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Daniel Martin Varisco

ON THE MEANING OF CHEWING:
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF *QĀT* (*CATHA EDULIS*) IN
THE YEMEN ARAB REPUBLIC

It must be a very acquired taste, for I have tried a leaf or two and thought it was filthy, but when you have acquired the taste for it, it makes you feel a devil of a dog as long as the feeling lasts.¹

So writes the British administrator Harold Ingrams about the chewing of leaves from the *qāt* tree in Yemen. *Qāt* is the Arabic term for *Catha edulis*, a species of the *Celastraceae* cultivated in the highlands of southwestern Arabia for at least the last six centuries. The leaves of this tree are chewed as a stimulant, producing a feeling of euphoria followed by depression. In the past *qāt* was mainly used by the urban elites, but recently chewing *qāt* has expanded among urban and rural, rich and poor, educated doctor and taxi driver. Indeed, *qāt* has become the most lucrative cash crop in the Yemeni economy at a time when production of traditional food crops has been undergoing great stress.

There has been considerable debate within and without Yemeni society on whether or not *qāt* should be used. Most Western travelers and development planners echo the sentiments of Ingrams and condemn the chewing of *qāt* as a health hazard, waste of time, drain on the household budget, disincentive to local production of food crops and obstacle to development of a slowly emerging third-world economy.² Religious opinion in Yemen sanctions the use of *qāt*, but the attitude of the government is officially negative. Nevertheless, the government receives considerable revenues from the taxing of *qāt* production and marketing. One Yemeni author has labeled the use of this stimulant as anti-revolutionary and a major factor in the long isolation of the country.³ Yet, despite the chorus of *qāt* critics, clearly more Yemenis are chewing *qāt* today than at any other time.

The focus of this study is on the meaning of chewing: why do so many Yemenis choose to chew and why is *qāt* such a significant issue for debate in the contemporary Yemen Arab Republic? Over the years many Yemenis have offered praise for this plant. It has been variously known as the “elixir of life” and the “flower of paradise.” It is said that one cannot taste “l’esprit du Yemen” until he or she has tasted *qāt*. While *qāt* has long had a meaning to those of the religious and political elites who have praised it, that meaning has changed as new groups in Yemeni society have the means to afford the pastime and have the desire to emulate the tradition of use. The meaning of chewing cannot be elicited from

literary evidence alone, but rather should be examined in terms of the overall socio-economic and cultural development occurring in the young Yemen Arab Republic.

Until the aftermath of the 1962 revolution North Yemen was a small, isolated backwater under the control of the *Zaydī* imams. Few Westerners and virtually no modern technology had penetrated *Zaydī* Yemen. Even other Arab states looked on Yemen as a medieval enclave where there was no cosmopolitan center such as Cairo, Baghdad or Beirut. On the eve of the revolution Ṣan^cā³, the capital, was austere and quaint. The revolution and ensuing civil war during the 1960s brought Yemen suddenly into an arena of international politics. Only in the past decade have the basic infrastructure and domestic economy of the country begun to develop.

Making the leap from medieval canons to the computer age is a difficult feat, but Yemen has attempted this without the benefit of oil wealth. In fact, Yemen has received a rebound effect from the oil-powered economies of her sister states on the peninsula. A considerable amount of foreign aid and loans has come to Yemen from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. In addition, over one-third of the potential male labor force in the Yemen Arab Republic has migrated for temporary work abroad, mostly to the oil-producing states.⁴ The amount of remittances entering back into the Yemeni economy has hovered around a billion dollars annually for at least the past five years according to official records. The impact of this ready capital on the Yemeni economy has been staggering, triggering high inflation through unchecked consumer spending.

A rapid and dramatic increase in the levels of household income provides the context for greater demand and expanded production of *qāt*. Many farmers, who in the past could barely provide subsistence needs, now can afford through remittance earnings to chew *qāt* daily if they wish. As rural and urban wages have inflated, members of the poor service groups can also afford to spend on *qāt*. With more imported foodstuffs available from the world market, farmers can also turn over productive land to this cash crop and purchase some food supplies. The mere fact that the Yemeni has more money, however, does not explain why he should spend up to twenty dollars a day for a bundle of leaves.

Concomitant with the unparalleled economic change at all levels of the society there is an evolution of perceptions of social status and patterns of behavior. The traditional social structure, although not uniform for the whole country, postulated a hierarchical ordering of social status groups based primarily on descent and reinforced through certain behavioral patterns.⁵ Due to changes in economic opportunities and the formation of the republic, traditional ideas about social divisions are changing. One can no longer easily identify the member of a social category by dress, place of residence, behavior, economic level or terms of address. Members of the lowest status groups have raised their incomes and shifted to new employment opportunities. Members of the former elites no longer have automatic prestige.

At the same time that there is social change there is an inevitable questioning of identity. This is heightened in the Yemeni context because of the rapid and condensed pace of development and the exposure to new lifestyles through extensive male migration and the media. It is no longer sufficient to be from a certain

tribe, town or region in Yemen; there is now a need to define oneself as a Yemeni vis-à-vis other Arab cultures and other nationalities. Yemenis are fiercely proud of their own heritage and the fact they were never dominated by a Western power, but abroad they tend to fill unskilled positions (construction, cleaning, cooking, shopkeeping) and may even be ridiculed as coming from an isolated and backward country.

The modern Yemeni has a need to identify himself in a positive way. Chewing *qāt* is an act that is distinctively Yemeni and shared with no other Arab culture. The use of *qāt* is embedded in the traditional society and has been infused with a new meaning to face a rapidly changing context. Chewing is an act with symbolic references that a Yemeni of any social category can follow to reinforce and in some cases to create a cultural identity. The meaning of chewing is that it gives the chewer a meaning, a sense of his or her own identity in a rapidly changing world over which he or she has little or no control.

THE *QĀT* PLANT IN YEMEN⁶

Catha edulis or *qāt* is indigenous to East Africa, from where it was probably introduced into Yemen as early as the 14th century. The first undisputed mention of the Arabic term is in a historical text by Ibn Faḍl Allāh al-^cUmarī, who claimed the plant appeared in Yemen during the rule of the Rasulid Sultan al-Mu³ayyad Dāwūd (died 721/1321).⁷ By the early 16th century the legitimacy of chewing *qāt* was under debate by Muslim scholars who had visited or lived in Yemen. The fact that chewing had social overtones is indicated in an account that by the early 16th century women of the southern highland town of Ta^cizz had complained to the local ruler that their husbands had lost their sexual appetites after chewing *qāt*.⁸ It appears that *qāt* was first planted in the south and perhaps was not cultivated in the Ṣan^cā³ region until the 18th century.⁹ The French traveler Paul Botta said that in 1837 *qāt* was the most important crop of Jabal Ṣabir, above Ta^cizz.¹⁰ Due to conflicting accounts and legends, it is neither possible nor advisable to pinpoint the introduction and early history of the plant in Yemen.

Statistical data on *qāt* production in the Yemen Arab Republic are rare and tentative. In 1980 the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries estimated that 40,000–45,000 ha of cultivated land were devoted to the *qāt* tree. This estimate, which is generally thought to be short of the mark, represents about 3% of the total cultivated area of the country, although *qāt* is grown only between about 1000 and 2500 meters elevation.

Data on yield and crop value are missing from official publications, including the annual yearbook of the Central Planning Organization. In 1971 it was estimated that the annual crop value for *qāt* was 300,000,000 dollars,¹¹ while a decade later estimates placed the annual value at about 800,000,000 dollars.¹² The latter estimate, made in 1982, amounts to almost a third of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 2.9 billion dollars at the time. At this same time the estimated market value of all other agricultural crops in the country was no more than 15,000,000 dollars. There is no doubt that *qāt* is the most lucrative cash crop in the Yemeni highlands.

The *qāt* tree is a perennial, easily cultivated and resistant to most pests and diseases. It can be grown on a variety of soils, with or without irrigation. The sole purpose of cultivation is for the young leaves, which can be harvested in the third year. In most areas two or three harvests per year are common, but up to six harvests have been recorded. There are no peak labor periods, as in cereal crop production; nor are specialized methods or expensive technologies required. Although there is no direct relationship, the increase in *qāt* production parallels a decline in coffee production. From farm budgets in the Hajja area it is evident that *qāt* is at least five times as profitable as coffee.¹³ In the major *qāt*-growing area of Radā^c the net profit of a *qāt* farmer in the second year after the crop matures is estimated at over 37,000 dollars per ha.¹⁴ In the Rāziḥ area near the Saudi Arabian border the market value is estimated at 90,000 dollars per ha for two harvests per year and 130,000 dollars for three harvests.¹⁵ In 1979–1981 land terraced with *qāt* in the Rāziḥ area sold for 200,000–600,000 dollars per ha.

Until the recent expansion of the road network and arrival of truck transport, *qāt* production had been limited to areas near major towns or markets. Before the revolution only 231 km of paved roads existed in Yemen, but this expanded to 1016 km in 1973 and 2422 km in 1981, not including the even greater expansion of dirt roads. The only major disadvantage to *qāt* as a cash crop is that it must be marketed fresh in less than 24 hours.¹⁶ As the marketing of *qāt* improves through a more efficient road network, farmers in previously remote areas can consider *qāt* a lucrative alternative to traditional food crops.

THE *QĀT* CHEW AS SOCIAL CONTEXT

The chewing of *qāt* leaves as a regular habit is widespread in the contemporary Yemen Arab Republic and crosscuts social categories. The most extensive survey of *qāt* use was made by Italian doctors from 1955 to 1967 on some 27,000 patients treated at clinics in Yemeni towns.¹⁷ Although this was not a systematic survey, it indicated that about 91% of men and 59% of women chewed *qāt* to some extent. This is similar to findings by Gerholm that about 90% of men chewed in highland Manākha,¹⁸ and by Hammarin that some 85% of men chewed *qāt* in villages near Ta^cizz.¹⁹ A survey in the coastal town of Tuḥayta, near Zabīd, revealed that 83% of the men and 70% of the women chewed.²⁰ Despite sampling problems and regional variations, it is clear that an overwhelming majority of Yemenis chew *qāt*, many on a daily basis.

Although the reasons are unclear, it appears that fewer women chew than men. Women are more likely to chew if they live in cities and have afternoon leisure time. It has been reported that women as a rule do not chew in the central highland town of ʿAmrān,²¹ the central highland valley of al-Ahjur,²² the southern village of Banī Ghāzī,²³ and the coastal fishing villages visited by Bornstein in the early 1970s.²⁴ Some women claim they are too busy to take time off and chew or simply cannot afford to go without sleep and still finish their chores. Some men have indicated that *qāt* is too expensive for women to chew.

The *qāt* leaves are generally chewed in the afternoon after the ʿaṣr prayer and lasting until the *maghrib* prayer or after.²⁵ The institution of the afternoon chew

occurs daily in both rural and urban areas. In most cases men and women chew at separate gatherings. Chewing is also an important part of formal occasions, including the wedding celebration, where *qāt* is generally provided by the host as part of the wedding expenses, celebration of a birth (*wilāda*), circumcision (*khitān*), send-off or reception for a pilgrim or migrant worker, funerals and religious festivals. During the fasting month of Ramadan the daily chew occurs after *iftār* and generally lasts until early the next morning. The number of men or women attending a chew depends on the nature of the occasion, importance of the host and local events. In general the size is small enough so that everyone can converse with everyone else. In a survey of 150 Yemeni men, al-Sa^cdī found that 59% regularly attended chews of less than ten people, 28% attended chews of 10–30 men, while only 1.5% went to chews of 30–100 men.²⁶

The daily chew serves as an important forum for socializing with one's friends and neighbors, informal conduct of business, discussion of current events, dispute mediation and religious instruction. Students use the occasion to study together; poets actively seek inspiration while chewing. When women meet for an afternoon party (*tafrīṭa*), they may dance and show off their clothing and jewelry. Even someone who does not chew *qāt* may attend a chew simply for the sake of socialization.

It is important to stress the social nature of chewing; one rarely chews alone simply for the stimulation. The term for a chew in some areas of Yemen is *matkā*^ᶜ, which is derived from the meaning of a sitting room with cushions.²⁷ A proverb recited by informants in the valley of al-Ahjur states that after the main dinner meal is the *qāt* chew and after supper is late night conversation (*ba^cad al-ghadā^ᶜ matkā^ᶜ wa ba^cad al-^cashā^ᶜ samrā^ᶜ*). Most Yemenis consider it shameful to chew in the morning before the usual time. Chewing is reserved for leisure time after the main work of the day has been completed.

The chewer usually brings his or her own *qāt* to the session. In rural areas the farmer may have his own supply, but most urbanites must purchase *qāt* in the daily market. In Ṣan^cā during 1983 a bundle (*rubṭa*) of leaves sufficient for a day's chew cost between 15 and 20 dollars, depending on the grade and seasonal fluctuations in supply. In chewing, the leaves chosen are the young and tender; these are worked into a wad which bulges one cheek. The amount chewed depends on the quality and the desired effect, but the average is estimated at 100 grams. The bitter juices are periodically expectorated and few Yemenis actually swallow the pulp.

The active ingredients in the fresh leaves are alkaloids which stimulate the central nervous system. The evidence thus far has not shown *qāt* use to be addictive nor to have serious medical side effects.²⁸ In 1959 UNESCO decided that *qāt* was not a narcotic and should not be placed on the ban of addictive drugs.²⁹ Three stages of influence on the chewer are generally recognized.³⁰ About fifteen minutes after forming the wad a sense of alertness (*tanabba*) begins. During this time the chewer feels energetic and finds it easy to conceptualize. Conversation proceeds rapidly and poets claim this is the best time for composition. This sense of heightened awareness lasts up to two hours. Following the initial stimulation comes a time when the chewer is calm, contented and turns his

thoughts inward. This sense of euphoria or well-being, generally referred to as *tarāqī* or *kayf*, characterizes an introspective mood. Conversation may cease and eyes may be directed to the view outside the windows of the sitting room. Eventually the chewer feels listless and becomes depressed. *Qāt* serves as an anorexic, so no food is eaten during or after the chew. Chewing also makes it difficult to sleep, prompting some to counteract the effect with alcohol.

Ethnographic descriptions of the *qāt* chew are of recent vintage, so it is difficult to trace historical changes in the social context of chewing. From the brief comments by travelers and historical references it appears that chewing *qāt* was primarily a pastime of the affluent and of religious scholars. The farmer, who comprised the bulk of the population, could hardly afford to cultivate *qāt*, nor did he have the leisure time to sit and chew. Tribal farmers in al-Ahjur say that before the revolution *qāt* was costly and rare. Chewing was reserved for special occasions.

Historical references focus on the stimulative effect of *qāt* and the intellectual activity associated with chewing. Some say that *qāt* was first used by Sufis, who could stay awake longer and recite Quran.³¹ Poets praised the *qāt* plant and valued it as a stimulus to creating verse. In his history of the *Zaydī* imams, Zabāra records poetry about *qāt* by a son of the 16th century Imam Sharaf al-Dīn.³² Thus, chewing was seen as a high-status activity and the *qāt* plant was valued for its properties.

INCREASE IN CHEWING

A wide spectrum of evidence from Yemeni sources and ethnographic analyses points toward a relatively recent increase in the chewing of *qāt*.³³ The most obvious indication is the substantial increase in *qāt* production over the last decade in the Yemeni highlands. It has been estimated that 80–90% of the new wells in the highlands are used for *qāt* production; indeed, *qāt* as a cash crop is financing much of the groundwater development in the Yemen Arab Republic.³⁴ Although statistical data do not exist on the precise extent of *qāt* production, qualitative assessments by individuals with long-term experience in the country indicate a virtual boom in *qāt* production over the past decade.

One reason for the increase in chewing is that a wider market has been created by new types of consumers. During the civil war of the 1960s, when the economic system of rural Yemen was disrupted, a number of farmers were given money and *qāt* as incentives to fight for one side or the other in the conflict. In some areas of the tribal north this spread the incidence of chewing, which continued after the conflict ceased. Under the post-imamate government, members of traditional lower-status groups have been able to increase their economic level by the expansion of employment opportunities in towns and cities. Similarly many Yemenis have migrated for temporary work abroad, increasing the availability of cash in the rural areas. Individuals who could not afford *qāt* in the past are now able to do so.

The increase in demand for *qāt* within Yemen parallels the shift from reliance on subsistence grains to the purchase of many basic foodstuffs and consumer goods on the world market. The Yemeni farmer no longer needs to cultivate the

food for his household; in some cases it is less expensive to buy imported foodstuffs than to grow the same crop. In 1982, for example, local wheat flour sold for about 60¢–\$1 per kilogram, while imported wheat flour was available at 30¢ per kilogram. Given the profitability of *qāt* as a cash crop, it is no surprise that cultivation of subsistence crops has been declining. Food consumption patterns over the last half of the decade of the 1970s show that per-capita consumption of sorghum, the traditional staple of rural Yemen, declined by 51%, while barley consumption declined by 22%. At the same time imported rice gained in consumption by 400% and poultry consumption, mostly from imported frozen produce from Europe, grew at a pace over 3,333%.³⁵ This shift results in a two-fold problem for the Yemeni economy: a decline in production of food crops despite the input of development aid and a disastrous imbalance of payments as Yemenis rely on the world market for their food.

As most Yemenis have gained relative affluence through a remittance economy, they still place importance on traditional spending patterns. Not all of the money is going for *qāt* and foreign goods. Construction has been stimulated, as Yemenis prefer to build comfortable, new houses. In tribal areas of rural Yemen the amount of the bridewealth (*sharṭ*) has sharply risen. In the central highland valley of al-Ahjur bridewealth is currently more than 20,000 dollars for an average wedding. The full cost of the festivities may double the amount. The value of the Yemeni dagger (*janbiya*), which most adult men wear, has also increased. Premium prices are paid for older daggers made of rhinoceros horn, which is more and more difficult to find. Women have traditionally worn much of their wealth in the form of jewelry; more expensive gold is now replacing the older silverwork. Such spending patterns indicate that Yemenis are not simply adopting wholesale the goods and lifestyles now available from abroad.

To a certain extent the increase in chewing by individuals who once were among the rural or urban poor can be seen as imitation of what is perceived as a higher-status lifestyle. When a poor man has money, he may want to do those things which the affluent do. Many rural Yemenis, when they return from work abroad or have access to remittances from a family member abroad, have more leisure time. *Qāt* chewing is the leisure-time activity par excellence in Yemen. One chews *qāt* after the serious work of the day has been done and to escape the drudgery of labor. There is an interesting correspondence between chewing *qāt* and dance in rural Yemen.³⁷ One type of dance among tribal men is called *barṣa*, which is performed out of doors, represents achievement and skill and is associated with work activity. Another type of dance, often called *liḥba*, is performed by men and women separately indoors at parties and important occasions. In the valley of al-Ahjur, *qāt* is chewed after the performance of *barṣa*, which is considered a serious activity, but before or during the frivolous dance of *liḥba*. Thus, chewing is a fulfillment of the day's work and not a substitute for that work.

THE MEANING OF CHEWING

Since the end of the civil war in the late 1960s, Yemeni society has undergone dramatic changes on all levels. The rapid change and exposure to new ideas and technologies are perceived by some as a threat to traditional values and lifestyles.

As in other areas of the region, there is concern about the influence of Western ideology and culture. The world of the Yemeni, in the social, economic and political aspects, is now a far cry from the relative simplicity during the imamate. It is not simply a matter of becoming aware of the world outside Yemen; that world is now intruding upon the Yemeni as he walks through the paved streets of the large cities, as he chooses the wheat for his bread and as he turns on television for the first time.

In the light of recent social and economic change, Yemenis have to balance the new and the old. One way of dealing with the potential threat of change is by fixing on an aspect of the traditional society and infusing it with a new or more intense meaning. For the Yemeni today, chewing *qāt* is no longer a pastime for the idle rich or pious saint. Chewing *qāt* is seen as an activity distinctively Yemeni and an activity with positive associations. It is not simply that more people are chewing *qāt*; the act of chewing as a social phenomenon has new, widely shared symbolism. *Qāt* chewing is a cultural identity marker that any Yemeni can define for himself.³⁸

There are many reasons why *qāt* should be the focus for the modern Yemeni in seeking to define his collective identity. This rather innocuous looking tree has been idealized in verse for the positive effect it can have on a person's state of mind. The Yemeni discriminates varieties of *qāt* similar to the way in which the French discuss wine.³⁹ Serjeant observes that the average Yemeni enjoys the fellowship of chewing with his friends the way that the English enjoy a beer in the local pub.⁴⁰ The chewing session often takes on a ritualistic ambience. If possible, sessions are held in a room (*mafraj*) on the top floor of house and with a nice view. The host provides water, sometimes scented, for the chewers and the waterpipe (*mada'a*) for those who wish to smoke. At a formal session incense or perfume may be handed around to those present. If a guest is present who has not tried *qāt* leaves, he or she will be offered the choicest leaves. One of the first questions asked of a foreigner in Yemen is if he or she has tried *qāt*.

Despite several studies of the *qāt* phenomenon in Yemen, little attention has been paid to the reasons why chewing is so popular. In a recent article on traditional medicine in Yemen, Underwood and Underwood suggested that the increase in chewing may be related to the dislocation of traditional Yemeni culture.⁴¹ It is clear from both personal ethnographic observations and the available literature that the meaning of chewing should be interpreted as a collective identity for the Yemeni confronting a context of rapid and potentially hostile change. The argument developed here is the Yemenis of all social status levels can focus on chewing *qāt* as a means of socializing and, at the same time, a way of belonging to the emerging national society. Chewing becomes a symbol of being Yemeni, however that may be defined, rather than being tribal or a member of some social group.

There are several factors facilitating the choice of *qāt* as an identity marker for the Yemeni. Historically, there has not been a stigma attached to the cultivation or use of *qāt*. Certain vegetable crops were not grown by tribal farmers, but left to the care of low-status individuals. The tribal farmer would grow *qāt* if he could afford the space or could be assured of a market, but only recently did the market expand. In the past the *qāt* seller (*muqawwit*) was stigmatized, as were

other market professions, but this was due to the nature of his market association and not to the *qāt* per se.

According to the consensus of Zaydī and Shāfiʿī scholars in Yemen, it is permissible to chew *qāt* as a Muslim. As early as the 16th century Muslim jurists were debating the propriety of *qāt* use. Some argued that the plant had forbidden properties similar to wine and strong drink, but others said that it could aid in the observance of religious duties by permitting individuals to stay awake. Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī recorded arguments for and against the use of *qāt*, but concluded that this plant did not have the same deliterious effects as wine, opium or hashish.⁴² Indeed, it is said that the Sufis first discovered the qualities of *qāt*. A Yemeni proverb even notes that *qāt* is the food of the upright or pious (*al-qāt qūt al-ṣāliḥīn*).⁴³ *Qāt* is chewed in Yemen on religious holidays, particularly during Ramadan. Sometimes the chew can serve as a forum for religious discussions, especially on a Friday.

One reason why *qāt* is accepted by such a wide spectrum of Yemeni society is the equalizing nature inherent in the production and use of *qāt*. *Catha edulis* is easy to cultivate by a small farmer on almost any size plot. For minimal investment and energy a farmer can quickly realize substantial profits. Tomas Gerholm has argued that *qāt* is a democratic crop in Yemen, with profits spread out to a number of small producers.⁴⁴ This contrasts with coffee, for which the profits are usually with the large merchants. The nature of the daily afternoon chewing session serves to put those in attendance on an equal footing. Members of different social status groups meet and talk with each other, sometimes sharing the same waterpipe or water jug. Each chewer brings his own supply of *qāt* leaves, unless he is receiving *qāt* in payment for contractual services or is attending a special occasion such as a wedding. Each chewer removes his shoes as he enters and all sit on the same level, although extra cushions may be provided for some guests. All who enter issue a general greeting to those present and sometimes greet each individual chewer. While individuals may try to affirm their higher status or to downgrade others, the setting per se does not reinforce a hierarchical ordering of social status.

As an institution the *qāt* chew can be used by individuals as a forum to affirm or break down social barriers. Ethnographic research in al-Ahjur indicates that in this tribal area there is no fixed hierarchy of seating at a chew based on status. Seating depends on a variety of factors, including the formality of the occasion, the number of people present, the wishes of the host and the order of arrival. Since some individuals may enter and leave at different times, seating is sometimes in a state of flux. Kennedy and his fellow researchers also found no rigid hierarchy of seating in a survey of chewing in the major cities of Yemen.⁴⁵ Gerholm, however, found that in urban Manākhā of the central highlands there was an order of seating according to status.⁴⁶ Furthermore, jokes were often directed at low-status individuals present. This is consistent with the tendency in Yemeni society for greater emphasis on social distinctions in an urban setting, while rural interaction is more egalitarian.

Another factor favoring the choice of the *qāt* chew as an identity marker is that chewing can be adapted to changing contexts. Before *qāt* was widely chewed in Yemeni society there were afternoon sessions, especially in urban areas, for

socializing.⁴⁷ It is unlikely that the phenomenon of the *qāt* chewing session developed all at once; chewing became a part of the traditional afternoon gathering after the work was done. Many Yemenis find it is easy to adapt chewing to the work context. In a survey of 150 chewers by al-Sa^ʿdī, over 21% said they chewed while at work.⁴⁸ In late afternoon it is common to find bulging cheeks on a taxi driver or a merchant, who may continue working into the evening. Construction workers often claim that chewing increases their energy. Students claim that *qāt* is indispensable for coping with the demands of modern academic life.

A widely quoted Yemeni proverb states that God has afflicted the Jews with *ʿaraq* (an alcoholic beverage) and the Muslims with *qāt* (*qad sakhkhaṭa Allāh al-Yahūd bi al-ʿaraqī wa al-Muslimīn bi al-qāt*).⁴⁹ While some Yemeni Jews did in fact chew *qāt*, the practice was usually associated with Muslims. The point is not that chewing *qāt* is a Muslim activity per se, but that it is a cultural identity marker. *Qāt* is to the Yemeni Muslim as afternoon tea is to the Englishman, vodka to the Russian and beer to the Bavarian. The irony in the proverb plays on the fact that *qāt* has a symbolic value in Yemeni society. It is a pleasant affliction that God has visited upon his children.

In summary, there are few aspects of traditional Yemeni society that are so well suited for marking an emerging collective identity as is *qāt*. The contemporary Yemeni focuses on *qāt* chewing as an act that is distinctively Yemeni at a time when new ideas and contacts alter the traditional concept of what it means to be Yemeni. While chewing has long had a positive association in Yemeni society, only in recent years has it been possible for practically all segments in urban and rural settings to afford *qāt* on a regular basis. The impact of remittances on the Yemeni economy has stimulated demand and production of *qāt*, but the meaning of chewing is not simply an economic impulse. The Yemeni today faces a context of rapid change and a perceived threat to traditional values and lifestyles. The government is promoting Yemeni nationalism to counter the age-old divisions inherent in tribal and class affiliations. At a time when identity is not clearly defined, any Yemeni may chew as one way of affirming both the value of his heritage and his own sense of self-worth.

A personal note serves to conclude the study. During ethnographic field study in the valley of al-Ahjur, a major *qāt* grower once took me aside and confided that *qāt* had become a bad thing for Yemen. He was curious if people in America, the most powerful and modern society he knew, used *qāt*. I explained that the tree was not native to America, but that some Yemeni immigrants had brought seed from Yemen and planted it in California. With a surprised but approving look my Yemeni friend responded, “*Al-Yamaniyīn shayāṭīn*” (literally, Yemenis are devils). There was irony in this remark; it expressed respect rather than criticism. These Yemenis could preserve their identity even in a foreign land. The critics of *qāt* notwithstanding, it may be no great price to feel a “devil of a dog” in order to maintain one’s own identity in the face of change.

NOTES

Author's note: This is a revision of a paper presented at the 1982 MESA meeting. Ethnographic data cited stem from fieldwork in the valley of al-Ahjur during 1978 and 1979 under a Fulbright-Hayes grant-in-aid, as well as subsequent visits to the Yemen Arab Republic. I wish to thank several colleagues for substantive comments on earlier drafts, specifically: Najwa Adra (Temple University), Steven Caton (University of Chicago), Abduh Ghaleb (University of Pennsylvania), Roger Joseph (California, Fullerton) and Jeffrey Meissner (Columbia University).

¹Harold Ingrams, *Arabia and the Isles* (New York, 1966), p. 106.

²Consider the remarks in A. Farougy, *Introducing Yemen* (New York, 1947), p. 17; Doreen Ingrams, *A Time in Arabia* (London, 1970), p. 113; John Kennedy et al., "A Medical Evaluation of the Use of Qat in North Yemen," *Soc. Sci. Med.*, 17, 12(1983), 785; Heinrich von Maltzan, *Reise nach Südarabien* (Braunschweig, 1873), p. 370; and, Hugh Scott, *In the High Yemen* (London, 1942), p. 95. *Qāt* was banned in Saudi Arabia in 1971 and virtually banned in the Peoples Democratic Republic of Yemen in 1977.

³Husayn ʿAbdallāh al-Dhamārī, *Al-Rashīd fī Jughrāfiyyat al-Yaman al-Saʿīd wa al-ʿĀlam* (Cairo, 1972).

⁴This is based on census data recorded in Hans Steffen and Olivier Blanc, "La Démographie de la république arabe du Yémen," in P. Bonnenfant, ed., *La péninsule arabe d'aujourd'hui* (Aix-en-Provence, 1982), p. 99. For a discussion of Yemeni emigration see Jon Swanson, *The Consequences of Emigration for Economic Development in the Yemen Arab Republic* (Boulder, Colo., 1979). The remittance phenomenon is discussed in Edward Hogan et al., *Yemen Arab Republic: Agricultural Sector Assessment* (Washington, D.C., USAID, 1982).

⁵For analysis of traditional social structure in North Yemen see Daniel Martin Varisco and Najwa Adra, "Affluence and the Concept of the Tribe in the Central Highlands of the Yemen Arab Republic," in Richard Salisbury, ed., *Affluence and Cultural Survival* (Washington, D.C., 1984) pp. 134–149, and Tomas Gerholm, *Market, Mosque and Mafraj* (Stockholm, 1977).

⁶The most comprehensive study of *qāt* in Yemen is Armin Schopen, *Das Qāt* (Wiesbaden, 1978). See also the survey by Maxime Rodinson, "Esquisse d'une monographie du *qāt*," *Journal Asiatique*, 265 (1977), 71–96, and by R. B. Serjeant, "The Market, Business Life, Occupations, the Legality and Sale of Stimulants," in R. B. Serjeant and G. R. Lewcock, eds., *Ṣanʿāʿ: An Arabian Islamic City* (London, 1983), pp. 159–178. A number of Arabic articles are included in *Al-Qāt fī Ḥayāt al-Yaman wa al-Yamāniyyīn* (Ṣanʿāʿ, 1981). The recent study in Arabic by ʿAbbās Fāḍil al-Saʿdī, *Al-Qāt fī al-Yaman: Dirāsa Jughrāfiya* (Kuwait, 1983) draws heavily on previous studies.

⁷*Al-Muʿassasat al-Masammāt wa Masālik al-Abṣār* (Cairo, 1920), vol. I, pp. 11–12. If this is true, it is strange that there is no mention of *qāt* in the later Yemeni agricultural treatise of al-ʿAbbās ibn ʿAlī (died 778/1376), which is being edited by R. B. Serjeant.

⁸Serjeant, "The Market . . .", p. 173.

⁹ʿAbdallāh al-Baradūnī, "Al-Qāt . . . min Zuhūrih ilā Istaʿmālih," in *Al-Qāt fī Ḥayāt al-Yaman wa al-Yamāniyyīn* (Ṣanʿāʿ, 1981), pp. 44–45; ʿAbbās Fāḍil al-Saʿdī, "Majālis al-Qāt fī al-Yaman, Tatawurhā, Anwāʿhā, Waṣfhā," *al-Turāth al-Shaʿbī* (Baghdad), 12, no. 11, (1983), 62.

¹⁰Paul Botta, *Relation d'un voyage dans l'Yémen* (Paris, 1880), p. 125.

¹¹Joseph Chelhod, "La société yéménite et le kat," *Objets et Mondes*, 12 (1972), no. 1, 19.

¹²This estimate is based on figures from International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, *Agricultural Sector Study: Yemen Arab Republic* (November, 1981), p. 49. It is assumed that 45,000 ha were devoted to *qāt* and the average annual gross yield per ha was about YR 80,000 (ca. \$17,778).

¹³Japan International Cooperation Agency, *Report on Master Plan for Hajja Province Integrated Rural Development in the Yemen Arab Republic* (1979), vol. II, pp. IX–34.

¹⁴Peter de Lange, "Rada Integrated Rural Development Project Study into Water Resources in Al Bayda Province, Progress Report for Period April to August 1983," appendix 5.

¹⁵Shelagh Weir, "Economic Aspects of the *Qāt* Industry in Northwest Yemen," Paper presented at the Conference on Contemporary Yemen, Exeter, July, 1983. This estimate was for 1980, a year when profits from *qāt* were high.

¹⁶It is interesting to note that there was a brisk air trade in *qāt* from Ethiopia to Aden in the days of the British protectorate. See C. Brooke, "Khat (*Catha edulis*): its production and trade in the

Middle East," *Geographical Journal*, 126 (1960), 52. Schopen (*Das Qāt*, p. 86) believes that initially the Yemenis dried the leaves for a type of tea, as is done today in East Africa.

¹⁷M. Manciola and A. Parrinello, "Il qat (*Catha edulis*)," *La Clinica Terapeutica*, 43 (1967), 2, 103–172.

¹⁸Gerholm, *Market . . .*, p. 183.

¹⁹Lars Hammerin, *A Socio-Medical Study of Some Villages in Yemen Arab Republic* (Stockholm, 1972), p. 14.

²⁰Nūriya ʿAlī Ḥumad al-Ḥūrī, *Al-ʿAwāmil al-Muʿathara ʿalā al-Tanmīyat al-Ijtīmāʿīya fī al-Qaryat al-Yamaniyya* (ʿAyn Shams University, Cairo, M.A. thesis, sociology, 1981), p. 333.

²¹Susan Dorsky, *Women's Lives in a North Yemeni Highlands Town* (Case Western Reserve University, Ph.D. thesis, anthropology, 1981), p. 56.

²²Najwa Adra, personal communication.

²³Cynthia Myntti, *Medicine in its Social Context: Observations from Rural North Yemen* (University of London, Ph.D. thesis, anthropology, 1983).

²⁴Annika Bornstein, *Al-Homrah and Ibn Abbas: Two Fishing Villages in the Tihama* (Ṣanʿāʾ, FAO, 1972), p. 3.

²⁵In the coastal region, where the heat is intense during the afternoon, *qāt* is generally chewed in the evening.

²⁶al-Saʿdī, "Majālis . . .", 65.

²⁷Rodinson, "Esquisse . . .", 85 has *madkī*, but this is dialectical. Schopen, *Das Qāt*, p. 111, errs in assuming the root of this term is t-k-?; in fact it is w-k-?. In *Tāj al-ʿArūs* the related term *muttakāʿ* refers to a *majlis* or sitting room with cushions.

²⁸For a discussion of the medical effects of *qāt* see Kennedy et al., "A Medical Evaluation . . ."; John Kennedy et al., "Qat Use in North Yemen and the Problem of Addiction: a Study in Medical Anthropology," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 4 (1980), 311–344; Schopen, *Das Qāt*, pp. 87–88; Serjeant, "The Market . . .", p. 174. There are conflicting claims on whether *qāt* stimulates or retards sexual desires.

²⁹G. Rizzotti et al., "The Question of Khat," (UNESCO, Commission on Narcotic Drugs, 14th Session, Item 10 of the Agenda, 1959).

³⁰Schopen, *Das Qāt*, pp. 94–95.

³¹Schopen, *Das Qāt*, p. 52.

³²Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Zabāra, *Aʿimmat al-Yaman* (Taʿizz, 1952), vol. 1, pp. 422–423.

³³This reflects observations of Najwa Adra, Steven Caton, Jeffrey Meissner, Cynthia Myntti and Jon Swanson. See also al-Baradūnī, "*Al-Qāt . . .*," pp. 45–46; Kennedy et al., "Qat Use . . .", p. 317; Serjeant, "The Market . . .", p. 174; P. and Z. Underwood, "New Spells for Old: Expectations and Realities of Western Medicine in a Remote Tribal Society in Yemen, Arabia," in Stanley and Toske, eds., *Changing Disease Patterns and Human Behavior* (London, 1981), p. 278; Weir, "Economic Aspects . . .", p. 5.

³⁴Hogan et al., *Yemen Arab Republic . . .*, p. 191.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 244.

³⁶An analysis of traditional spending patterns is provided in Varisco and Adra, "Affluence . . .". The link between increased use of *qāt* and increased bridewealth is described in Yūsuf Muḥammad al-Madfaʿī, "Al-Qāt wa Athārḥā al-Ṣaḥīya wa al-Siyāsīya . . .", in *Al-Qāt fī Ḥayāt al-Yaman wa al-Yamāniyīn* (Ṣanʿāʾ, 1981), p. 161.

³⁷I am indebted to Najwa Adra for drawing this point to my attention. A full discussion of dance in Yemeni context can be found in Najwa Adra, *Qabyala: The Tribal Concept in the Central Highlands of the Yemen Arab Republic* (Temple University, Philadelphia, Ph.D. thesis, anthropology, 1982).

³⁸There is a parallel between the social symbolism of chewing *qāt* and that of coca-leaf chewing among the Quechua in Peru. See Catherine Allen, "To be Quechua: the Symbolism of Coca Chewing in Highland Peru," *American Ethnologist*, 8, 1 (1981), 157–171.

³⁹Kennedy et al., "A Medical . . .", 784. Various qualities of *qāt* varieties are recognized. The best is generally said to be Bukhārī from Jabal Bukhār near Ibb. This variety relaxes the chewer without leaving a bitter taste.

⁴⁰Serjeant, "The Market . . .", p. 94.

⁴¹Underwood and Underwood, "New Spells . . .," p. 278.

⁴²Ibn Ḥajar al-Haythamī, *Al-Fatāwā al-Kubrā al-Fiqhiyya* (Cairo, A.H. 1308), vol. IV, pp. 223–227.

⁴³Serjeant, "The Market . . .," p. 172. *Qāṭ* is not a formal part of religious ritual in Yemen as it is in Ethiopia. For the latter see C. Radt, "Contribution à l'histoire ethnobotanique d'une plante stimulante: le kat en Éthiopie," *L'Ethnographie* 65 (1971), 38–65.

⁴⁴Tomas Gerholm, "Provincial Cosmopolitans: the Impact of World Events on a Small Yemeni Town," *Peuples Méditerranéens* 9 (1979), 53–72. See also Weir, "Economic Aspects . . .," p. 8.

⁴⁵Kennedy et al., "Qat Use . . .," 319.

⁴⁶Gerholm, *Market* . . . , p. 180.

⁴⁷This type of gathering has been noted for other Arab cultures. For a related gathering in Morocco see L. Rosen, "Social Identity and Points of Attachment: Approaches to Social Organization," in C. Geertz et al., *Meaning and Order in Moroccan Society* (Cambridge, Mass. 1979), pp. 38–39.

⁴⁸Al-Sa^cdī, "Majālis . . .," 65.

⁴⁹Recorded in S. D. Goitein, *Jemenica* (Leiden, 1934), p. 116; Rodinson, "Esquisse . . .," p. 82; Ettore Rossi, *L'Arabo parlato a Ṣan^cā²* (Rome, 1939), p. 165; Serjeant, "The Market . . .," p. 172.