

## Qat – to chew or not to chew

by Chris Wilson

*Visitors to countries around the Horn of Africa should be prepared for an extraordinary sight. This will be of a man with one great big swollen cheek bulging out, as if a tennis ball has been inserted into it, green teeth and a far away look in his eyes. The reason for his outlandish appearance is a leaf called Qat, or Chat, which many say is an evil drug and the scourge of the society, but which those who chew it maintain is the greatest pleasure in life. It keeps you awake, sharpens your senses, loosens your tongue, enhances your sex life and enables you to dream.*

In much of Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia, Yemen and Djibouti life revolves almost completely around Qat. Although people chew mainly to relax, many do so to work with even greater concentration. Students use it to cram before exams, long distance truck drivers keep going for miles on a cheekfull, businessmen use it to soften up the competition and strike the best deals, and poets turn to it for inspiration.

By midday in Sana'a, the Yemeni capital, most men are impatient to be off to the souk to secure their daily supply. Nearly all work ceases, a major rush hour ensues with traffic at its very worst and tempers frayed as people hurry to get the best before it is gone. It is all highly stressful. Once you emerge from the jostling crowd however, with your green bunch intact, you can at last slow down and relax.

Now only hours of delight stretch before you.

First a big lunch is necessary. You never feel hungry after Qat, so if you're going to eat you'd better do it before. Then, well stocked, not only with your washed and shiny leaves on their juicy stems, but also with water, Pepsi, cigarettes or a shisha (water pipe), you sit down to chew. This may be a solitary thing but usually it is with a few good friends. How you sit is very important. You half sit, half recline on a mattress on the floor, supported on the left by a hard cushion. All doors and windows are firmly closed so as not to let in any drafts and the air rapidly becomes thick with smoke. Before long everyone is animated, talking loudly. Conversation ranges far and wide, from politics to poetry, from prices to philosophy. And the amazing thing is that, as the Qat takes effect, all the problems of the world suddenly seem so easily solved.

Although it is mostly men who chew the habit is increasing amongst mainly middle class women. They arrive at each other's homes covered in black of course, but once inside, disrobe to reveal the latest fashions, quantities of gold, make up and elaborate hairstyles. The room is fragrant with incense and as the chewing gets underway there is laughter, reportedly ever more bawdy jokes, music and even dancing.

In Sana'a sunset is known as The Hour of Suleyman. As the last rays flood the room you notice a sudden quiet. All talking has ceased and everyone is withdrawn and meditative. The only sound is the gurgle of the water pipe or the odd heavy sigh.... It is at this point that one is supposed to enter a state known as Kayf, in which one experiences a sort of contented enlightenment (or enlightened contentment?) Some do actually manage to sustain this and end up floating in perfect bliss, but for most it does not last all that long. Once it begins to wear off many people begin to feel distinctly depressed and melancholic, and everything that seemed so easy before now feels insurmountable.

The Qat tree, *Cathula Edilis*, grows wild in many parts of east and southern Africa, but in Ethiopia, Yemen and Kenya it is a lucrative cash crop, in many areas replacing coffee as the main source of income. This is having a devastating effect on the environment, especially in Yemen, where deeper and deeper wells are being sunk to enable irrigation, thus dramatically lowering the water table in a country that has, for centuries, been an example to the rest of the world of good water management. To make matters worse the vast amount of chemical fertilisers and pesticides used inevitably seeps underground to contaminate what little water is left.

There are many other arguments against growing Qat. It is responsible for laziness, lethargy and – amongst the poor – malnutrition, as some men prefer to spend what little they have on Qat for themselves rather than food for their children. Whether it is actually a "drug" or not is debatable. Chewers claim it is not addictive. When they go abroad, for instance, to places where Qat is unobtainable, they simply forget about it and do not experience any withdrawal symptoms. On the other hand the minute they get back home and see everyone else chewing they can't wait to do so as well.

Not much research has been done into the physical side effects. It certainly causes weight loss and insomnia. It may also be the cause of mouth cancer and, although many claim it is an excellent aphrodisiac, in the long term it probably also results in impotence.

In the USA and most of Europe it is classified as a drug and is illegal. In Britain and Holland however it is not. It is even big business and plane loads of freshly picked qat from Addis Ababa arrive each week at Heathrow.

The question as to whether it is, like alcohol, forbidden in Islam or not is an interesting one. In Saudi Arabia chewing qat is punishable by death, yet right next door in Yemen it is simply not an issue. In Ramadan people chew even more, though at night of course, often until dawn.

Whatever : everyone agrees it is the major impediment to development in the region. With most of the male populations busily chewing every day it is hard to get much done. Their unfortunate governments however have an insoluble problem on their hands. No matter how dearly they would love to completely get rid of Qat, to try to do so would surely end in their own spectacular demise.

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