

# Ballad of the New Somali Café

It's not spacious. It's not comfortable. It's not homely. But for the Somali refugees in London, it's somewhere to go. Hadani Ditmars reports. Photographs by Kayte Brimacombe.

In an unassuming corner of Bethnal Green – home to immigrants and BNP supporters alike – members of London's Somali community gather together at the New Somali Restaurant, known locally as the Somali Café. Decorated in a minimal, linoleum-tiled style, the café resembles an American workers canteen circa 1950.

Its true nature as a meeting point for London's Somalis is revealed by a bulletin board with posters advertising Somali newspapers and one-way flights to Djibouti.

Over in a corner sits Musa, an ex-SNM (Somali National Movement) fighter, drinking tea. The sweet, milky, aromatic beverage proves to be a smooth elixir for story telling.

"We would hide for days in the mountains," Musa says. "If there were government patrols around we would sneak past the checkpoint at night, careful to avoid the mines." Musa grins. Despite the danger, he looks almost fondly upon his days as an armed guerrilla. Armed resistance, it seems, is sometimes easier than life as an inner-city refugee.

Musa is one of 65,000 Somalis in

London, 66 per cent of whom have arrived as refugees in the past five years. They are mainly from the northern region of Somalia, a former British colony where, between 1988 and 1991, over 160,000 people were killed by government troops and another 600,000 fled to squalid camps in Ethiopia. Cities as large as Manchester were destroyed as the civil war raged.

According to Faisal Mohammed, a local mental health worker, Musa is part of a community with an 84 per cent unemployment rate. 39 per cent of Somalis in London are homeless and 37 per cent live in overcrowded conditions. There is a high level of mental illness and even suicide among the refugees, related to civil war atrocities as well as difficulties in adjusting to new cultural realities.

The new realities include frequent racial attacks. The Tower Hamlets Racial Equality Council say that between 1992-93, 120 Somalis were assaulted. Somali women are also harassed, usually for wearing traditional Muslim dress.

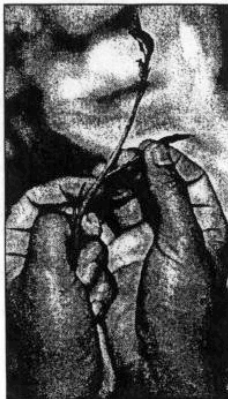
To make matters worse, their plight is perceived as "last year's

issue". Public attention is focused on Bosnia and Rwanda. In the past year and a half, ten Somalis in London took their own lives. The most recent death took place last week. A young Somali man threw himself from the ninth floor of a block of flats.

Clan-based Somali society, where the extended family is a way of life, contrasts sharply with the reality experienced by many refugees, separated from loved ones and living solitary lives in run-down council accommodation.

Since there are virtually no Somali staff or interpreters employed by borough councils, health and employment departments, no Somali social workers, doctors, nurses, teachers or lawyers because of the restrictive practices of British professional bodies, and an almost total lack of voluntary organisations employing Somali speakers, family ties are a vital lifeline. For those Somalis unfortunate enough to be here without an extended family, there is always the café.

Here, refugees can exchange information about Somalia or find people to deliver letters to family back



In the raw: Quate leaves can produce euphoria when chewed

home. Here too, they can find solace in one of the few (barely) affordable pleasures left to them – chewing quate.

A rather ordinary looking green plant, whose leaves can produce a state of narcotic euphoria when chewed, quate is dangerous, critics say. Many Somalis claim it is harmless, even therapeutic. The danger, it seems, lies in the economic repercussions of "quate abuse". At £4 for a "hit", a daily habit can make a significant dent in a DSS weekly income.

Many Somalis are reluctant to talk about quate use, due as much to the sensationalist image it portrays as to its quasi-legal status. Musa becomes hostile at the very mention of it.

"It's the quate you're after, isn't it? You journalists are all the same – always showing the bad side of things."

Abdi, a regular at the café, is more open. "How do you do?" he says. "I'm the quate seller".

A former accountant, Abdi originally left Somalia in 1977 because of the persecution he faced from the southern-based government as a "northerner" from the Issaq tribe. He first fled to Ethiopia, and then through a series of illegal border

crossings made it to Zambia, then Uganda, Iraq, Syria and Jordan before arriving in Saudi Arabia. When he was unable to renew his work visa, Abdi came to England.

Now he lives in a council flat in Essex. His neighbours barely speak to him. The money required for retraining, in order to gain professional accounting credentials in Britain, is out of reach for the moment. He comes to the café every day. Quate selling provides a supplementary income.

While Abdi meets potential customers in the café, the exchange usually occurs outside, with a car boot substituting for the market stall. The chewing takes place in a back room, or, after Friday prayer, in an upstairs flat.

Abdi Razaqa, the café-owner's son, a religious young man, explains that quate is neither "haram" (forbidden) nor "hallal" (acceptable). As there is no explicit Koranic teaching forbidding its use, quate occupies a moral no-man's-land.

Abdul Rahman, 60, explains the particular qualities of Ethiopian quate as opposed to the Kenyan variety. "The Ethiopian is the best," he says. He claims that it is a cure for diabetes as well as a powerful aphrodisiac.

"Not like the Kenyan quate that the young people chew," he continues. "That stuff makes you crazy, that's why the young ones are so violent – fighting each other and going out of their minds – it's the Kenyan quate."

Still, Rahman says that clan conflicts do not extend to the London community. Most Somalis here are from the Issaq tribe, and relations with the other small minorities never go beyond "cold shoulder tribalism". The 1,000 or so members of the Marchant tribe, once the ruling class in Somalia, reside mainly in the Swiss Cottage area, a far cry from the poverty of Somalis living in Tower Hamlets and Bethnal Green. They do not mix.

In general, Rahman explains, the old pre-civil war generation was much more "pan-Somalian" than the present one. Their attachment to England is greater than that of the younger generation; they look back nostalgically to the days of colonial rule. In contrast, the "war generation" take their



Oxford House in Bethnal Green provides a refuge for the local Somali community





Café society: the place for traditional dishes, gossip and news from home

cultural cue from America.

"I'm the 'godfather' of the Somali mafia," one sharply dressed young man boasts. His claim seems to have more style than substance - a glamorous image buoyed by Italian leather shoes and the inevitable mobile phone.

Halima, a 60-year-old woman who settled in Britain with her seaman husband during the Fifties, has no patience with the 'godfather' and his ilk.

"They're just thugs", she says. "Last week, I came to the café and they swore at me and called me 'an old seawoman'."

She was one of the first women to accompany her husband to England, in what had previously been an all-male exodus. Having left her husband 30 years ago, she is alone in London, and comes to the café for compan-

ionship. The owner's wife is a friend, she says, but a little "too religious" for her liking. "She's a good woman, though," says Halima, glancing at her friend, veiled in black, as she dutifully labours in the kitchen.

It is not only generation differences that distinguish elements of the Somali community. Class differences are also alive and well.

An educated, well-dressed man sits down and explains the current political situation in Somaliland, the Northern Somali state still officially unrecognised by Britain. "Why should they be interested in us?" he says. "There is no oil, no money to be made."

As he talks, a big man in tarty clothes, slightly stoned on quat, looks in from the doorway and says: "Oh,

so you're a politician now, are you? What do you know about anything? You're 20 years out of date!"

"Here you have a typical Somali," the well-dressed man retorts.

Two young men begin to talk animatedly of the Somali cultural festival at nearby Oxford House, where they can sing, dance, and more importantly, meet girls - a crucial factor in a still conservative society.

The somewhat strained atmosphere in the café relaxes as the men laugh and joke about the evening's possibilities. There are some things in life that transcend time and circumstance and, perhaps, even memory.

*The Somali cultural festival, Oxford House, Derbyshire St., Bethnal Green (071-739 9001) runs until Saturday*



## diary

Victoria Ward



It is surely a rare moment when Dame Shirley Porter, the beleaguered former leader of Westminster council, becomes responsible for making money for Labour Party activists, but that time is nigh: next week she looks set to accrue, inadvertently, a tidy sum for objectors to the Westminster "homes for votes" affair. Leading opponents of the alleged gerrymandering at Westminster have opened a book on whether Dame Shirley will show up for preliminary hearings on 7 and 10 October - which she herself requested through her solicitors. On her behalf they will be making a submission as to "whether or not the district auditor investigating the case, John Magill, should disqualify himself". (Dame Shirley and co are accusing him of bias against them following certain comments he made in January).

Punters betting that Dame Shirley will not appear - she has spent much of the past six months in Israel and is now in Portugal - include Peter Bradley, deputy leader of Westminster's Labour group. He has bet £110 - the precise amount debited from the council's expenses for a "hand-quet", lunch at the Dutchster Grill when leader Miles Young took over from David Weekes, recorded here last week - that Dame Shirley will not show. Former Westminster councillor Neal Coleman is taking the opposite punt - but since the takings will go to the objectors' fund the competition is not breaking up too many friendships. As for Dame Shirley? All a spokesman will say is: "She may or may not appear."

To the Travellers Club where Sir David Attenborough was kind enough to give me just a whiff of some of his latest botanical discoveries, due to be shown in his new forthcoming BBC series, *The Private Life of Plants*. The most fascinating of them all, he told me, was a 12ft giant - named, rather unsubtly, after a part of the male anatomy. "The *Amorphophallus Titanum* is an incredible plant," he says with a commendably straight face. "It can be found in

the rain forests of Sumatra and only flowers once every three years.... Ah. So that's why it took him so long to make the series.

On to the laudich of David Marsh's authoritative tome *Germany and Europe: the Crisis of Unity*, where the fine tittle of Europe's elder statesmen appeared to be the main topic of discussion. Earlier Marsh had discovered the former West German Chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, 75, in his Savoy hotel room doing what appeared to be press-ups. "In fact," smiled a relieved Marsh, "he was on the floor prising champagne bottles from the fridge."

Not to be outdone, however, Lady Healey was keen to extol the newfound hobby of her husband, also a former chancellor. Instead of attending next week's Labour conference, Lord Healey will be viewing an evening of flamenco dancing at Sadler's Wells. "If you see someone outside masquerading as a flamenco dancer," she confided, "you'll know it's my husband."

Disgarding his sequins for an academic gown is Brian Eno (below), who has just been appointed visiting professor at the Royal College of Art. Eno, who synthesised his way to fame in the 1970s with the likes of David Bowie and Bryan Ferry, was last week propelled into academia where he will teach an assortment of RCA classes on useful subjects such as "interactive multimedia". A difficult man to track down - the college chased him from Vienna to America and Switzerland before they could offer him the post (nobody is revealing for how much). Eno, 46, is said to be "thrilled to bits", however, as are his prospective students. "I can guarantee his classes will be packed to the hilt," said an effusive RCA spokesman. "People will be interested in him initially, afterwards some serious teaching will go down."



Living up to her description as "too shy to give on-screen interviews" is artist Rebecca Horn, who was conspicuous at Tuesday night's opening of her new exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery - by her absence.