

# FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Although khat has been used in Ethiopia for centuries, **Andrew Craig** argues that the rising demand for khat globally from the Horn of Africa diaspora is blighting the famine-ravaged region.



Our bus bumped to a halt at the Harar Gate, at the western edge of the old city walls, after a gruelling nine hours from Addis Ababa. On disembarking, I stepped over the remnants of bags of khat which had been masticated during the journey by my fellow passengers.

The walk through the Gate into the Old Town of Harar was not what I had imagined it to be. My guidebook's account of 'charming people' and 'coffee-scented streets' did not prepare me for the sight of dishevelled men, strewn like litter, along the roadside. Some twitched with involuntary spasms and others lay splattered with their own vomit. With pupils dilated, they clutched bushels of khat tearing off clumps of leaves with their mouths and chewing, languidly. This was the stark reality of khat dependence.

Khat, or *catha edulis*, is a plant native to tropical East Africa. Its main psychotropic ingredient, cathinone, generates a feeling of euphoria, and for centuries East Africans and Yemenis have used the drug as a social lubricant.

Traditionally, consumption was limited to areas in which the plant was grown as only the fresh leaves have a stimulant effect when chewed. However, in recent years, improved transport and infrastructure have made global distribution possible.

The Somali and Ethiopian diaspora are now opening the khat market to an ever-increasing number of consumers. Around seven tonnes of khat arrived at British airports each week in the 1990s; in 2010 this total rose to around 57 tonnes, some of it intended for onward distribution to countries where the drug is illegal. In the United Kingdom, the drug is mainly used by the East African community, but is also growing in popularity among British students.

The impact of consumption in the UK is revealed in a literature review written by two Oxford University academics and published by the Home Office in July 2011. The review asserts that there is no evidence to show a causal relationship between khat consumption in the UK and the social harms for which it is

supposedly responsible. The authors question the legitimacy of the drug's illegal status in other countries such as Canada and the US, on the grounds that such bans were not preceded by adequate research.

However, the main body of research into khat and other drugs focuses on how the trade affects Western populations. Far less attention goes to the social and economic consequences for producer countries such as Ethiopia, where khat growing is linked to the poverty and hunger that affect millions.

In fact, since khat is not considered to be a hazardous drug, the trade is often seen as inconsequential. An article by Susan Beckerling from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine published in 2007 advocated growing khat as a reliable source of income. However, the consumption of khat has a debilitating effect on many Ethiopians. Unlike in the UK, where its use is purely recreational, in Ethiopia, the drug has an additional value as a hunger suppressant. Several consumers I met in

Harar cited this as their main reason for chewing khat, even though it is relatively expensive in Ethiopia. A dependent user can chew up to half a kilo of leaves per day and bunches of khat cost up to £7 per kilo. In a country where many workers earn less than £1 per day, paying for the drug usually diverts money that might otherwise go towards feeding families.

A further concern is that most illegal drug users in the country began by using khat as their gateway drug. The Ethiopian drug authorities also believe that the infrastructure for the supply of khat is increasingly used to distribute illegal drugs.

However, land use in Ethiopia has bleak humanitarian implications. Land for food against land for khat is becoming a conflict that threatens to menace the country's already deficient food producing resources.

Modern Ethiopia has become synonymous with famine, and the spring of 2011 exposed once again the vulnerability of the region to climatic conditions. Moreover, climate change models predict increased periods of prolonged drought and flooding. Famines of the future are likely to become more frequent and more intense. Ethiopia's fragile ecology and poor infrastructure offer little capacity to adapt in such conditions. Smallholders and pastoralists who rely on regular rains will be most at risk if environmental conditions deteriorate.

However, cycles of famine are not inevitable. Programmes to reform food production in the country include promoting drought-resistant crops such as sorghum (a type of cereal crop) and chickpea, as well as the use of improved seed quality. These schemes can help to reduce the risk of crop failure but the competition for arable land is becoming another obstacle to their success.

Pressures on agricultural land are heightened by the Ethiopian government's own policy of so-called 'villagisation', in which tens of thousands of people are moved from traditional lands into centralised 'village' communities. This relocation enables the government to lease huge areas of fertile land to foreign and domestic agro-companies for the cultivation and export of food crops. Defenders of the scheme claim that it has the potential to improve agricultural techniques, increase local food supply and create jobs. Detractors believe that this smacks of wishful thinking. The programme is more likely to become one more episode in the long history of conflict between production

for profit and human welfare. Private agro-companies often pay low wages, sometimes leaving their employees unable to afford the food that they produce. And, inevitably, the grant of agricultural licences to foreigners raises the spectre of bureaucratic corruption.

## THERE IS NO JUSTIFICATION FOR...LARGE SCALE PRODUCTION...WHERE AGRICULTURAL LAND IS SCARCE AND WHERE PEOPLE ARE SO FREQUENTLY WRACKED WITH HUNGER...

As vast areas of Ethiopia are leased to foreign farming interests, the proportion of land used to grow khat becomes ever more relevant. Current estimates are unavailable but in 2003 a total of 94,330 hectares was given over to producing the drug. Since then, khat growing has rocketed. Almost all regions of Ethiopia now cultivate the crop and it has become the country's fourth leading export, yielding ten percent of export revenue (USD\$210 million). Remarkably, in 2010, the revenue generated from khat exportation increased by more than 50% on the previous year. It is a woeful irony, in a country where 7.8 million people are supported by donor-funded food programmes and 13 million receive some form of food aid, that so much land is devoted to a crop that the people cannot eat.

However, if this is an issue that resonates with the Ethiopian Government, I have not been able to find a reference to it in my research for this article. Although the conflict between land for food and land for khat is a visible obstacle to hunger-alleviation strategies, there seems not to be even the beginnings of a debate about it. When asked, the UK Department of International Development said 'land used for khat cultivation is not an issue that DFID is currently working on'.

In a world busting at the seams with narcotics, the pursuit of international markets for the sale of khat is a colossal step in the wrong direction. Khat farmers are thriving under the legal protection of the Ethiopian government but the moral case against the growing of khat is simple and undeniable – there is no justification for its large scale production in a country where agricultural land

is scarce and where people are so frequently wracked with hunger and famine.

It is estimated that the profits from growing khat is 2.7 times higher than those from cereal production. This means that the khat business is having an escalating impact on the Ethiopian economy: moreover there is no doubt that the tax revenues from the trade are making a contribution to the development of country's infrastructure. However, in comparison to the vast sums that are expended on humanitarian aid, the tax revenues from the khat trade are paltry.

In 2009, humanitarian aid to Ethiopia amounted to USD\$3.9 billion. According to the independent research organisation Global Humanitarian Assistance, food aid accounted for 77% of that total. The budget for food aid therefore has the potential to exercise greater influence over the Ethiopian economy than do the tax revenues from khat sales. Research by Jeffrey Sachs, Director of the Earth Institute, reveals that transporting food into famine-hit areas is ten times more costly than sustained food production on the ground. This being the case, it can be argued that aid budgets should be used to incentivise the cultivation of crops that people can eat.

John Dempsey, a senior advisor for the US Institute of Peace, believes farmers in war-torn Afghanistan could be persuaded to give up growing opium and cannabis if Western and Afghan officials introduced incentives for growing food crops. How much easier would this type of trade-off be in the more stable social and economic conditions of Ethiopia? If such inducements could be made, it would be possible to develop food production on a scale that would ease the cycle of famine that has plagued the country for decades. In this respect, the economics of interventionist strategies is self-evident.

Poverty and hunger in the horn of Africa are beyond simplistic solutions, but I would argue that the khat trade is a significant impediment to food production. Aid donors cannot make aid conditional when famine occurs but, in more secure times, it can be used as a negotiating mechanism to discourage the growing of khat in favour of food. Governments should recognise this and act accordingly. In doing so, they will make a positive move to alleviate hunger and might also halt the advance of the vomit-encrusted T-shirt.

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