



**Governing Khat  
Drugs and Democracy in Somaliland**

Peter Hansen

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the role of the mild stimulant *khat* in the economic and political transformation of the independent, yet internationally unrecognized Republic of Somaliland. Rather than seeing khat as a hindrance for nation-state formation and as a developmental problem, the paper argues that khat has been important to the economic viability of Somaliland and to the formation of political practices and identities. In this sense, khat should be seen not only as a drug contributing to violence, state failure and inadequate development, but also as underpinning economic processes, political identities and societal structures that have been crucial to the formation and political success of Somaliland. The paper adds to our understanding of the links between emerging political and economic orders in a post-conflict society.

## INTRODUCTION

Since its declaration of independence in 1991, Somaliland has undergone a remarkable political transformation. Based on its history as a British protectorate, it has reasserted its sovereignty, reconciled former warring clans and carried out local, presidential and parliamentary elections. Somaliland has created a bicameral political system with an elected parliament and a House of Elders, combining 'modern' or 'Western' forms of democracy with 'traditional' forms of political leadership and conflict mediation. Somaliland also has its own currency, flag, national anthem, holidays, army, police force, coast guard and judiciary and is thereby radically different from most other areas of Somalia, which are characterised by weak or failed government institutions, militant Islamic movements, pirates, insecurity and suffering. Apart from its political and institutional achievements, Somaliland is also somewhat of a post-conflict business success, where the combination of clan-based societal structures that provide trust between business partners and few government regulations have facilitated the creation of a booming private sector. The vitality of the private sector is seen at many levels, from the thousands of street vendors, small shops and businesses characterising urban life and the export of livestock from the port of Berbera, to the large import-export companies and international transport, telecommunication and remittance companies that operate not only within, but also outside the country's boundaries. However, despite impressive economic and political achievements, Somaliland is not recognised as an independent nation-state.

One of the most visible business successes in Somaliland is the mild stimulant khat, which is chewed daily by the large majority of So-

maliland men and which employs thousands of drivers, wholesalers and retailers.<sup>1</sup> Chewing khat normally takes place in chewing sessions that include friends, colleagues, business partners, family members, fellow students, political allies or whatever group of men meeting for whatever reason. Khat is so ingrained in the everyday that imagining Somaliland without it is difficult. Much like drinking alcohol in the West, chewing khat is perfectly legal, quite normal and an important part of the social life of most Somali men. Within the past fifteen years its consumption has increased significantly. Before the war, khat was chewed mostly at weddings and funerals and at times when it was important to stay awake such as during religious worship, truck driving and studying for exams. Today the consumption of khat is no longer regulated by the same socio-cultural norms, and from being mostly an urban and male phenomenon it is spreading to rural and coastal areas and being picked up by a growing number of women and adolescents. The growth in consumption is seen at the khat market in Hargeisa, one of the largest and most extensive khat markets in all of East Africa, which offers a wide range of khat types for both poor and rich consumers.<sup>2</sup> As such, khat is likely to be the commodity that

<sup>1</sup> Khat contains more than forty alkaloids, acids, vitamins and minerals. The most active alkaloids in khat, cathinone, cathine and norephedrine, are known to produce a sense of euphoria and happiness, to suppress hunger and stimulate social interaction, alertness and confidence. Like other much stronger stimulants such as cocaine and amphetamine, the high of khat is followed by a phase of tranquillity, contemplation and often insomnia (Dhaifalah & Santavy 2004; Halbach 1972; Kalix 1984, 1992; Nencini et al. 1989; Weir 1985; Al-Motarreb et al. 2004). Because of its bitter taste, khat is often consumed with sweet tea or a soft drink. It also stimulates craving for cigarettes.

<sup>2</sup> The various types of khat range from a minimum of US\$0.6 per kg for *taajaro* to US\$20-40 per kg for the best and most potent khat, known as *damar musbar*. The most widely consumed khat is *dardar*, which costs around US\$6 per kg. Due to the cost of transport, in the eastern part of Somaliland *dardar* costs approximately US\$10 per kg (Hansen 2006).

has experienced the most rapid growth since the declaration of independence (Bradbury 2008: 157).

At an international level there is no agreement on the legal status of khat, leaving it up to each individual country to either legalise or ban it. As a global product khat therefore crosses legal-illegal divides and moves in and out of informal and formal economic domains. Khat is legal in Kenya and Ethiopia, where it offers a lifeline to many farmers and is an important export commodity. In Ethiopia, khat now ranks as one of the country's most valuable exports (Gebissa 2004, 2008). The value of Ethiopian khat exports to Somaliland alone was around US\$80 million in 2005 (Hansen 2006).<sup>3</sup> Khat is also a lucrative cargo for international airline companies that transport it from Ethiopia and Kenya to England and Holland, where it is also legal.<sup>4</sup> From England and Holland khat is smuggled to North America and other European countries with significant Somali communities.<sup>5</sup> Historically in Somalia, khat has also crossed the illegal-legal divide and at various times been linked to both formal and informal economies. From 1960 until 1983 it was a legal substance and integrated into the formal Somali economy. With a ban imposed by the Somali government in

1983 khat entered the informal economy, controlled largely by military and other state officials. In Somaliland khat has always been a legal substance and has for several years provided important revenues for the emerging institutions of the state.

The consumption of khat is highly contested, both in Somaliland and globally. Some see it as harmless and others as representing the most serious development problem existing in contemporary Somaliland society. Critics of khat argue that it should be banned as it represents a severe drain on the economy, has negative health effects on the individual consumer, leads to malnutrition and domestic violence, lowers the efficiency of the bureaucracy, corrupts politicians and public institutions and enhances clan identities and oral practices, thereby affecting the formation of an efficient and internationally recognisable nation-state. Critics of khat include international development institutions, international and local NGOs and parts of the diaspora who are often outraged and frustrated when remittances intended for food, medicine and education are used to purchase khat; Islamic leaders influenced by more global and purist interpretations of the Quran, and female politicians and women's NGOs, who argue that khat seriously challenges the social fabric of society as it turns men into khat addicts, leading to the neglect of children and divorce; while critics in the private sector blame khat for poor performance in the workplace. Some politicians in Somaliland agree that khat is a problem and that it needs to be governed more thoroughly but they argue that it is primarily the consumption of others that is problematic, and fail to see their own personal consumption of khat as having any harmful effects.

In this paper, looking beyond its obvious problems and developmental challenges, I

<sup>3</sup> The importance of the Somaliland khat market is reflected in the presence of an Ethiopian trade delegate in Hargeisa (Bradbury 2008: 153). Besides khat, landlocked Ethiopia is interested in the port of Berbera, through which they are able to import and export goods and food aid.

<sup>4</sup> Compared to other types of cargo flown out of East Africa and the Horn of Africa the volume of khat is lower but margins are known to be much higher.

<sup>5</sup> In the US khat is classified along with cocaine and heroine as a class I drug. Khat is smuggled by young Somalis from England to the US where it sells at around ten times the price. Often, these young couriers are paid one thousand dollars by the organisers to bring around 30-40kg to the US. As they are told that khat is legal in the US they are often very upset when arrested in the US and charged with a serious crime.



argue that khat has been important to the economic viability of Somaliland and to the formation of political practices and identities. In this sense, khat should be seen not only as a drug contributing to violence, state failure and inadequate development but also as underpinning economic processes, political identities and societal structures that have been crucial to the formation and political success of Somaliland. In this sense, rather than seeing the recent political achievements and the growth of khat in Somaliland as each other's opposites they should be understood as deeply interlinked. The paper is not intended as an argument *for* khat, which clearly can have negative effects on individual users, their families and larger parts of Somali society. The aim of the paper is simply to present an analysis of the ways in which khat is tied to the formation of Somaliland and to contemporary political practices, and thereby explore the links between emerging political and economic orders in a post-conflict society. The paper is based on fieldwork in Somaliland, Puntland, south-central Somalia and London in the period from 1998 to 2006.<sup>6</sup>

## **KHAT, CONFLICT AND STATE COLLAPSE**

Until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the consumption of khat in British Somaliland was largely restricted to Sufi communities, who chewed it as a way of communicating

<sup>6</sup> During my fieldwork, where emphasis has been on return migration and the role of the diaspora to political and economic processes of change taking place in Somaliland, chewing khat has been one of the most important fieldwork methods as it opens networks and gives access to information. Moreover, for four months in 2005 and 2006 I was employed by the United Nations Development Programme in Nairobi to work as a consultant on khat during the Somalia Joint Needs Assessment.

with God (Gebissa 2004: 11).<sup>7</sup> As a result of infrastructural developments in East Africa and the formation of an urban elite of civil servants and urbanised pastoralists who picked up the habit, the trade in and consumption of khat increased in the urban centres of the protectorate in the 1910s and 20s. Khat consumption was by no means as widespread as today, but it must have presented something of a problem for the colonial administration as it chose to ban its import and consumption as far back as 1921 (*ibid*: 79). Because of infrastructural developments easing transport from Ethiopia to Somaliland, the process of urbanisation and the inability of the British to enforce the ban, consumption continued to increase. As a result of the ban, in the 1940s and 50s chewing khat became an important political symbol for expressing anti-colonial sentiments and the chewing session an important meeting ground for Somali nationalists. In order to counter increasing anti-colonial and anti-British sentiments, the colonial administration lifted the ban on khat in 1957. However, right until independence in 1960, chewing khat retained its anti-colonial and pan-Somali nationalist connotations (*ibid*: 80-82).

After independence khat was used as a weapon in the first Somali-Ethiopian war (1964-1967). The Ethiopian military leadership banned its export, believing that without khat, Somalis would not only make poor soldiers, but also resent and perhaps even overthrow their own political leadership. However, as the export ban was a severe blow to the Ethiopian economy and largely ineffective on the Somalis, the military leadership eventually lifted the ban and instead used increased khat

<sup>7</sup> Today, Somali Sufis continue to argue that khat is consumed to please their religious souls (*rux*) and refer to khat as 'food for saints' (*quud awliyo*). In the eyes of many of its critics, this is simply a poor justification for the continuation of a bad habit.

exports in a new attempt to now turn Somali soldiers into khat addicts, uninterested in and incapable of waging war. Moreover, it was believed that increased khat imports would drain Somalia financially and empower Ethiopian farmers, traders and the military leadership (Gebissa 2004: 102-104).

Khat also played an important part in the civil war in Somalia and in the eventual collapse of the Somali Republic. In the 1960s, farmers in the western part of present day Somaliland started growing khat as a way of coping with plant diseases, soil erosion and droughts (Samatar 1989: 138-147). Within few years these early khat farmers were able to make good profits, which they invested in houses and more khat plants, as well as food crops. The fact that khat farmers did well inspired other farmers to start growing it, and by the late 70s, khat had become an important and lucrative local cash crop with local state officials often investing in khat farms. Khat was referred to as “the famine preventer” and khat farmers as the “khat elite” and by the early 80s khat had become the most important domestically grown cash crop (Samatar 1985: 50). The khat boom was in direct opposition to official agrarian policies emphasising the production of food crops but as authorities of the state were involved, it was allowed to unfold (*ibid*).

After Somalia’s defeat to Ethiopia in 1978, the Somali government responded by concentrating its power in the hands of the Darood clan and marginalising other clans. In 1980 members of the Isaq clan living in London and Jeddah formed the Somali National Movement (SNM) in order to defend the interests of their clan and fight the Somali regime.<sup>8</sup> From its bases in eastern Ethio-

pia it initiated a guerrilla war against the Somali army and government institutions inside Somalia. In an attempt to counter the SNM, the Somali government waged an economic war against the Isaqs by restricting their import-export licences and their access to travel between towns, effectively preventing them from doing business (Bradbury 2008: 59-60). The government also discriminated in relation to employment opportunities and access to social services and employed a scorched earth policy of asset stripping and killing (*ibid*).

In 1983 the government banned the import, production and consumption of khat in an effort to further weaken the Isaqs and the SNM. The Isaqs supplied the lucrative Somali and Djiboutian khat markets and were also primary owners of the khat fields. Officially the government argued that khat presented an important drain on the economy, disrupted production of food crops and had serious negative health effects on the population. The khat ban was coupled with an eradication campaign whereby local khat farmers’ crops were destroyed by the government. Before the eradication campaign, the government promised farmers who voluntarily gave up khat production compensation and assistance in the transfer to other plants. However, the only person to ever receive cash compensation was the regional governor of the Northwest, who was praised for his “revolutionary spirit” when giving up khat farming (Samatar 1985: 53).

From the perspective of the Isaqs the khat ban and eradication campaign were seen as acts of state violence and had the effect of further increasing popular support for the SNM. Because of the eradication campaign the SNM reportedly went overnight from around 300 to 3000 fighters. Whereas the eradication campaign put an effective stop to the local production of khat, the ban on

<sup>8</sup> For a full analysis of the formation of the SNM see chapter 8 in Lewis 1994.

khat imports only had the effect of transferring trade from the Isaqs to regional authorities belonging to the Darood clan and to the Somali army that was smuggling khat across the border to Somalia (Samatar 1985: 55-56).<sup>9</sup> During the 80s the illegal trade in khat represented an important informal economy whereby government officials were able to supplement their declining salaries (cf. Bradbury 2008: 43). Government officials not only traded but also increasingly picked up the habit of consuming khat, a spending and consumption pattern popularly interpreted as an indication of their illegal economic activities (Simons 1995: 126-127).<sup>10</sup> The political and economic significance of khat was also seen in the diaspora, where the price of khat went up and the proceeds were channelled back to the SNM (Anderson et al. 2007: 166). In 1988 the SNM initiated an offensive inside Somalia that was not only an attack on government forces but also an attempt to secure the khat trade between the northern Somali towns and Djibouti (Simons 1995: 76). The government responded by bombing the northern towns of Hargeisa and Burao, causing hundreds of thousands of refugees to flee across the border to Ethiopia. With the declaration of independence in 1991 the trade in khat across the Ethiopian-Somaliland border returned to Isaq hands.

In south-central Somalia khat continues to be linked to the dynamics of the civil war. First of all, khat imports provide an im-

portant income for those in control of the khat trade and in particular of the numerous airstrips in and around Mogadishu that are used when importing it from Kenya.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, warlords are known to mobilise and pay their fighters on the basis of the provision of khat. In 2006 and 2008 Islamic militant movements in control of most of south-central Somalia tried to enforce a ban on the import and consumption of khat, arguing that it was against the principles of the Quran and therefore *haram*. However, according to the most popular Somali interpretation, khat falls in the grey area between being haram and halal (i.e. *makruh* or *mustabaha*). One of the results of the most recent ban on khat has been growing dissatisfaction with the Islamists and their radical interpretation of Islam, which are seen as un-Somali. For example, in 2009 khat traders in south-central Somalia organised demonstrations against the Islamists' ban on khat. Moreover, much like in the 50s in British Somaliland, the Islamists' ban on khat has been counterproductive for them as it has caused people to associate consumption of khat with resistance to radical and conservative interpretations of Islam. The Transitional Federal Government (TFG), which has the support of the international community, also presses for a ban of khat in Somalia. However, with neither the TFG nor the international community being able to enforce such a ban let alone undertake the most basic state functions, it only seems to enforce the feeling among people that these actors on the Somali political scene are far removed from local realities in Somalia and as such of little legitimacy inside Somalia.

<sup>9</sup> The local production of khat that took place in the Gebiley area west of Hargeisa has not been fully re-established since the eradication campaign in 1983 and today only supplies relatively few local consumers. Locally grown khat is considered inferior to Ethiopian and Kenyan khat, which is grown in the proper altitudes and therefore has higher levels of cathinone, cathine and norephedrine.

<sup>10</sup> Similarly, those who invested their money in houses or plots of land instead of khat were seen as people who had come by their money through legal means (Simons 1995: 127).

<sup>11</sup> In the early 90s the khat trade in south-central Somalia was estimated at around 1 to 5 million USD every month, generating profits at more than 100.000 USD daily (Duyvesteyn 2000: 13).

## KHAT AND NATION-STATE FORMATION IN SOMALILAND

One of the results of the defeat of the Somali army to the SNM in 1991 was the return of the Ethiopian-Somaliland khat trade to Isaq businessmen, who had already established themselves as traders in khat and other consumer goods in the Somali refugee camps in eastern Ethiopia in the late 80s.<sup>12</sup> The camps were important consumer markets, in particular for khat as many male refugees consumed it as a way of coping with the frustrations of the war, personal problems and the boredom of refugee life. Several of the khat importers and owners of shops, supermarkets, and remittance and import-export companies existing in Somaliland today started their businesses in the refugee camps.<sup>13</sup> Khat is highly unstable, with the active alkaloids starting to break down immediately after cutting. As khat is largely ineffective on the human body after 48 hours it needs to reach its consumers as quickly as possible. Therefore, khat trade networks crossing international boundaries and various conflict zones work fast and are one of the few things that are really well organised throughout the Horn of Africa. The khat network that spans eastern Ethiopia and Somaliland – comprising a complex chain of farmers, traders, truck drivers, wholesalers, saleswomen and consumers – is organised around the principles of kinship, with the role of the emerging Somaliland state being that of solving disputes and trying to maintain peace.

<sup>12</sup> The largest one, known as Hartisheik, numbered several hundred thousand Somalis, primarily Isaqs. In 1988, Hartisheik, officially holding 280,000 refugees, was the largest refugee camp in the world.

<sup>13</sup> For example, one of Hargeisa's biggest supermarkets started as a small shop in Hartisheik refugee camp, as did Somaliland's biggest remittance company, Dahabshiil.

The largest khat trade network in Somaliland was established in the late 80s and early 90s, and is essentially based on a marriage between two Isaqs, with the wife living in Jigjiga in Ethiopia and the husband in Hargeisa. Their khat can be found in many types and is of various strengths, flavours and prices, but all are known under the brand name "571" which refers to the year Mohammed was born and as such to the close links between Sufi practices and khat consumption.<sup>14</sup> The wife is responsible for buying, packing and loading the khat on trucks and planes destined for the Somaliland and Puntland markets, and the husband for import and distribution on the Somaliland and Puntland side.<sup>15</sup> The 571 brand has become one of Somaliland's most successful and politically influential businesses, and the couple recently opened a new airline company that will fly between Ethiopia and Somaliland, a market that was left vacant with the decision by Ethiopian Airlines to close their flights between Addis Ababa and Hargeisa as a result of suicide bombings in Somaliland in October 2008.

Besides providing huge profits for importers, the trade and distribution of khat also employs a large number of women and men who would have no other way of finding employment. Today, thousands of women provide for themselves and their family as khat sellers and thousands of men are involved in

<sup>14</sup> Another khat brand was known under the name of "B611" referring to the year when Mohammed received his first revelation. The prefix "B" stands for *barako* which means blessing. The "B611" brand allegedly ranked second at the Somaliland market but was outcompeted during a price war with 571. During this price war, which ran for ten months and lowered the price of khat substantially, the B611 importer lost more than US\$600,000.

<sup>15</sup> The marriage is known to not only secure but also compromise the trade in khat. For example, when the male khat importer in Hargeisa married a second and younger wife without the knowledge and consent of the first wife, she simply opposed it by stopping the delivery of khat, effectively forcing him to divorce the second wife.

the distribution of khat in Somaliland.<sup>16</sup> Most often in the eyes of politicians in Somaliland, khat is an asset in terms of creating employment opportunities in a country where unemployment is very high and for generating revenues for both municipalities and the state. After livestock production the khat trade could very well be the largest employer in post-conflict Somaliland. The economic drain on the country caused by khat imports is to some extent curtailed by the fact that the Ethiopian-Somaliland khat trade is largely controlled by Somalis.

The spread of khat outside its traditional areas of production and consumption (i.e. the Horn of Africa, East Africa and Yemen) is largely the result of the global dispersal of Somalis and the entrepreneurship of Somali traders, who effectively distribute khat to any significant Somali community around the world. At a global level the trade in khat is secured not only by shared clan identities, but also by the more general identity of being Somali. In this sense, clans and the Somali identity serve economic purposes as they secure and monopolise the lucrative khat trade as it creates trust between traders. One of the consequences of khat trade and consumption being tied to and controlled by Somalis is that it is difficult for non-Somalis to enter the khat market, either as trader or consumer.<sup>17</sup> The

<sup>16</sup> Men often explain that they refrain from working as khat retailers as it is below their dignity to spend most of the day selling khat making only small profits. Moreover, with men consuming khat they would end up chewing rather than selling their khat supply. Finally, men explain that they would have to give khat to all their friends, a practice known as *saxad*, making it impossible to run a business.

<sup>17</sup> For example, in order to buy khat as a non-Somali in Copenhagen, you need first to be introduced by someone to the proper khat dealers in order not to be mistaken for a policeman or government representative trying to arrest or interfere with the illegal and informal khat trade. Similarly, being physically recognisable as a Somali and being able to speak the Somali language gives reassurance to khat dealers that the person is only out to buy khat.

importance of ethnicity to trade networks has most clearly been made by Cohen (1969) in his analysis of the Hausa traders, who also emphasise ethnic identity in order to control the cola nut and cattle trade in West Africa. However, contrary to the point made by Cohen that tribal identity is articulated in the context of a formal political system such as that of the nation-state (Cohen 1969: 2), the Somali identity that is crucial to the effectiveness of the khat trade is articulated on a global scale and in the contexts of various formal and informal political systems.

Because of the huge profits involved, khat has also been linked to the re-emergence of violence between different Isaq sub-clans in Somaliland in the 1990s. For example, the fighting that broke out in 1994 and 95 in and around Hargeisa did not concern only control of the airport and the recently introduced Somaliland shilling, but also control of the khat trade (Bradbury 2008: 118).<sup>18</sup> As a reflection of the continued stabilisation of Somaliland, it is no longer violence but price, quality, supply and marketing strategies that secure market shares. However, it is important to point out that khat has not only caused internal fighting, and continues to be linked to the dynamics of war in other parts of Somalia, but has also played an important role in negotiating peace in Somaliland. At the numerous peace meetings held in Somaliland in the early 90s, meetings that were important in creating an atmosphere of trust between former warring clans and as such for the political future of the country, the consumption of khat was an important social lubricant and facilitator of interaction and communication. Chewing

<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the fighting that took place in Puntland in 2001 not only represented a fight over political power but was in fact also a fight between two khat importers over the Puntland khat market, one selling and promoting Ethiopian khat and the other Kenyan khat.

khat during peace meetings was simply a traditional, well-known and as such an effective way of keeping people engaged, attentive and interacting for often very lengthy dispute settlements. As noted by Wills in his analysis of the early years of the history of Somaliland, the Sheik peace conference held in 1992 lasted for four months and varied from formal chaired meetings where various parties would be invited to debate a given issue, to direct negotiations between clan or sub-clan representatives and khat chewing sessions (Walls 2009: 385).

Rather than trying to impose a ban on khat, which has proven to be counterproductive and largely impossible to enforce, the political leadership in Somaliland instead legalised and taxed it. In the early 90s taxation of khat imports provided an estimated 10 percent of the government's income (Bradbury 2008: 112). Not only khat but also the private sector more broadly was crucial for the viability of Somaliland, which received no support from the international community. Following independence, Isaq businessmen who were profiting from the import and sale of consumer goods through the port in Berbera supported the new political leadership by financing peace meetings and providing food for the army and police (Bradbury 2008: 112). The private sector also provided the state with a loan that financed the introduction of the country's own currency, which produced a significant financial windfall for the government (ibid). In 1999 the primary khat dealer in Somaliland, the 571 khat business, allegedly paid almost US\$3 million in taxes to the Somaliland state, which accounted for around 20 percent of the country's income that year (APD 1999: 65).

Within the past ten years, and reflecting the increased formalisation and strengthening of the state, the taxation of khat has increased

from around five percent to around 20 percent (Hansen 2006). According to customs officials in Somaliland, the government collected approximately US\$5.5 million in khat import taxes in 2005, which means that khat revenues make up around 30 percent of the country's budget (ibid). The increased capacity to tax khat and patrol the Ethiopian-Somaliland border means that only an estimated 10 percent is smuggled into the country.<sup>19</sup> Most importantly, the tax increase is first and foremost the result of long negotiations between khat importers and government officials, as the government is well aware that it is difficult to impose government policies upon the private sector without its consent. Apart from taxes paid to the government, khat importers also pay tax in the form of khat at the various police road blocks found all over Somaliland. Moreover, retailers are taxed by local municipalities for selling it at the khat markets that are to be found in all urban areas of Somaliland. The capacity of the Somaliland authorities to tax khat imports sets them apart from Puntland, where the ability to collect tax revenues on imports and exports is not as fully developed, and the rest of Somalia, where taxation of khat is simply not in the control of the government.

Apart from providing vital resources for the government, khat has also been crucial for the recreation of trust and formation of societal structures. Known as a natural amphetamine, khat provides a small high (*marqan*) that stimulates conversation and interaction between chewers.<sup>20</sup> While chewing, people ex-

<sup>19</sup> Personal communication with Jonathan Guégan, Academy for Peace and Development, Hargeisa, January 2006.

<sup>20</sup> During a chewing session a consumer will normally consume the equivalent of 5mg of amphetamine (Dhaifalah & Santavy 2004). Unlike amphetamine the consumption of khat takes several hours, which makes it much less potent and much harder work.

change information, opinions, rumours, frustrations and ideas and because of very few or no social alternatives, chewing sessions have emerged as the most important social activity in Somaliland society (cf. Ducaale 2005: 149). Khat sessions typically start early in the afternoon and last until early or late evening, and they fit perfectly with Somali oral practices and the preference for face-to-face social interaction. Exchanging information and news through verbal communication has always been important in Somali society, and livelihoods have depended on it for years. Khat sessions are referred to as “oral newsletters”, supplying chewers with valuable information and gossip about investment opportunities and job openings. Chewing khat is often necessary to get things done and to obtain information about a particular subject. As almost everything in Somaliland works through personal relationships, the number of people one knows is important, and chewing khat is simply a strategy whereby social networks are strengthened. The better-off typically meet to chew in private homes, whereas the poorer consumers go to one of the khat cafés that have mushroomed in all cities and villages in Somaliland within the past fifteen years.

To many chewers, khat and khat sessions are an antidote to depression and the absurdity of the civil war. Chewing sessions are an important socio-cultural phenomenon as they are one of the few social venues where solidarity, friendship and intimacy have been recreated following the civil war and its associated spread of mistrust, violence and hatred. Similarly, lack of trust between people in post-conflict societies is known to prevent the formation of viable political institutions (Jackson 2004). The importance of khat to the establishment of social cohesion in post-conflict Somaliland is also linked to the way in which chewers take turns buying and receiving

khat. Whoever has the cash will pay for his friends until that money runs out. Therefore, consumers often end up in multiple relations with obligations to give and opportunities to receive khat – relations of reciprocity that are important for the cohesiveness of society (cf. Kennedy 1987; Weir 1985).

## **KHAT AND POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY SOMALILAND**

The importance of khat in politics today is reflected in the consumption of khat among the majority of politicians. Top politicians and civil servants usually chew the most expensive and potent types of khat, which they are often given for free by the khat importers, who in return are left to run their khat business without too much interference from the state. Both in Somaliland and Puntland the few non-chewing male politicians as well as female politicians often find themselves rather isolated and often have very short political careers. As politicians are heavy consumers of khat and partly build their careers on it, it is no surprise that they are reluctant to put in place policies that would regulate the import and consumption of khat (i.e. set a minimum age for consumption, regulate import volumes, set a fixed minimum price, etc.) and thereby perhaps present their own consumption of khat as problematic and harmful. Being involved in the khat trade, both in the diaspora and in the Horn of Africa, has also in several cases provided an entry point into politics in Somaliland. One consequence of the importance of khat to politics is that non-chewers such as women and many well-educated returnees from the diaspora are largely cut off from local informal political debates and networking. However, with political careers being made on the provision of khat, there are

also better-off members of the diaspora that are able to throw big khat parties upon return and thereby access politics more easily than local and poorer political contestants.

Khat also divides the day into two different political forms and locations. Before the arrival of fresh supplies of khat, urban centres bustle with life, business and market activities. This is the time of the day when people go to the market to buy whatever they need and when they settle whatever business they may have with the various public offices and institutions of the state. After lunch and the arrival of khat the city radically changes as market activities and traffic slow down and the various institutions of the state and local government close while the larger part of the male population get ready for their chewing sessions. As for politics, one might think that politicians are only working half-time and that what takes place before lunch is what is most important. This is far from the truth. What takes place in the afternoon and the chewing sessions is just as important as what takes place before lunch and in the formal political institutions of the state. The day is simply divided into two different political spaces and two different ways of doing politics. What takes place before lunch is the formal and public face of political life in Somaliland. The political debates taking place in Parliament and the House of Elders are accessible and similar to political debates and processes taking place in most other nation-states. When politicians meet in the afternoon in a private home or party headquarters to chew khat, the political debates and negotiations simply continue, only in more private and less visible surroundings.

The importance of the chewing session as a political forum has grown within the past few years (Ducaale 2005: 149) and is most likely more influential than the political discussions

taking place before lunch.<sup>21</sup> The importance of informal political practices and debates is of course not a phenomenon restricted to Somaliland but can be found in many African countries (Chabal and Daloz 1999: 95) and indeed in most countries around the world, where informal negotiations and debates are also important to policy making. What is striking in the Somaliland case is the institutionalisation of the chewing session, whereby the boundaries between formal and informal politics are blurred. For example, the government is known to establish its own chewing sessions with the purpose of influencing public opinion or to counter the influence of political opponents (Ducaale 2005: 149). The opposition is also known to organise its own chewing sessions in order to exert pressure on the government and affect public opinion. Chewing sessions not only bring together politicians of the same opinion or party but also people holding opposing views, and are therefore important in furthering the exchange of different opinions, which again enable political compromises that are less easily made in public and the formal political domain.

Somali politics has been described as a segmentary political system that is based on the combination of solidarity and alliances existing between members of the same lineage (*reer*) and strategic contracts between members of different lineages (*xeer*) (Lewis 1961, 1994, 1998). In this sense, politics not only reflects clan solidarity but also how alliances between different clans and sub-clans are used to improve and strengthen the status, standing and security of any given group. As the chewing session is used both to strengthen intra-clan

<sup>21</sup> In Somali they say that "the meetings of the night are more important than the meetings of the day". This saying means that khat sessions are more important than meetings taking place in formal political institutions (personal correspondence with Matt Bryden, Hargeisa, January 2006).



solidarity and to enter inter-clan strategic alliances it simply provides an important venue and socio-cultural environment for the practice of politics. However, khat also changes politics as it is increasingly used by individuals to secure political careers and more generally as a strategic tool to strengthen social networks. Most often people take turns buying khat but there are also many consumers who are unable to pay for it and therefore end up being dependent on relatives or friends who are able and willing to sponsor their consumption. Khat is also used as a means of payment, for example when someone assists in a shop or company as a way of earning the right to participate in the chewing session later the same day. Especially in the political domain, where khat is used to secure political support, it changes society from being egalitarian to being hierarchical and based on patron-client relationships. In this sense, khat transforms politics as it adds the elements of manipulation, dominance and hierarchy to a segmentary political system that has traditionally been based on egalitarian principles.

The political importance of khat goes beyond the chewing sessions attended by politicians, ministers and members of the opposition or upcoming political candidates, as any chewing session invariably touches upon political issues. In this sense the chewing session is important in securing local ownership of political debates and problems. The sessions can be seen as localised forms of political participation and are referred to by chewers themselves as “grassroots democracy”, “everyday forms of democracy”, “political workshops” and “peace dialogues”. The decentralisation of politics via khat fits well with the society’s democratic and egalitarian political practices and its dislike of centralised state power. Since the war there has been a growing tendency for people to meet for chewing

sessions on the basis of clan. On the one hand this phenomenon has been important in strengthening clan identities and building trust and political identities, but on the other hand it also counters the formation of other identities and social relationships. For example, the chewing session counters the formation of a citizenry that sees itself as first and foremost having a range of obligations and opportunities in relation to the state, rather than towards members of the clan with whom one chews khat. Chewing sessions may be important in building trust between clan members but they are also known to create distrust towards other clans with whom one is not chewing khat. As such khat both creates solidarity and stimulates rivalry, political tensions, conflicts and the segregation of society on the basis of clan membership.

While khat is known to strengthen relationships between fellow chewers, it also changes the relationship between the individual chewer and his or her spouse and children. With women selling and men chewing khat most of the day, the otherwise traditionally strong coherence between husband, wife and children is often challenged. As such, khat transforms the socio-cultural fabric of society by changing gender roles and relations, by prioritising the consumption of khat rather than education as a livelihood strategy and by draining the male population of its strength and famous entrepreneurship, as they often suffer from khat hangovers (*kebadiro*). One recent concern is that excessive khat consumption leads to impotency and the involuntary loss of semen (*spermatorrhoea*) whereby the reproduction of Somalis as a people is challenged.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the consumption of khat among pastoralists is also said to challenge

<sup>22</sup> Chewers tend to argue that khat affects their sexuality and reproductive capacity either positively or negatively.

the survival of the nation-state as milk from the livestock is no longer used to feed the animals or family members but to buy khat. Khat thereby both reinforces clan identities and the vitality of Somaliland as a political community but also radically transforms and challenges its cultural and physical survival.

Compared to other states, the Somaliland state is clearly quite unique in its combination of 'Western' and 'local' forms of political practices. Applying the analysis of statehood as presented by James Scott (1998) we see that the state in Somaliland has only a few of the characteristics that are often found in highly centralised and authoritarian states. The fact that the government has put in place an efficient system of khat taxation illustrates state legibility, which is defined by Scott as the desire and ability to implement certain standards whereby the state transforms reality into rationalised and compartmentalised slices (ibid: 3-4). However, khat is also known to seriously challenge legibility as it influences bureaucratic capacities and thinking and simply hinders the implementation of bureaucratic procedures. For example, khat not only determines the opening hours of public institutions but also has an impact on individual government employees, who are often heavy consumers of khat and therefore often tired from yesterday's khat session and corruptible with the provision of khat. Moreover, the Somaliland state is not first and foremost driven by an ideology of high modernity that sees science, technology, knowledge and rationality as crucial for the continued development and transformation of society (Scott 1998: 4-5). In fact, khat can be seen as countering any modernist drive as chewing it and building social networks via the chewing sessions directly counters the value associated with knowledge, education and individual merits. According to Scott, an important element of

high modernity is the strict ordering of the physical environment through urban planning, cultivation of fields, etc. (ibid). Often, in many urban centres, khat creates physical disorder. The khat market is most often located at the busiest and most central place in town and when the khat arrives and everyone rushes to get their daily bundles of it the city centre often comes to a halt because of traffic jams. Moreover, the plastic bags that are used when picking up bundles of khat at the retailer simply pollute the city and can be seen hanging in the trees and littering every street corner. In this sense khat challenges not only the formal institutions of the state and the way government employees think, but also the ordering of physical urban environments.

## CONCLUSION

The role and history of khat in Somalia and Somaliland has important lessons for our understanding of the relationship between economies and political orders and identities. First of all, the formation of the Somaliland state is directly linked to the vitality of the khat trade and the private sector more generally. Without the support provided by the private sector and without khat revenues, the political processes and formation of the Somaliland state would have been difficult, if not outright impossible. The vitality of the khat trade illustrates that business and economic activities can function quite well without the existence of a strong and regulating state as long as trust is secured between people and business partners (cf. Little 2003). The Somaliland state has neither the capacity nor the will to implement restrictive khat policies and has instead opted for the legalisation and taxation of khat. The unregulated status of khat is linked to the fact that most

policy makers are consumers and have a realistic understanding of their own governmental capacities when it comes to khat. Considering the fact that stronger states have failed in the past to eradicate it, this seems like a pragmatic and sound response. Moreover, the majority of the population are not interested in once again living in a country with a highly centralised and authoritarian state but are simply looking towards the state as providing political stability and the most basic social services.

Secondly, the shifting status of khat as moving in and out of legal and illegal categories and formal and informal economic domains has contributed to both state failure and state formation. In Somaliland, the legalisation and taxation of khat has provided important revenues for the state, which ideally benefits the Somaliland population. Moreover, chewing khat underpins informal political practices and identities that are important to the cohesiveness of society and to the workings of the formal political institutions of the state. Conversely, in the past the criminalisation of khat has contributed to the escalation of violence, the division of the Somali people along clan lines and the eventual breakdown of the formal institutions of the state. Much like the prohibition of alcohol in the US in the 1920s and 30s, banning khat in Somalia in the 80s did not seriously lower consumption but mostly created an informal khat economy whereby state officials enriched themselves and antagonised parts of the population that had previously made a living out of trading in and producing khat. In this sense, the history of khat shows that it does matter to political orders whether khat is linked primarily to formal or informal economic domains.

Of course more could be done by the government to regulate the consumption of khat, which is clearly having negative effects

on contemporary Somaliland society. Like alcohol in Western countries or any other drug considered harmful or dangerous in countries around the world that are also regulated, there are ways to curtail the harmful effects of khat. For example the government could, as Djibouti has done, set a maximum on khat imports, license chewing places, set a minimum age for its consumption and prevent its import before a certain time. The government could also fix the price on khat and thereby prevent the dumping of it in the evening, a practice that enables children and adolescents to buy it. The call for a more thorough regulation of khat is aired, not only by Islamists, women's NGOs, female politicians, international NGOs and UN organisations but also by former khat importers who have been out-competed during price wars.

Lately, the widespread consumption of khat in Somaliland is being used by members of the diaspora to position themselves as the legitimate political leaders of their homeland. In the eyes of primarily well-educated members of the diaspora the unregulated nature of its consumption and import in Somaliland exposes the current administration as being unable to govern properly, and thus they feel that they should be in control of the country. They acknowledge the achievements of those who stayed and fought against the dictatorship and eventually declared the independence of Somaliland, but also argue that what is needed at the moment is not guns and the loyalties of clans, but the knowledge of governance linked to their own experiences from Western democracies. Having furthered their educational and work related careers while Somalia disintegrated into war, anarchy and khat chewing, they feel they embody the modernist ideals and ability to govern that are needed in the further democratisation and development of Somaliland. Not all diaspora Somalilanders

are ardent non-chewers. On the contrary, khat is known to have spread in the diaspora as a way of coping with social, cultural, and personal problems and as a way of retaining Somali cultural identities (Ahmed 2005, Klein 2004).<sup>23</sup> The consumption of khat is used by non-chewers to distance themselves vis-à-vis chewers both at home and in the diaspora and to present themselves as the legitimate political leaders of the homeland. They argue that rather than chewing khat, Somalis should take advantage of the many opportunities for education that exist in the West, education that at some point can be beneficial to the homeland. In this sense, the consumption of khat both abroad and at home is used by an educated elite to position itself within a transnational political field.

Khat is of course not the only factor when it comes to understanding state failure and state formation in Somalia and Somaliland. First of all, Somaliland is the result of the victory of the SNM and as such of the successful struggle of one clan. In south-central Somalia the war is still ongoing with various clans and actors engaged in the fight for power and influence. Secondly, in Somaliland the tradition for conflict mediation based on the clan system and the principles of customary law has survived both colonialism and the Somali state. In the early 1990s, when Somaliland declared its independence and needed to heal the wounds caused by the war, it was the clan system, respect for elders and clan leaders and the tradition of conflict mediation between clans that secured peace and laid the foundations for the establishment of a formal political system and the institutions of the state. In Somalia, the clan system and the associated

tradition of conflict mediation have largely broken down, making it more difficult to end the war and set up an inclusive political system and a viable state. These differences between Somaliland and south-central Somalia are often linked by Somalilanders themselves to the different colonial experiences of British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland. As the British ruled British Somaliland via indirect rule and only posted a relatively small number of colonial officials in the protectorate they never influenced or disrupted cultural values and social practices. On the contrary, the Italians ruled Italian Somaliland via direct rule and posted a high number of Italian colonial officials to manage the colony and thereby simply disrupted cultural values and practices. Thirdly, and reflecting these different colonial experiences, the political success of Somaliland is linked to the fact that it has sorted out its own problems whereby political institutions and practices are in sync with the socio-cultural and historical fabric of society. On the contrary, south-central Somalia has been subjected to foreign interventions by a range of regional and global powers that have done more to fuel the conflict than end the war and set up viable and legitimate political institutions.

<sup>23</sup> However, the consumption of khat in the Somali diaspora is likely to decrease as it is mostly consumed by first generation refugees and immigrants, and is not the drug of choice among second generation Somalis.

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