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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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