

Fluid Merchants and Consumers: *Qāt* and the Yemeni People

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I. Introduction

Qāt, whose fresh leaves produce a stimulant effect, is largely cultivated and consumed in Yemen and the East African countries. In Yemen, few entertainments exist, so chewing *qāt* in the afternoon is very popular.

If you visit a *qāt* market in Sana'a around noon, you will hear merchants shouting the names of the *qāt* they purvey, such as 'Hamdānī', 'Maṭarī' and 'Arḥabī', all of which are the names of tribes. If you are aware that Yemen is famous for its tribal structure, you may conclude that *qāt* merchants use their tribal ties for their business and that Yemenis chew *qāt* with other members of their tribe. In this article, these assumptions are shown to be incorrect: *Qāt* merchants are fluid in choosing their commodities, and *qāt* consumers are fluid in the company they keep, both inside and outside of Yemen.¹

This section will discuss *qāt* and its place in Yemeni society. Section II will focus on how *qāt* merchants obtain and sell *qāt*. We pay special attention to asymmetrical information and explain that establishing firm relationships is rather risky, which is unexpected, and that merchants do not depend on their blood relationships. In Section III, we compare *qāt* consumption in the 1970s and the 2000s, showing that its use changed from centring on special, compulsory and collective events to ordinary, free and individual refreshment. We will then go outside Yemen in Section IV to see how and with whom Yemenis chew *qāt*. *Qāt* has the power to unite people, but this power sometimes goes beyond ethnicity or nationality.

1. *Qāt*

Qāt is native to Ethiopia. It is not clear when it spread to Yemen, but its consumption was limited to the rulers, nobles, and wealthy merchants for centuries.

The production and consumption of *qāt* began to increase in the 1970s in Yemen or, strictly speaking, North Yemen² at that time. Rural areas were short of male labourers because they travelled to Saudi Arabia, where the economy was flourishing due to the rise in oil prices and the boom in the

construction industry. *Qāt* was substituted for cereals and coffee, as it was much easier to produce.³ Migrants sent remittances to their families living in the countryside, and this financial prosperity enabled rural people to construct feeder roads from their remote villages to the main roads. Mass out-migration and domestic labour shortages caused the inflation of Yemeni wages in cities, which enabled people to spend more money on non-essentials and caused a substantial shift towards a predominant cash economy in both cities and rural areas. All these factors brought about an increase in the production and consumption of *qāt* [cf. Weir 1985a: 20–22].

To chew *qāt*, one must go to a *qāt* market around noon. *Qāt* should be chewed fresh, and in Sana'a, it can be bought after it has been harvested that morning. As *qāt* has no fixed price, one must bargain with *qāt* merchants on the price.

In Yemen, *qāt* is consumed by men and women separately in social gatherings in the afternoon. In English, we say 'chew *qāt*', but in Yemeni Arabic, they say '*khazzan al-qāt*', meaning 'storing' or 'keeping *qāt*'. *Qāt* is kept in one of the cheeks and spit out at the end; it is not swallowed after mastication.

In Sana'a, *qāt* gatherings are the most popular places for people to socialise. Coffeehouses are famous as social places for men in the Middle East [Hattox 1985]. There are *būfīs* and *qahwas*⁴ in Sana'a, which are equivalent to *maqhās* in regular Arabic. There, men can speak with others over a cup of tea, so they can be recognised as meeting places for men in Sana'a.⁵ However, they do not function as meeting places like *qāt* gatherings. 'If I would like to talk about a complicated problem with my friend, I will say to him, "come to my house and chew *qāt*"', said an informant.

There are various types of *qāt*, and it is impossible to tally the number of kinds of *qāt* sold in Sana'a because there is no official classification. Aside from classification based on the production areas, as mentioned earlier, there are other classifications based on forms, colours and juiciness. Mainly three forms exist: *Qaṭal*, *rūs* and *rubaṭ*. *Qaṭal* is only the leaves packed in plastic bags. *Rūs* refers to the top of the twig. *Rubaṭ* refers to 1-metre-long twigs tied with vinyl tape. If the production area is the same, *rubaṭ* is the most expensive, followed by *rūs*, and *qaṭal* is the cheapest. If you want to chew a large amount of *qāt* within budgetary limits, you should buy *qaṭal*.

You should check the colours and juiciness if you are very sensitive to the *qāt* you chew. The colours include white, red and blue, although different colours are often mixed and sold together. *Qāt* with a lot of water is called '*baghara*', and *qāt* with little water '*nazzy*', the latter for connoisseurs.

Qāt can be purchased according to one's financial situation; *qāt* prices range from a half dollar to one hundred dollars. *Qāt* cultivated only with rainwater and without chemicals is called '*ṭabīṭ*' and is sold at a higher price. *Qāt* cultivated with chemicals tends to be cheaper.

In Yemen, the import and export of *qāt* is prohibited, so all the processes from cultivation to consumption are completed within the country, which leads some economists to consider *qāt* an enemy of the Yemeni economy.⁶

Outside of Yemen, *qāt* is a commodity that is often imported and exported. Since the 1980s, *qāt* has

been transported by air to Europe and North America due to the increasing numbers of Somali people living there who are eager for it. *Qāt* is considered a symbol of national or ethnic unity or an identity marker for *qāt* chewers inside and outside of their homelands [Varisco 1986; ACMD 2005]. Ethiopia and Kenya make the greatest profit from exporting *qāt* [Anderson et al. 2007].

Many countries in Europe and North America have regarded *qāt* as an illegal drug. This is not a pharmacological problem but rather a social one related to the Somali people who have escaped from their prolonged civil war; however, many governments have made *qāt* a scapegoat to avert their eyes from social problems, such as poverty, unemployment and discrimination. Governments have banned *qāt*—although it is still smuggled, as we will see—but the social problems have yet to be solved, and new problems have appeared. These governments cannot trace *qāt* or understand the amount, the consumers or the possibility that a crime group might control the sale of *qāt*.

2. Yemeni Tribes and *Qāt*

In Yemen, most areas where *qāt* is cultivated are tribal lands. *Qāt* sold in Sana'a is named after the production areas, most of which are districts that correspond to tribal lands. For example, *Hamdānī qāt* is named after *Hamdān*, a district and tribe on the northern side of Sana'a.

Tribal people are sedentary farmers rather than Bedouins, and farming is considered perfectly honourable. They are known to be conservative and autonomous, and they do not want outsiders to come onto their lands [Dresch 1989]. Those who go onto any tribal land without permission might be killed by the local people.

Therefore, it might seem that *qāt* merchants are from tribal lands, that they can obtain *qāt* from their hometowns by relying on their blood relationships and that people chew *qāt* with those who share blood relations with them. It is true that *qāt* merchants use their blood relationships when starting their business, but they can change their source and market of *qāt* easily. It is also true that *qāt* has the power to unite the people who consume it; however, we will find that there are various means of consumption inside and outside of Yemen.

3. Merits of *Qāt* for Producers

Before discussing the *qāt* trade, let us examine *qāt* production. There have been several critics of *qāt*,⁷ but *qāt* producers are very positive about its cultivation because it has brought them many benefits. *Qāt* is much easier to cultivate than any other crop, including coffee. This was particularly true of *qāt* cultivation during the 1970s, when it was cultivated using rainwater and without chemicals. Now, *qāt* requires irrigation systems and chemicals, meaning it is no longer easier to cultivate than other crops, although producers do not think it burdensome for them, as *qāt* brings them considerable profit.

An informant who cultivated *qāt* and other crops with his family told me that he now chews *qāt* in the afternoon because he has earned enough money from cultivating it; previously, he had to work in the afternoon before cultivating *qāt*. Others told me that thanks to *qāt* they were able to send their

children to university, pay for their family members to travel to Egypt for medical treatment and make a pilgrimage to Mecca.

The areas around and northward of Sana'a, where *qāt* is now extensively cultivated, were areas where only subsistence crops, such as legumes and cereals, were cultivated with rainwater. There were few cash crops, and *qāt* was the first cash crop for many producers. *Qāt* can be cultivated even in barren areas where no crops can be cultivated, and it can be sold in a few years.

Areas where coffee can be cultivated are not so lucky, as *qāt* earns much more than coffee. The quality of Yemeni coffee is good based on international standards, but a producer informed me that he wanted to stop cultivating coffee and shift to cultivating *qāt* to earn more money because cheaper coffee was imported and sold at a grocery shop in his village. There are activities designed to promote speciality coffee in Yemen using social media networks such as Facebook and Instagram;⁸ however, it is difficult for all coffee producers to enjoy the benefits while maintaining the quality of the coffee they produce, which requires considerable labour. *Qāt* is much easier to grow and is more lucrative.

II. Merchants and the *Qāt* Market

1. Merchants and Producers

The distribution channels of *qāt* are very effective in Yemen. It is harvested in the early morning, sold in the markets around noon, and consumed in the afternoon. The entire process is completed within a few hours. Between a *qāt* producer and a buyer are one or two merchants. The government and private companies intervene little in the process, and the only reason *qāt* is distributed in such a short amount of time is that both *qāt* producers and merchants want to sell it when it is as fresh as possible.

As mentioned, *qāt* is cultivated in tribal areas where people are known to be conservative and autonomous. Thus, one might think that *qāt* merchants are from tribal lands and that they use their blood relationships to secure their commodities.

It is true that *qāt* merchants, who are mostly males in Sana'a, take advantage of their blood relationships when starting their business. Their relatives may take them to a *qāt* market and teach them how to obtain it, or they may go to a *qāt* market in their hometowns where their relatives sell it.

After a while, merchants may get to know the producers from whom they purchase their *qāt*. Maintaining relations with producers allows merchants to obtain *qāt* quicker and cheaper, and producers may even give credit if the merchants do not have enough money to purchase it at first, although *qāt* merchants must pay in cash. This makes the merchants clients of the producers.

Qāt producers want to build firm client ties with as many merchants as possible: the more clients they have, the steadier their income. However, being a client of a *qāt* producer is rather risky for a *qāt* merchant, as the quality of *qāt* can easily be influenced by weather, precipitation, chemical fertiliser use, agrochemicals and water on the fields. Even within the same *qāt* field, the *qāt* of today is not the same as it was yesterday. To maintain the quality of the *qāt* they purchase, merchants tend to be chance customers

or acquaintances of as many *qāt* producers as possible, so as not to build firm client ties.

Merchants mainly obtain *qāt* from three places: directly from *qāt* producers, in the *qāt* market near production areas and in the *qāt* market in the city. Many merchants choose the first two options, while very few choose the third.

Three cases are presented below to demonstrate how each *qāt* merchant has his own way of obtaining *qāt*. They can choose the *qāt* that they trade as they like, without being bound by blood relationships. The merchant names used below are pseudonyms.

[Case 1]

Mudarres came to Sana'a when he was a high school student and began selling *qāt* with his friend from the same village in Dhamar Province. At first, he obtained *qāt* in his village, which was a two-hour drive from Sana'a. He then changed his *qāt* market and the kind of *qāt* he sold. Now, he trades in *Arḥabī* because he thinks that its taste is good and its quality is excellent; he not only loves it himself, but his consumers do also. The market is in the *Arḥab* District, which is much closer. He obtains several kinds of *Arḥabī* from the producers he knows. A *qāt* merchant he happened to know at a *qāt* market in Sana'a taught him about the market.

[Case 2]

Kawkabani changes the *qāt* he sells every few months throughout the year. He sells *Ḥaymī*, *Maṭarī*, *Ḥushayshī*, *Sufyānī* and *Ṣa'dī* in that order. He obtains *Ḥaymī* and *Maṭarī* from producers at a *qāt* market near the production areas, *Ḥushayshī* from *qāt* merchants at a *qāt* market in the production area and *Ṣa'dī* from *qāt* merchants in a market in Sana'a. He deals both with those he knows and those he does not.

[Case 3]

Thani gets one kind of *Maṭarī* or *Ḥaymī* throughout the year from a *qāt* market near the production area from any producer who sells the type he wants, and he trades with only one producer at a time, buying a large amount of *qāt* at once. There are some producers he knows well, but he does not prioritise them.

Merchants have several choices in terms of obtaining *qāt* based on the production area; where to obtain it; its forms, colours, juiciness and kinds; and whom to deal with. There is no perfect way for a merchant to obtain *qāt*. The means of obtaining *qāt* can vary depending on the merchant's own tastes and those of their buyers.

2. Asymmetric Information in the *Qāt* Market

When it comes to selling, *qāt* merchants want to build firm ties with as many buyers as possible: the

more clients they have, the steadier their income. The same is true for buyers. If they want to maintain the quality of the *qāt* they buy, it is better for them not to be clients of particular *qāt* merchants but rather to be chance customers or acquaintances of as many *qāt* merchants as possible.

Let us now consider asymmetric information. Generally, in bazaar economies, merchants are infamous for the lies they tell. They tend to lie to the producers about market conditions and to buyers about the merchandise they sell to them. Merchants have more information than producers and buyers [Fancelow 1990].

In the *qāt* market, the most important point is whether chemical fertilisers, agrochemicals, and water are used. Many consumers love 'organic' *qāt*, and it is said that producers lie to merchants and that merchants lie to buyers about this information.

However, lying about the quality of *qāt* is difficult. Buyers are sensitive to the *qāt* they chew every day. If a buyer chews *qāt* and notices that it is not what he wanted, he considers himself cheated by the merchant and will never buy *qāt* from that merchant again. Rumours of the dishonesty of merchants and producers and of the subpar *qāt* dishonest producers cultivate will spread around the *qāt* gatherings, causing the price of *qāt* to fall.

Information about the quality of *qāt* is more important for economic subjects in the *qāt* market than information about market conditions, which *qāt* producers and buyers can easily access. The relative level of quality-related information is as follows: Producers have the most amount of information, followed by merchants, and buyers have the least information.

Because of the uncertainty of *qāt* quality, the weak actors (i.e. the merchants and buyers) tend to act fluidly towards the strong actors (i.e. the producers and merchants) in order to become chance customers or acquaintances. This leads the strong actors to also act fluidly, as they would like to build firm client ties with the weak actors, even though they know the weak actors are fluid. In this way, relationships between the economic subjects in the *qāt* market are not firm, sustainable or given. They fluctuate daily in the same way that the quality of *qāt* changes daily.

While *qāt* merchants and buyers are both weak, the former act more fluidly than the latter. It is much riskier for merchants to prioritise client ties over quality. Merchants must maintain the quality of the *qāt* they sell, and if consumers change their tastes, then the merchants also change the kinds of *qāt* they offer. Producers may sell their *qāt* to other merchants who buy larger amounts of it at higher prices. Natural disasters, for example, can cause damage to *qāt* fields, and merchants may no longer have a source of *qāt*. Maintaining firm client ties is risky for merchants, who must always seek out new *qāt* producers.

On the other hand, it is beneficial for buyers to depend on their client ties if they do not pay too much attention to the quality of the *qāt*. If you are very rich and buy *qāt* from a special merchant, there is a high probability that you can get the quality you want every day.

It goes without saying that economic subjects in the *qāt* market, even if fluid, need to be honest with those they deal with. Among them, merchants are the most fluid yet the most honest actors.

Merchants are the weak actors when buying *qāt* from producers and the strong actors when selling

qāt to buyers. When buying *qāt*, merchants avoid being tied to any client and attempt to make more acquaintances and remain chance customers. On the other hand, when selling *qāt*, merchants want to build firm client ties with as many buyers as possible and then offer many services to those buyers. As they know that buyers are also fluid, they need to pay attention to acquaintances and chance customers as well.

Merchants must be honest with producers about payment and honest with buyers about the *qāt* quality. It is true that there are merchants who lie; however, it is not easy for such a merchant to remain a merchant for long.

III. Consumers Inside Yemen

In this section, we will examine the changing meaning of *qāt* chewing by comparing consumption in the 1970s with the 2000s. We point out that the use of *qāt* changed from centring on special, compulsory and collective events to ordinary, free and individual refreshment.

1. *Qāt* Chewing in the 1970s

Regarding the situation during the 1970s, three words were used to explain *qāt* consumption according to the anthropologists who did research at that time: *mafraj*, *kayf* and *al-sā'a al-sulaymānīya*. We shall examine *qāt* gatherings in the 1970s based on these three words.

(1) *Mafraj*

There are few public spaces for chewing *qāt*,⁹ and thus people mainly gather to chew *qāt* in their houses. A room called the *mafraj* was the main venue for a *qāt* gathering¹⁰ in the 1970s. A *mafraj* usually refers to a small room on the top of the house [cf. Barakāt 1992]. Many houses in Old Sana'a are four- or five-storey buildings, and the lower storeys have smaller windows for reasons of security and limits of architectural techniques. A *mafraj* on the top floor, however, has larger windows and commands a lovely view, although it is very small. It is also furnished with luxurious furniture, often made of velvet.

In Old Sana'a, not every house has a *mafraj*, which depends on architectural structure and economic power. In areas other than Old Sana'a, a *mafraj* is on the top floor if the building is multistorey [Stevenson 1985: 17; Weir 1985a: 111] and has a similar interior [Gerholm 1977: 177]. It is considered a true joy to chew *qāt* and have a pleasant chat while admiring the scenery, such as the houses and gardens spread out below and the changing colours of the sky in the distance.

In fact, people sometimes chew *qāt* alone in places other than *mafrajs*, such as shop owners chewing in their own shops or taxi drivers driving their cars, although these are regarded as exceptions [Gerholm 1977: 179; Stevenson 1985: 17; Varisco 1986: 10]. This is because *qāt* should be chewed communally in a *mafraj*; chewing *qāt* alone and in private is an anti-social act, and participation in *qāt* gatherings was obligatory [Weir 1985a: 109, 147].

(2) *Kayf*

Many studies have called the effect caused by chewing *qāt* euphoria. Weir and Kennedy call the state of mind '*kayf*' in Arabic. According to Weir, *kayf* is a state that is reached an hour after chewing *qāt*. It is an elevation in mood during which the chewer feels not only optimistic, confident and active but also alert and highly attuned to the subjects of the conversation. Some who chew a substantial amount in a short time became so animated that a kind of logorrhoea occurs; their tongues cannot keep pace with their thoughts, which creates a disconnected quality to their speech [Weir 1985a: 41]. According to Kennedy, *kayf* is a good state of mind that those who chew *qāt* want to reach. Because of such variables as the grade of *qāt* and the amount chewed, *kayf* is not always achievable. The principal qualities of experience that informants identified for us as constituting *kayf* were increases in alertness, ability to concentrate, the flow of ideas, contentment, confidence and friendliness [Kennedy 1987: 111–112]. While there are differences in the nuances between Weir and Kennedy, they have much the same meaning: the favourable effects of chewing *qāt*. The effects are similar to those of a stimulant, and it has been inferred that the effects are due to cathinone, which is contained in *qāt* and whose chemical formula is similar to that of amphetamine.

(3) *Al-sā'a al-sulaymānīya*

As mentioned, *qāt* has been assessed negatively, while anthropologists tend to find positive conclusions. The exchange of information¹¹ and the construction, reconstruction and maintenance of social relations during the gatherings are positively evaluated. At the gatherings, people discuss a wide range of topics, including politics, economics and theology. Politicians reach political agreements during *qāt* gatherings. A woman who is seeking a bride for her son can find her or ask other women to help her at the gathering.¹² *Qāt* gatherings are an important means of welcoming strangers and household members into the community when they have been away for long periods of time, for example, on pilgrimages, trading expeditions, working in Saudi Arabia or in government posts elsewhere in Yemen. A *qāt* gathering marks the assimilation of an individual into a new tribe. It could also play a part in the restoration of normal relations between tribes after they have been suspended by political or legal disputes [Makhlouf 1979: 27; Swanson 1979: 40; Weir 1985a: 125–128; Kennedy 1987: 236].

*Al-sā'a al-sulaymānīya*¹³ is symbolic of the positive aspects of these gatherings. When you chew *qāt*, you can have a lively discussion with people at the beginning, and then after a noisy one or two hours comes a calm. The noise that existed a little while before ceases, and people turn inward in their minds instead. This time of contemplation and rumination is called *al-sā'a al-sulaymānīya*, which evokes unity between the people there [Gerholm 1977: 178; Stevenson 1985: 19; Weir 1985a: 41–42; Varisco 1986: 5–6; Kennedy 1987: 91–92; Al-Motarreb et al. 2002: 406].

(4) *Qāt* as a symbol of unity

Although there is room for doubt that the similar expressions of *al-sā'a al-sulaymānīya* are repeated,

and that the time of silence is brought about only by the effect of *qāt*, this sense of unity symbolises *qāt* in the 1970s. *Qāt* is described as a symbol of unity. *Mafrāj* is a place to confirm the unity of members of a community by chewing *qāt* and experiencing *kayf* and *al-sā'a al-sulaymānīya* together. Community members should participate in these gatherings, and non-participation is regarded as an anti-social behaviour. *Qāt* should be consumed by all members of a community, not by an individual. Needless to say, 'members' means only men, excluding women. Women were invisible at that time, especially for male researchers.

2. *Qāt* Chewing in the 2000s

Based on my own data, collected in 2003,¹⁴ *qāt* consumption and its meanings have changed. Now, not only *mafrāj* but also other rooms are used for gatherings, and the workplace is a common area for men to chew *qāt*. *Qāt* chewers feel relaxed and energetic rather than *kayf*. Some men and women love to chew *qāt* alone. You can quit chewing *qāt* if you want more time to work, or you can spend more money and time on things other than *qāt*. *Qāt* has become a kind of private refreshment, and those who want to use it in that way do not seek *al-sā'a al-sulaymānīya*.

Compared with the 2000s, *qāt* chewing in the 1970s was a special event, like a wedding or Eid, whereas now, *qāt* is not special but an ordinary habit.

According to a survey from 2003, the majority of respondents answered that they chew *qāt* in a house, be it their own or a friend's. Only one respondent answered '*dīwān*', and no respondent used '*mafrāj*', signalling that *mafrāj* is no longer an important place for *qāt*.

In Sana'a, where segregation of the living space based on the sexes is rigid, men and women usually chew *qāt* separately.¹⁵ Some houses offer rooms for *qāt* gatherings for both sexes and others only for one sex.

As mentioned, while *mafrāj* is a room for *qāt* gatherings, there are other rooms used for *qāt* gatherings, such as the *dīwān*, a drawing room, and the *makān*, a living room.¹⁶ The *mafrāj*, *dīwān* and *makān* have similar interiors; mattresses are placed around the room, with cushions along the walls. People sit on the mattresses around the room, and the centre of the room is used as a place for a water pipe (*madā'a*) or a temporary repository for the branches and leaves that are not suitable for chewing.

There are other places to chew *qāt* than houses. The survey referred to above was answered by men, nearly half of whom chew *qāt* at their workplaces. Many companies and government and municipal offices forbid workers to chew *qāt* on duty, and therefore, most men who chew at workplaces are night time factory workers, shopkeepers and craftsmen.

According to a survey in 2003, many people answered that they chewed *qāt* with their friends, family members and business associates (multiple answers). There were more who answered, 'with friends (*aṣḍiqā'*, *aṣḥāb*)' than who answered 'with family members' or 'with business associates such as colleagues (*zumalā'*), bosses (*mudarā'*) and workers (*'ummāl*)'. 'Family members' refers to immediate and close family members, such as 'my wife', 'my husband' and 'mother-in-law living together', rather

than 'family' in a general sense. It should be pointed out that there were no answers mentioning tribes or tribal members.

There are many people who chew *qāt* alone, most of whom also answered that they chew *qāt* with their friends and family members. However, some always chew *qāt* alone. Elders—men who entrust their jobs to their sons and women who entrust their housework to their daughters and the wives of their sons—often chew *qāt* alone in their own rooms. Many men chew *qāt* alone while tending their stores or doing manual labour. Women chew *qāt* alone in the house while taking care of their young children.

When considering where and with whom to chew *qāt*, we find that there are not many men who enjoy *qāt* every day with their favourite persons in the house; there are men who cannot chew *qāt* on weekdays because of their jobs, men who chew *qāt* only a few hours after lunch and men who chew *qāt* at their workplaces with their business associates. Chewing *qāt* with business associates in the workplace, however, was not noted in the ethnographies of the 1970s. Chewing *qāt* alone was considered an anti-social act in the 1970s, but now it is not disfavoured, at least in Sana'a, and chewing *qāt* is a kind of private refreshment; therefore, people do not need *al-sā'ā al-sulaymānīya*.

Few people change the places where they chew *qāt* and people they chew it with every day, and there are not many who rigidly keep to the same place and companions. Most have a few places and several acquaintances to chew *qāt* with. People are more variable than places, and friends are more commonly shared with than family members, although this tendency is more applicable to men than to women.

There are quite a few people who participate in gatherings without *qāt*. Chewing *qāt* is not compulsory when attending gatherings. You can enjoy talking with a cup of tea and some sweets served by the host. Participants without *qāt* were not reported in the 1970s.

People feel relaxed and become energised after gatherings. Conversations are important, but not all themes are serious and can be rather ordinary, and small matters are spoken about. Sometimes a problem, be it individual or social, may be discussed among the chewers to be solved, which is not what they want every day nor what happens every day. They often watch television during the gatherings. Some play with cell phones or talk to friends over their telephones. If the gathering has a large number of participants, they divide into groups and talk. A sense of unity is not required.

IV. Consumers Outside Yemen

1. Yemenis in Ethiopia

In this section, we turn to how Yemenis abroad chew *qāt*. It should be noted that *qāt* is a legal refreshment in Ethiopia, like in Yemen, but it is an illegal drug in the UK and Holland. The names of the cities where I conducted the research are pseudonymous in order to protect personal privacy.

The Yemenis I interviewed in the Ethiopian cities N, J and D were descendants of common people.¹⁷ Their ancestors came to Ethiopia because of hardship in their homelands at the beginning of the last

century, and they worked as manual labourers at first. After they bought property and got better jobs, they experienced oppression. Most Yemenis living in Ethiopia are self-employed and speak several languages, and their relatives have left the country in search of better lives.

The way *qāt* is consumed in Ethiopia is different from how it is done in Yemen. In Ethiopia *qāt* is swallowed, whereas in Yemen, as previously noted, *qāt* is kept in one of the cheeks and spit out in the end. Yemenis in Ethiopia consume *qāt* in the Ethiopian manner.

Most Yemeni people in cities N and J are self-employed and do business with Ethiopians. They have no chance to gather as a Yemeni community. They consume *qāt* with their families or alone, mainly on weekends. For them, *qāt* is not a symbol of ethnic unity but a form of recreation.

Yemenis in cities N and J are too busy to enjoy *qāt* every day. They open their shops early in the morning and close them at night. They eat lunch and pray in turns. In Yemen, however, shopkeepers close the shops to eat lunch at their homes and chew *qāt* in their shops; in Ethiopia, shopkeepers work without breaks and do not consume *qāt* while working.

In city D, however, *qāt* is consumed in a manner similar to that found in Yemen, except for the Ethiopian manner of swallowing it. A Yemeni offers a room for *qāt* and after lunch his friends come to the room. They sit on the mattresses put around the room. Some chat and watch television, some play with their smartphones, and others concentrate on their tasks. Some just come to chat for a while without chewing *qāt*. The owner of the room is Yemeni, but the other members are all Ethiopians from different ethnic groups. Their common language is Arabic or, strictly speaking, Yemeni Arabic,¹⁸ and they also speak Amharic, Somali, Oromo and Harari. *Qāt* unites people beyond ethnicity.

There are Yemenis in the city, and the owner knows them very well, but they do not come to the room every day. The room is for the owner's friends, not for Yemenis in general.

2. Yemenis in the UK and Holland

In Western countries, *qāt* was a scapegoat for immigration and refugee problems. Governments banned *qāt* and classified it as a dangerous drug without scientific judgement [ACMD 2005, 2013]. The UK and Holland are, as is well known, famous for their tolerant attitudes towards drugs. The two countries were among the last in Europe to ban *qāt*. Finally, the Dutch government banned *qāt* in 2012, and the UK did so in 2014. This is not because of a pharmacological problem but rather to avoid becoming hubs for *qāt* smuggling. Therefore, I will demonstrate the situation in the two countries before and after prohibition. I interviewed Yemenis in London and in three cities in Holland.

There are many Yemenis living in London,¹⁹ although there is no Yemeni Street or Yemeni District; they live widely scattered around the city. Before prohibition, those who loved *qāt* chewed it daily. They bought *qāt* imported from Ethiopia and Kenya and sold by Somali merchants at shops such as grocery stores in Arab Streets. They chewed *qāt* with their friends, most of whom were Yemenis.

Now, they can get smuggled *qāt*, fresh or dry, if they dare to, and they do not mind the high prices. Dry *qāt* is cheaper and less effective, but they enjoy the atmosphere.

In Holland, there was a large *qāt* market near the airport, and *qāt* was distributed to the cities by merchants; most *qāt* came from Ethiopia and Kenya. *Qāt* was sold directly from *qāt* merchants, most of whom were Somalis, to buyers. There were very few opportunities to buy *qāt* in shops. After the prohibition, it became difficult to obtain *qāt*, but some Yemenis know about smuggled *qāt*, fresh and dry, and if you call a merchant he will bring it to you, although the price has increased.

In city A, there were no opportunities to gather as a Yemeni community, although there are quite a few Yemenis living there. They chewed *qāt* with their friends. Since prohibition, some obtain smuggled *qāt* and chew it secretly, while others quit *qāt* and enjoy other pleasures.

In city B, there were rooms specifically rented for *qāt* consumption, and those who consumed *qāt* came in the evenings on weekdays and in the afternoons on weekends. There were not only Yemenis but also Somalis, Ethiopians, Sudanese and Dutch. They enjoyed *qāt*, chewing or swallowing, while chatting in Dutch, which is their common language, smoking and watching television. *Qāt* unites people beyond nationality.²⁰ The rooms were only for men, and if a woman wanted to chew *qāt*, she stayed home and chewed it with her friends. After prohibition, the rooms were closed. Some *qāt* lovers enjoy smuggled *qāt* in their houses, and some gave up *qāt* and found other recreations.²¹

In city C, there are several Yemeni families as well as single Yemeni men, and on weekends, they used to gather at separate houses for men and women. Some chewed *qāt* and others did not, chatting for several hours. Now *qāt* is illegal; however, they still come together on weekends using social media networks.

V. Conclusion

The *qāt* sold in Sana'a comes from tribal lands, but the merchants do not depend on their tribal relationships. They can change the kinds of *qāt* and the places and producers they obtain *qāt* from. They do not want firm relationships when getting *qāt*, while they do want firm ones when selling it, which does not occur because the buyers do not want firm ones with them. The relationships among the economic subjects are flexible and fluid.

If you are lucky and have a blood relationship with a successful and rich man, you can use it; however, this is not necessary. In other words, the *qāt* business is for those who do not have powerful relatives to depend on. With thirty dollars, you could start a *qāt* business. You do not need a shop or a storehouse to keep *qāt*, for you should sell *qāt* on the day you get it, and you do not need a licence to sell it. It is easy to be a *qāt* merchant, but it is not easy to be a successful merchant, for you have to look for *qāt* producers who cultivate the kind you want and buyers who always come to you. You must also collect information on the situation in the production areas, the types of *qāt* that are becoming popular and unpopular and so on. Even if you have a relative who can cultivate *qāt* very well, it is risky to rely on him alone.

In Yemen, *qāt* was a symbol of unity in the 1970s, and it has become a kind of private refreshment.

You can chew *qāt* alone or quit chewing it if you want, which was not allowed in the 1970s.

Now, *qāt* is one form of recreation that still has the power to unite people, and this power sometimes goes beyond ethnicity and nationality. This power is not peer pressure, which was found in the *qāt* gatherings of the 1970s in Yemen. Now, you may chew *qāt* as you like if you wish. The Yemenis I interviewed chew *qāt* not to maintain their identity as Yemenis, but for individual refreshment.

During the Arab Spring, Yemeni protesters stayed in tents set up in Tahrir Square in the centre of Sana'a, discussing the future of Yemen with their mouth full of *qāt*, and in the morning, they joined anti-government demonstrations.

Qāt has the power to unite people, but this power is not compulsory. Yemenis gather with or without *qāt* if they want to. They do not need it in order to maintain their identity, even though they are far away from their homeland.

The prolonged political instability at home and the COVID-19 pandemic have forced people in Yemen to face hardships. There, *qāt* merchants have just appeared who use social media networks to deliver *qāt* directly to consumers, avoiding personal contact in the market. *Qāt* is not essential for life, and yet, it loosely unites people—those who love it and those who do not.

Notes

¹ Sections I, II and III are based on Otsubo [2017], IV is based on Otsubo [2019]. Research in the UK and Holland was funded by JSPS.

² North Yemen and South Yemen were unified in 1990.

³ It has often been pointed out that *qāt* was substituted for coffee [Zabarah 1982: 12; Stevenson 1985: xiv], although, as far as I know, *Harāz* [Gerholm 1977: 53–56] is the only concrete case where *qāt* was substituted for coffee. It is true that the conditions for *qāt* cultivation are similar to those of coffee, but they are not the same, and *qāt* is more resistant to drought and frost damage [Weir 1985b: 75]. Soil which is suitable for *qāt* is not always suitable for coffee [Otsubo 2000] and, as a plant, *qāt* is much stronger than coffee to the extent that coffee plants nearly died when they were planted in the same field, as *qāt* roots drew considerable nutrition from the soil [Otsubo 2017]. As for the case where *qāt* was substituted for cereals, see Weir [1985b: 74–76]. Both Kennedy [1987] and Kopp [1987] refer to this change, but they do not specify the areas.

⁴ *Būft* is a kind of coffeehouse where tea, fresh juice and light meals such as sandwiches are served. *Qahwa* is where only drink is served. As far as I know, no coffee is served at the *būft* or *qahwa*.

⁵ A woman can go there to quench her throat, but she will not stay there long to talk with her friends or family.

⁶ Economists prefer coffee to *qāt*, for the former can be exported. We may calculate how much Yemen would earn if all the *qāt* cultivated in Yemen were exported, and if all the *qāt* were switched to coffee and all the coffee were exported based on the data of CSO [2005] and Anderson et al. [2007: 166]. The former is £ 4,248,965,000 (≅ YR 1,274,689,500,000), and the latter is \$ 118,357,615.8 (≅ YR 23,671,523,100). Exporting *qāt* would be much more 'economic', contrary to economists' expectations.

⁷ *Qāt* has a bad influence upon families, family budgets and the Yemeni economy [Zabarah 1982: 12], and bad effects on human bodies such as insomnia and lack of appetite [Swanson 1979: 40; Kennedy 1987], but many other diseases which are thought to be caused by *qāt* are almost all refuted by ACMD [2013].

⁸ Regarding Qima Coffee, see <https://www.qimacoffee.com/>

⁹ There are *lūkandas* in Sana'a, cheap hotels with dormitories where men staying in Sana'a temporarily enjoy *qāt*

and water pipes, but it is not common for people living in Sana'a to go there to enjoy them.

¹⁰ There are several Arabic words which mean a gathering for *qāt* in the afternoon. *Jalisa* and *majlis* mean ones for several men, while a larger gathering for men is called *maqyal*, and for women *tafriṭa*. I have seldom heard *jalisa* and *majlis* strictly distinguished, although *maqyal* and *tafriṭa* are.

¹¹ Weir said that men who heard news at *qāt* parties told their wives the information [Weir 1985a: 125]. I heard the opposite in Sana'a; women heard news at *qāt* gatherings and then told their husbands. Couples participate in *qāt* gatherings separately and after the gatherings exchange information, which sometimes allows them to gather much more information than if they were to attend the same gathering.

¹² Some Yemeni men told me that it was shameful for a man to ask any man about his daughter's bridegroom, make contact with the candidate or talk to him about his daughter.

¹³ *Al-sā'ā al-sulaymānīya* is often translated as 'Solomon's Hour', but some of my informants denied that.

¹⁴ The survey was carried out on men and women over 14 living in Sana'a. In total, 200 questionnaire forms were delivered, 122 of which were collected and completed by 95 men and 27 women. Most of the questionnaire's questions were not multiple-choice but descriptive, which restricted respondents to those who can read and write well. Male respondents were craftsmen, shop keepers, merchants, workers at factories and government officials. Most of the women were the wives or sisters of the male respondents. Nine of the 27 women worked and many of them were government officials. Women's literacy is not always related to their family's economic strength, but we also recognise the female respondents as middle-class citizens, for they have the ability to answer the questions. Interviews were conducted with some of the respondents covering the results of the questionnaire. We may say that the results of the research reflect the present situation of middle-class citizens in Sana'a.

¹⁵ It does not matter that one chews *qāt* with one's spouse or one's sibling of the opposite sex, the latter of which is not very common.

¹⁶ *Dīwān* corresponds to a drawing room, furnished with luxurious furniture like the *mafrāj*, but much wider than it. In Sana'a, outside Old Sana'a, most houses—most of which are one to two storeys—do not have a *mafrāj* but do have a *dīwān*. A living room is called a *makān* and is used by the family every day.

¹⁷ Sayyids, descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, started to leave Yemen for East Africa in the sixteenth century. There are non-sayyids, or common Yemeni people, who came to Africa around the beginning of the twentieth century. They worked as manual labourers during the construction of the harbors and railways, for the great powers had expanded into East Africa.

Yemenis had a hard time there for decades, harder than during Italian control [1935–41]; the Italians thought Arab people were more sophisticated than any other ethnic group in Ethiopia and promoted the construction of mosques, and Mecca pilgrimages. During the era of Haile Selassie I [1930–1974], the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church was established as the state religion in 1955, and the rights of Muslims were taken away. When the Dergue came to power in 1974, Yemeni merchants had a hard time, for the government was Marxist-Leninist; merchants were considered exploiters and the enemies of peasants, and their estates were confiscated.

In 1991, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power, but most Yemenis had escaped from Ethiopia, leaving for Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, Western Europe, North America, Australia and Yemen. Thus, when I visited Ethiopia in 2016 and conducted research in cities N, J and D, there were 5–6 families in each city. The cities had a large Muslim population and many Yemenis and now they have a large Muslim population but few Yemenis.

¹⁸ In city D, adult men working in the market speak Arabic, while women do not. There must have been many Yemenis living in the city for Arabic to still be a common language.

¹⁹ Yemenis started to leave their homeland for the UK since the 1890s. They worked as sailors and then settled to work at factories at the harbors in places like Cardiff, Liverpool and South Shields. They were manual labourers and stayed at the bottom of the social classes [Halliday 2010].

- ²⁰ An informant in city B told me that he did not chew *qāt* in a *qāt* room, but rather in his house with his friends. There were no rules where to consume *qāt*, and you could chew *qāt* as you liked.
- ²¹ I have never heard of alcoholic drink as an alternative to *qāt*. It can be obtained much more easily and cheaply in the UK and Holland, but it cannot be their choice.

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