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Voices from the margins: Khat-chewing, devotional leisure and ambivalence in the British-Somali diaspora

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Introduction

- Khat-chewing and its relationship with Somali culture.
- Liquid modernity and devotional leisure.
- Research methods.
- Khat-chewing as a form of devotional leisure
- Khat-chewing, leisure and cultural dissonance
 - the voices of Somali women
 - Younger – 2nd generation migrants



What is Khat? And what is khat-chewing?

- Khat (*Catha Edulis*)
 - Shrub like narcotic chewed in East Africa and the Southern Arabian Peninsula. (Carrier, 2007)
 - Toxicology reports – as potent as coffee (Kalix, 1987; Swain, 2017)
 - Users peel khat sticks and place the contents into the side of their mouth.
 - Chewing releases dopamine – mild feeling of euphoria – seen to aid conversation (Anderson et al., 2007)
- Complex – khat not grown in Somaliland – instead Kenya and Ethiopia.
- Emerged in the 15th century associated with tribal and religious elites. (Swain, 2021)
- Past 200 years goat herders chewing while tending their flock – blurring between leisure and work (Hansen, 2008)



Khat-Chewing in Somali Culture

- Growth in khat use at the beginning of the 20th century
 - Due infrastructure developments khat-chewing soars. (Abdullahi, 2001)
 - Caught the attention of the British – saw Somaliland as a protectorate since 1864.
 - British attempt to ban, leads to backlash and subsequent independence in 1960.
- Khat use prominent in the North.
 - Came under scrutiny from Siad Barre – dictator.
 - Civil War late 1980s.
 - Many flee – Britain popular destination (Valentine et al., 2009)



Khat-chewing: Cultural Dynamics?

- **Patriarchal**
 - Within Somali Culture (Harris, 2005)
- **Linked with cultural identity (masculinity/age)**
 - Central in establishing and maintaining patriarchal and patrilineal hierarchies (Fangen, 2006)
- **Different types – *Mirra* (Kenya) or *Harari* (Ethiopia) – (Swain, 2018; 2021)**
- **Banned by British Government**
 - Khat ban (2014)
- **Chewed in the *mafrish* (khat house); sessions 6 hours to 2 days in lengths. (Thomas and Williams, 2013)**



Devotional Leisure and Liquid Modernity

- Link between khat-chewing and the notion of devotional leisure.
- Liquid modernity
 - Transition in the context of society – production based to consumer based (Bauman, 2000; 2006)
 - Shaped by deregulation of financial markets and the scaling back of the welfare state.
 - Increased individualisation – leading to uncertainty and fear amongst the population (Bauman, 2005; Blackshaw, 2016; Swain, 2017; 2019)
 - Particularly amongst flawed consumers – those without the financial means to consume – Somali refugees.
- Devotional leisure
 - Leisure can be used to create a sense of order – value sphere.
 - Central in developing a sense of identity, community and broader values.
 - Site of sanctuary from a fluid ever changing world.
 - Marginalised groups use of traditional cultural/leisure activities (Blackshaw, 2016; 2018)



The Research Focus

- **Ethnographic research on khat-chewing**
 - 35 un-structured interviews.
 - 18 months of participant observations.
 - 2nd largest Somali community in the UK.
- **Complexities**
 - Positionality – insider/outsider debate (Carrington, 2008; Fletcher, 2013).
 - Ethical Issues surrounding legality, anonymity (Bucerius, 2013); anti-khat groups.





Khat-Chewing and Devotional Leisure

- Khat-chewing huge symbolic status in Somali culture.
 - Seen as a cultural norm.
 - Central part of Somali masculine identity
- Allowed older and middle-aged men to create a positive sense of identity.
 - Negate the effects of feeling marginalised in British society.
- Create a sense of togetherness.
 - With others experiencing similar anxieties.
 - Diasporic connection with Somaliland.
- Devotional leisure – khat-chewing used to create a value sphere
 - Built on a positive identity; feeling of community; and connection with a broader diasporic consciousness.

Khat-Chewing and Ambivalence

- Khat-chewing seen as problematic, particularly amongst British-Somali women
 - Men spend time away from family.
 - Khat linked to unemployment.
 - Domestic abuse.
- *Mafrish* perceived as a space to hide from the changing social environment of the diaspora.
 - Increase voice for women in liberal democracies.
 - Youth forging syncretic identities.
- Khat-chewing linked to a site of escapism from changing realities in the diaspora.



Conclusion

Khat-chewing can be interpreted as a form of devotional leisure.

- Helps middle and older aged men create a value sphere.
- Shaping identity, community and broader diasporic consciousness.

However, khat-chewing also a site of division.

- Lack of help in the domestic sphere.
- Link to lack of integration within British society.
- Clash with emerging identities – syncretic identities of the youth.

Khat-chewing divides the community it seeks to unite.

- Site of cultural dissonance.
- Such leisure serves to further divide khat users from others in their community.

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