The Hilux and the ‘Body Thrower’: Khat transporters in Kenya

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Introduction

The stimulant khat (or miraa as it is known more widely in Kenya and as I refer to it in this chapter) is a substance strongly associated with life lived at a fast and furious pace. Much of this reputation comes from the high speeds reached by the transporters responsible for driving sacks of this highly perishable commodity from its production zone in Kenya’s Nyambene Hills to Nairobi. Over the course of the last century, trade in Kenyan miraa has grown from just a local phenomenon to being in demand as far away as Manchester and Minneapolis. This globalized demand and the perishability of the substance means that the few hundred kilometres between the Nyambenes and Nairobi (where miraa is repackaged for air transportation) have to be covered at speed.

The Toyota Hilux pick-up is the vehicle usually used along this crucial section of the miraa network and this chapter, after describing the Nyambene to Nairobi run and those who own and operate the vehicles, draws out perceptions of these pick-ups and their dare-devil drivers. One such dare-devil is nicknamed Ntã Mwiri (Body Thrower), as his driving suggests a man prepared to throw his and his passengers’ bodies away. The image of a Hilux over-laden with sacks of

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1 My research on miraa was first undertaken for my PhD which was sponsored by a Carnegie grant, then by an ESRC studentship, and finally as a research assistant on an ESRC/AHRC-funded project entitled ‘The Khat Nexus’. My thanks go to Roy Dilley, Paul Baxter, Noel Lobley, David Anderson and, in particular, Nicholas M’Mucheke and my other Kenyan friends.

mira and driving at high speed has become iconic in the Kenyan miraa trade and is an image used even in Kenyan cartoons. This chapter looks at the development of this image, the factors behind it and the mixed reactions it provokes in Kenya, a country deeply concerned about its high number of road accidents. The chapter ends by arguing that perceptions of miraa and its transporters are interlinked, with both being regarded in wider society with considerable ambivalence. The reputation of the Hilux—in the Nyambenes at any rate—owes much to miraa and the urgency required in delivering it fresh to consumers.3

The cargo

Miraa is the most commonly used name in Kenya for the stimulant leaves and stems of Catha edulis (Forskal), a tree that is indigenous to much of Africa, and is cultivated—either in the form of a tree or a shrub—throughout East and Southern Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. It is strongly associated with Yemen, where the qat session has become an important social institution,4 and also with Somalis, whose fondness for the substance has led to a lucrative trade serving both Somalia and the Somali diaspora. Besides Kenya, miraa is cultivated and consumed in Ethiopia,5 parts of Uganda,6 Madagascar (especially around the Northern town of Antsiranana) and even Israel. Consumption of wild miraa is common in the Eastern Cape.7

Miraa trees in Kenya grow wild in the forests and are cultivated in various locations, the most important of which is the Nyambene Hills, the mountain

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3 This chapter is based on sixteen months of anthropological fieldwork on miraa in Kenya, combining participant observation with key informant interviews. My friend and research assistant, Nicholas Mugaa M’Mucheke, conducted some further interviews in late 2005, meeting drivers, vehicle owners and insurance agents. He even took participant observation to its extreme and travelled to Nairobi in a Hilux! His material added a great deal to what we had previously collected together on Hilux drivers and owners, and nicely nuanced previous findings on miraa transport. See N. Carrier, The social life of Miraa: Farming, trade and consumption of a plant stimulant in Kenya (PhD thesis, University of St Andrews, 2003) and N. Carrier, Kenyan khat. The social life of a stimulant (Leiden, 2007).


