Khat chewing has mainly remained localized in the Islamic world, where it has been a topic of ambivalence and scrutiny for some time, with debate simmering over whether khat is a harmful drug and thereby not permissible (harām) under Islamic law. In the 16th century, Muslim jurists’ debated this issue, some having ‘argued that the plant had forbidden properties similar to wine and strong drink’, with others noting that khat ‘could aid in the observance of religious duties by permitting individuals to stay awake’ (Varisco 1986: 9). In Ibn Hajar al-Haythami’s final analysis, however, khat’s fundamental properties are defined oppositionally. His opinion specifically hinged on the fact khat was not like opium, hashish, or wine: in other words, substances to which khat differs in its social consequences.

Khat from the West

It was not until 1975 that United Nations laboratories first discovered the active ingredient of khat to be cathinone, which they described as an amphetamine-like stimulant compound (Mateen & Cascino 2000: 971). The 1970s also saw a sharp increase in khat consumption in Yemen, leading to a rapid doubling of its production (Weir 1985: 34) confirming khat chewing as a resilient, if not growing, tradition. Since then, from the perspective of contemporary law at least, the amphetamine-like pharmacology of cathinone renders khat a substance that is legally controllable (Kalix 1992). With the classification of the newly discovered compound cathinone as ‘amphetamine-like’, khat then became a point of concern outside its immediate sphere of consumption, with it becoming difficult, and potentially criminal, to transport or be in possession of khat. In 1999, The New York Times described khat chewing in Yemen as a national problem to be overcome, with the practice of chewing caricatured as a ghettoized drug of the
urban West, saying: ‘About 1,000 years after acquiring the habit, the people … have never been more hooked’ (Burns 1999). CBC News (Evans 2008) made a playful, if racist, satire of the custom: ‘You have only to stand on a Sana’a street corner to see just how popular it is. It is a city full of Dizzie Gillespies in full blow – huge cheeks popping out at you everywhere you look – on buses or passing cyclists and in the souks, sellers almost impossible to understand because their mouths are full of khat’. Moreover, in 2003, the US Department of Justice (2003: 1) made their disapproval official, pronouncing that khat had a ‘high potential for abuse’. Following suit, Time magazine covered the issue in 2009, reporting on Yemen’s capital Sana’a, stating that ‘By 4 in the afternoon, most men walking the streets of Sana’a are high, or about to get high’, calling the habit ‘a full-blown national addiction’ (Butters 2009). The same article points to the interplay of gender and power in the socio-politics of khat chewing, claiming ‘khat ceremonies reinforce the exclusion of women from power’. In contradiction, however, the Yemen Observer paints a more moderate picture on the gender issue, and with more positive overtones reports that there has been a recent rise in khat consumption amongst young women, stating that ‘Some chewers of Qat say that Qat brings them the strength to help them with academic performance, despite the possible health risks posed by chewing (Al-Yarisi 2012).

Khat in the Middle East

Regardless, khat consumption is now indisputably widespread in Yemeni society, and the prevalence of khat consumption in the Yemeni capital Sana’a, has been estimated to be as high as 80 per cent for males and 50 per cent for females (at age fifteen and above) (Bannoord et al. 2008). Khat chewing has consequently been charged with causing general problems for economic development and public health (Wedegaertner et al. 2010: 735). A major specific concern is the high demand for water resources that khat growing requires. With 40 per cent of the potable water in Yemen directed towards khat cultivation (Almas & Scholz 2006), a feature in The Guardian reports that Sana’a, ‘the fastest-growing capital in the world will run out of economically viable water supplies by 2017’, such is the heavy drain that khat growing has on the nation’s water (Macleod & Vidal 2010). The concern centres on economic growth, and accordingly regards the practice of khat chewing as the crux of the problem.

Further on the centrality of development economics, Weir writes (1985: 36): ‘Most economists prefer coffee… because it might earn Yemen foreign currency’. Khat on the other hand is unlikely to be a viable export and has been generally condemned by development-oriented economists (Weir 1985: 37). Khat has thus been critiqued as a commodity that might not be articulated into global flows and markets, if not just because of the cultural receptivity that chewing presupposes, then perhaps because of the legal prohibitions on transporting psychoactive plant materials across state borders. Not functioning as a global commodity, khat cannot migrate along the same channels as legitimate stimulant commodities, such as its competitor, coffee.

Health concerns

Aside from the role khat may play in damaging the economic aspirations of Yemen, there has also been dispute about the health impact of khat chewing. The principal alleged dangers are mental illness (specifically psychosis), cardiovascular disease, and oral health (gum disease and oral abscesses), all of which are thought to be dangers posed by chronic khat chewing. Surprisingly then, in the 2010 special edition of the Journal of Ethnopharmacology entitled ‘The use and misuse of khat (Catha Edulis) in a changing world: Tradition, trade and tragedy’, some of these potential negative effects of khat chewing were deemed inconclusive, particularly the putative link to cardiovascular disease (Al-Matarreba et al. 2010). Moreover, no causative relation to psychiatric disease was substantiated: rather, it remains inconclusive whether khat actually causes the same ‘neurocognitive deficit that have been identified in previous studies of individuals who have been chronic users of stimulants, such as amphetamines and methamphetamine’s’ (Hoffmann & Al’Absi, 2010: 554). In fact, the scientific and public health evidence shows that the physical and mental health ‘risks’ of khat remain very low (Klein et al. 2012: 3; Warfa et al. 2007).

Global response

Despite the scientific literature’s moderate position, khat chewing still remains a political issue on the global stage, as it has previously been identified by the World Health Organization (WHO 2003; 2006) as a public health concern of the Arabian peninsula region, broadly tying khat consumption to the negative potential effects on the ‘social and economic life’ of its users (WHO 2006: 11).
More direct criticisms have been laid at khat consumption in Somaliland, where khat plays a prominent role in the social life of most men. Indeed, in Somaliland the importation of fresh khat leaves from neighbouring Somalia takes up a large portion of Somaliland’s annual spending and is deemed a heavy burden on the economy, having already had corrosive effects on the state’s governing abilities (Hansen 2010). Hansen’s study (2010) reports that while khat was found to strengthen male social networks and provide an environment for peaceful political engagement, chewing khat was found to lead to the breakdown of families. For families with a male member who chews khat, much of the family budget can be lost to the long hours of homosocial chewing. *CBC News* (2008) concurs, stating that “[khat] does little to put food in bellies or bring in hard currency from abroad”. In the Somali case specifically, the criticism of khat is most strongly presented by ‘women’s organizations and female politicians who argue that khat destorys Somali men and leads to the neglect of children and domestic violence’ (Hansen 2010: 591).

In the UK however, where khat is still legal, though apparently not for long, Somali migrants meet and casually chew khat in ‘mafrishes’ which are commonly referred to as ‘Somali pubs’. However even these sanctioned spaces have not evaded the controversy, and the ‘mafrishes’ of the Peckham district of London have recently raised concern on the basis that they might function as effective spaces for the recruitment of terrorists (Swains 2012).

Regardless of the validity or invalidity of this particular claim, this potentiality succeeds to propel the controversy forward, and offers another insight into the socially networked life of a globally contested object of concern. Curiously though, the possibility of khat mediating terrorism might point towards deep international political asymmetries. Indeed, Gezon & Totomarovo (2008) contend that discourses on recreational khat chewing practices in Ethiopia, Kenya and Madagascar can be most strongly connected by a shared concern over “the hegemony of the western economic development model” (Gezon & Totomarovo 2008: 1), a model they regard as buttressed by khat’s incorporation into the ‘global rhetoric of the war on drugs’ (2008: 10).

Discourse on khat chewing has reverberated across the globe, and international development organizations, such as the WHO (2003; 2006) and the World Bank (2007; 2012), are now committed to helping reduce khat consumption. The World Bank explicitly (2007: i) recommends: a set of economic and non-economic policy measures. These include: increasing the tax burden; building public awareness; incorporating training on the hazards of khat in the school system; enforcing public policies aimed at discouraging khat consumption (e.g. extension of working hours); closing knowledge gaps and developing viable crop diversification programs. Such measures are hoped to help ‘wean’ chewers off khat (World Bank 2007: i).

With the forceful arguments against khat consumption made by the WHO and World Bank over health concerns and an economically-centred rationale of productivity and development, further license is unavoidably lent to the mainstream media to treat khat chewing as a lazy and unhealthy form of time wasting. Moreover, publications by the World Bank (2012: 1) furnish epistemic support to a prohibitive stance on chewing, specifically by classifying khat as a ‘narcotic’ substance.

‘Narcotic’, however, is technically an incorrect category placement in the strict sense of Western pharmacology, which decisively taxonomizes khat’s primary bioactive compound, cathinone, as an amphetamine-like compound (Graziani et al. 2008; Kalix 1988; 1990; 1992). Based on its biological effects on physiological function at least, khat is far more closely related to the prescription medications Adderall and Ritalin’, which are routinely prescribed to children — and heavily marketed to their parents — in the US. But with khat not being a recognized medicine, the comparison is necessarily muted. In this regard, the pejorative and possibly spurious labelling of khat as a ‘narcotic’ inevitably associates khat with narcotics linked with entrenched social problems, such as heroin or opium. I now explore the grounds for such a hasty comparison.

**Chewing as a situated practice**

To consider the practice of khat chewing from the position of its local chewers, I move to focus on a typical chewing setting in Yemen, drawing from previous ethnographic accounts. In so doing I hope to resurrect some of the heretofore unmentioned dimensions of khat chewing as an everyday social practice.

In Yemen, khat chewing usually takes place in organized sessions (termed ‘chews’) where men gather to chew in a group. Khat ‘is used as a [temporal] marker to distinguish leisure time from work’ and is built into the rhythms of quotidian life; the traditional after-lunch chewing session is usually engaged in, the social configuration of which is thought to foster individual democratic subjectivities and what might be considered the practice of a form of public reason (Wedeen 2008).

Khat chews are thus widely considered by Yemeni men to be socially generative spaces, in that they function as nodes of male connectivity where strangers can meet through mutual contacts. Through open-ended public discussions, private information may be openly shared, thereby making it *ipso facto* public information. Chewing sessions thus connect men who disseminate and synthesize news or opinion together. Moreover, where particularly influential politicians, tribal leaders or respected community members are present, important political decisions may be made during the chewing session (Wedeen 2008: 114).
The genre, or tone, of the chew can vary from casual, contingent and open-ended, to more ceremonial events, which can be recognized by the orientations of the participants’ relative seating positions, where ‘seating positions correspond to statuses in the room’ (ibid: 123). Wedeen offers a definition of a typical ‘chew’ as gatherings where as many as several dozen people ‘meet to debate literary matters, political life and social problems’ (2008: 104). While a session will initially open with individuals proposing topics for discussion, often several suggestions may be made before a topic is chosen and pursued. Wedeen identifies this liminal moment, involving the choice of discussion topics, as an ‘important aspect of democratic practice and personhood’, seeing ‘lively disagreements about issues of mutual public concern…to make worlds in common’ (2008: 104) as an important aspect of democratic practice and participatory politics.

In Wedeen’s final analysis, the khat chew is considered to bring strangers into physical, spatiotemporal and affective proximity, and through the establishment of mutual shared concerns and their contestation, makes subjective coalescence possible. In this reading, khat chews don’t just constitute drug-fuelled ramblings, but the ‘phenomenological dimensions of participatory politics’, as Wedeen (ibid: 112) puts it, can alleviate interpersonal tensions between acquaintances, working out pre-existing problems and disputes.

The ‘chew’ thus consists of an assemblage of bodies and affects, situated and distributed, respectively. These gatherings can thus be viewed as providing a unique format for democratic politics, displaying the quality of being affective and rational at once, nurturing political subjectivities that are predicated on affective dynamics shared amongst participants. Crucially though, these discussions are mediated by, structured around, and sustained by, khat consumption. The ‘chew’, as a complex bundle of relations thus functions somewhat similarly to the coffee-houses and salons of the European enlightenment movement, and as such, Wedeen concludes that the Yemeni khat chew fulfils two of the criteria that Habermas (1991) posits as essential to the constitution of a discursive ‘public sphere’: ‘citizens’ engagement in critical discussion and the mediated reflexive role that such mini-publics play in helping to produce the impersonal, audience oriented, broader public of anonymous citizens’ (Wedgeen 2008: 113). The socially and politically generative potentialities of these gatherings reveal that khat chews achieve more than unhealthy idling. Rather, in this instance, khat can be seen to be instrumental in bringing men more closely together, networking a form of political consciousness with an organic democratic activity.

Nonetheless, the example of the Yemeni khat chew is not intended to imply that khat is an inherently democratic entity ‘in its nature’. Rather, I want to gesture towards the way the intrinsic properties of khat become realized as a hybrid fusion of nature and culture, with the inalienable material properties of khat, such as its pharmacology, nested within social fields coordinated by a particular mode of consumption. I emphasize that khat retains the capacity to be animated within many settings, each with their shifting worlds of facts and social values. Depending on khat’s location and how tightly it is embedded into local regimes of knowledge and practice, khat may successfully do a variety of things: aid study, mediate democracy, enhance storytelling, promote idling etc. In this sense, the fundamental essence of khat is inextricably entangled with the cultural uses that authorize it, and I argue that khat cannot be meaningfully discussed without recourse to its social context.

Conclusion

The khat polemic has thus far seen khat essentialized in a set of universalizing claims: as a narcotic; a drain on economic growth; a strain on family structures; a public health concern; the sign of democratic hope; and a potential node for connecting militants. With these conversations situated in segmented discursive arenas with little cross-talk, these perspectives remain important and relevant, but relatively hermetic and univocal. To effectively examine the khat controversy as a complex anthropological problem, I argue, demands recognizing the social relations that khat inhabits and animates as part of real lived-world experience, for the various sets of actors involved, within the various institutions and material relations they inform.

I suggest that similar controversies might be more fruitfully mapped by incorporating the diverse sets of perspectives that jointly stabilize their object of concern. Having shown here how khat can function multifariously, from an economic policy concern to a powerful mediator of democratic discussion, I contend that it is precisely through such oppositions that divergent political claims function to inflate ‘the controversy’. Rigorous analysis of similar issues thus demands attentiveness to a plurality of perspectives, tracking the shifting role of the object of focus as it migrates from site to site, where it may in part be doing very different things.

I have shown that khat may be used recreationally for all of the buzz and benefits it may afford the user, or indeed as a crutch for a host of political, economic and public health interventions. The jury is out as to the future of khat; meanwhile the controversy chews it up.