Qat/Khat International Perspective
Traditional and cultural issues

In Ethiopia, Yemen, Somalia, and Kenya, the fresh young leaves and tender stems are traditionally consumed for their stimulating properties (Halbach, 1972). The freshness of the plant material is considered crucial, because 48 hours after its harvest the desired properties will have largely diminished. Khat was traditionally used during Muslim religious ceremonies and when studying the Koran, for recreational purposes, as a natural plant remedy with medicinal properties, and for reducing physical fatigue while traveling or working. The leaves are mostly chewed, and an egg-sized bolus is kept in the cheek for several hours before it is spit out; the extracted juice is swallowed. Especially among Somali consumers, the whole plant material might be swallowed (personal communication, Peter Hansen). However, it is also used as tea (Abysinnian, Arabic or Bushman’s tea), paste, or as dried powder. The most common traditional setting for consumption is the khat party (Baasher, 1980; Kennedy, 1987; Weir, 1985), which is known to have taken place for centuries among the higher classes (Schopen, 1979). Men usually gather on weekends after lunch in specially prepared rooms in private houses (mafrish, mafrij) and chew khat until the early evening.

Nowadays, khat parties also take place in public teashops or cafes, where sodas, sweet tea, water, chewing gum, and cigarettes are often being consumed at the same time. Women are said to chew less frequently, and mixed-gender khat parties seem to be rare. A detailed description of the khat party is provided elsewhere (Al-Motarreb, Baker, & Broadley, 2002; Baasher, 1980; Kennedy, 1987). These gatherings were and still are an important social institution, because political, business and social affairs are settled during khat chewing, and khat is also an integral part of other rites and celebrations, e.g. weddings and rites of passage (Al-Motarreb et al., 2002; Carrier, 2005). The lower classes and inhabitants of rural areas, e.g. farmers, traditionally used khat throughout the day during heavy work, for fighting physical fatigue, or the suppression of hunger (Gebissa, 2004; Luqman & Danowski, 1976; Schopen, 1979). The cultural, social, and national importance of khat chewing has been emphasized by many researchers (Gebissa, 2004; Kennedy 1987; Weir, 1985).

How current khat use has degenerated

There is evidence that khat-chewing habits have changed qualitatively during the last decades. What was previously a formalized and strongly regulated social habit, now has features of excessiveness, informality, and decoupling from normative control, at least in some user groups (Nabuzoka & Badhadhe, 2000). This is apparent in individuals’ consumption of higher quantities of the drug (Dhadphale, Mengech & Chege, 1981; Griffiths, 1998; Nabuzoka & Badhadhe, 2000; Odenwald, Hinkel et al., 2007; Patel et al., 2005), longer continuous consumption time (Nabuzoka & Badhadhe, 2000; Odenwald, Lingenfelder et al., 2007), and parallel use of other drugs, e.g. benzodiazepines or alcohol (Nabuzoka & Badhadhe, 2000; Odenwald, Hinkel et al., 2007; Omolo & Dhadphale, 1987; Selassie & Gebre, 1996; Zein, 1988). Although previously khat chewers were traditionally »initiated« at about 20 years of age, nowadays they start using the drug earlier, and especially in Kenya.
consumption has become part of the youth culture (Carrier, 2005; Nabuzoka & Badhadhe, 2000; Patel et al., 2005). Children and adolescents start using khat early in their lives, sometimes at the age of 8-10 years. Furthermore, the formerly male habit is now practiced more and more by women (Alem et al., 1999; Griffiths, 1998; Nabuzoka & Badhadhe, 2000; Patel et al., 2005) and, alarmingly, also during pregnancy and lactation (Kahawaya et al., 2007; Belew et al., 2000; Eriksson, Ghani & Kristiansson, 1991). Cathine has been identified in human breastmilk (4 of 7 samples tested positive, 2-4 hours following chewing; positive samples ranged between 90 ng/ml and 140 ng/ml) and in infant urine (one sample that was taken 12 hours following chewing was found to have 200 ng/ml; Kristiansson, Abdul Ghani, Eriksson, Garle & Qirbi, 1987). There is now convincing evidence that khat use during pregnancy is related to a lower birth weight. Khat use today has new functions, illustrated by research with ex-combatants in Somalia which shows that individuals use khat in order to modify painful emotional states related to their past war-experience (Odenwald et al., under review). New patterns of use, which were not previously described in the academic literature, have been observed in Somalia and Ethiopia: ijabane or igabana (eye opener). This consumption during early morning hours was previously known only among khat farmers (Gebissa, 2004). Today, during morning hours, crowds of khat chewers gather in the proximity of khat markets. They chew together and share with one another, in order to chase away the typical khat-induced qaadiro (hangover; personal observation, confirmed by Peter Hansen, personal communication). Some researchers highlight the special function of khat chewing in immigrant communities in western countries, where it apparently serves an identity defining role (Ahmed & Salib, 1998; Griffiths, 1998; Patel et al., 2005). At the same time, khat use

**Why do khat farmers produce khat?**

Due to its high and stable market prices and its resistance against drought and frost, farmers have a more secure and higher income from khat than from other crops (Feyisa & Aune, 2003; Gebissa, 2004; Kennedy, 1987; Seyoum, Kidane & Gebru, 1986). Thus, khat growing communities have been found to be more prosperous than others (McKee, 1987; Seyoum et al., 1986).

**International economic importance**

During the past decades, the economic importance and consumption of khat leaves have increased dramatically, from a custom practiced only by certain social or ethnic groups in parts of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, to a widespread habit in the general population of countries like Ethiopia, Yemen, Kenya, Somalia, Djibouti and Eritrea (Alem, Kebede & Kullgren, 1999; Belew, Kebede, Kassaye & Enquoselassie, 2000; Kebede et al., 2005; Selassie & Gebre, 1996) as well as among immigrant communities all around the world (Nencini, Grassi, Botan, Asseyr & Paroli, 1989; Patel, Wright & Gammampila, 2005). The popularity of khat use is currently spreading to countries like Uganda and Rwanda (Beckerleg, 2006). One decade ago it was estimated that on a world-wide scale, there were 5 to 10 million consumers each day (Balint, Ghebrekidan & Balint, 1991; Kalix, 1996). Today, this number is probably much higher. The main producing countries are Ethiopia,
Yemen, and Kenya, where the production, trade, and use of khat are not legally restricted. Ethiopia is considered to be the world’s largest producer, with khat being the country’s second largest export product in 1999 (FAO, 2001). In Yemen, the area under khat production has expanded dramatically, and the khat sector now produces 10% of the national GDP (Ward, 2000; Worldbank, 2005). Also in Kenya, the economic importance of khat is considered great, with remarkable monopoly-like trading structures linked to Somalia, its main export destination (Maitai, 1996). The khat sector today feeds millions of farmers and people involved in its trade. However, the khat boom has also caused marked changes in traditional agriculture and land-use systems (Feyisa & Aune, 2003), forest decline (Gessie, 2007) as well as other ecological problems, e.g. through the exploitation of scarce water resources for irrigation farming (Worldbank, 1999). In Somalia, khat import and trade are considered sources of income for several civil-war factions (Grosse-Ketteler, 2004).