

THE CURSE OF

QAT

ITS DEFENDERS SAY IT BOOSTS CONFIDENCE, MENTAL AGILITY AND SEXUAL PROWESS. ITS DETRACTORS CLAIM IT IS THE MAIN CAUSE OF YEMEN'S SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PROBLEMS. IN SEARCH OF THE TRUTH ABOUT CATHA EDULIS

BY CONOR PURCELL

SO THIS IS HOW I AM GOING TO DIE. I AM traveling in a convoy of battered Toyota Hilux trucks, driven by very stoned, very reckless Yemeni men around jack-knife bends so close to the road's edge I can peer out the window and see the gnarled undergrowth hundreds of feet below me. We are somewhere between the Yemeni capital of Sana'a and the ancient town of Hajjah, from where we departed. There is traffic coming the other way too, equally fast and equally reck-

less. Most worrying of all, the cheek of my driver Mohammed is bigger than a man's fist. His eyes are blood red. Mohammed has been chewing qat for the past two hours and, judging by the bulges in their cheeks, so has everyone else on the road. The sun is starting to set and – as Mohammed had promised before we set out – we need to “go very fast” to reach the capital before nightfall. We do so, but by then I have stopped caring about the high-speed cornering, the terrifying bends and the endless ravines, for I have been chewing qat too, and it has finally taken effect.



Qat, or, to give it its full name, *catha edulis*, is, depending whom you ask, the scourge or the savior of Yemen (and, for that matter, the Horn of Africa too). It is grown and chewed throughout the Arabian Peninsula and everywhere from remotest Eritrea to bombed-out Mogadishu. As we navigate the gridlock on the outskirts of Sana'a's fairytale Old City, the place has begun to awake from its daily qat-induced slumber. Dickensian street lamps switch on; the chocolate-box houses, perched precariously on top of each other, are illuminated and shadows move past ornate stained-glass windows. It is otherworldly and achingly beautiful, or maybe that is just the qat talking. The rest of my Friday night will consist of repeated helpings of sugary cardamom tea, scrawled note-taking and staccato conversations with Mr. Younis, the proprietor of the Arabia Felix Hotel where I am staying.

In the morning, everything is very different. The capital's streets are lined with traders selling everything from huge bundles of cotton wool to complete engines. Men roll rickety carts full of withered cab-

economy is entirely dependent on children. Five-year-old boys sit behind corner-shop counters, greasy faced 10-year-olds work as mechanics; the adults away in their own private cathinone-induced stupor.

It is hard to overstate how prevalent the pastime is, and how it cuts across all geographical, class and demographic boundaries. Every male over the age of 14 chews it. The prime minister chews it; the street cleaners chew it; to not chew it would be to effectively take yourself out of Yemeni society.

FOUR MEN EYE ME IMPASSIVELY, their cheeks bulging, their legs splayed. A tiny, bug-eyed girl runs around them, squealing with delight. Two boys sit across from the men, playing with a red toy truck. They occasionally look at me, catch my eye, and look away. We are sitting in the living room of the six-storey home of a Yemeni qat farmer called Mohammed, 6,000 ft above sea level, 147 km from Sana'a, in the heart of qat country. It is a beautiful Friday afternoon in January

that can be locked – a relic of the past when warring tribes were common. Even today, outside the city limits of Sana'a, the men carry guns, mainly Kalashnikovs, complementing the *janbiya* every man wears.

When chewing qat, the first sensation is of eating a particularly pungent plant, similar to putting a rolled-up ball of dock leaves in your mouth. As you chew – struggling to contain the mash of foliage – the juices build up, eventually reaching the point where you are forced to spit or swallow. I swallowed; no one else was spitting – and my grimace made it clear to the others what I had done. Laughing, Mohammed's son explained you are not supposed to swallow either, but to let the juices be absorbed.

The beginnings of a qat session are intense – the men joke and jibe, fondly belittle each other and talk in rapid bursts. The qat brings the group together, news is shared, jokes told, stories remembered. If a foreign guest is present, an almost ceaseless barrage of questions is unleashed: “How much is qat in your

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bages and half-crushed tomatoes past glassy eyed donkeys and weather-beaten old men. The noises, smells and sights compete for your attention, until it all becomes one incoherent tableau; the visual definition of culture shock. And, rolled up on bundles of newspapers, strewn across the cracked pavements, lie stacks of green gold, fruits of the tree of paradise; qat.

The narcotic pantomime is played out with metronomic precision. Every day the traders collect the qat from farmers who drive in from surrounding provinces. At midday, the first of the day's qat arrives and a palpable buzz engulfs the streets and lanes of the city. The markets begin to fill up and men unroll sheets of blue plastic and unravel newspapers. Shouts go up and men sit on their haunches, examining the day's batch, checking for imperfections, insulting the sellers' prices and eventually – after a dialogue than can last anywhere from 15 seconds to 15 minutes – handing over their money. Then, the streets clear.

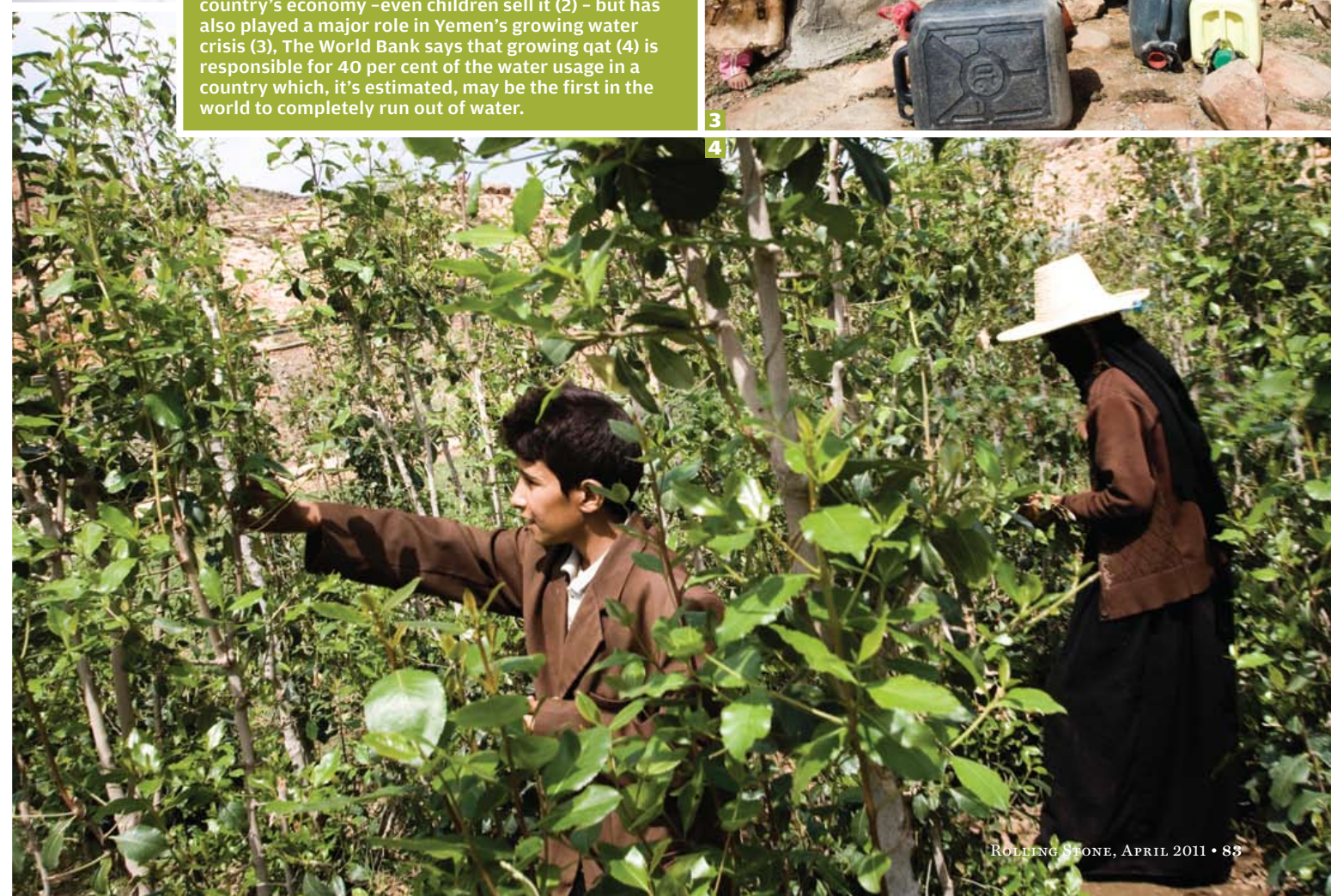
The men disappear through doorways and alleys, their bundles carefully placed under their arms. They meet up with friends and chew qat for anywhere from two to five hours. Wander around the Old City during the afternoon and you would be forgiven for thinking Yemen's national

and I am taking part in the quintessential Yemeni experience: the chewing of qat. Mohammed, his three children and myself had earlier gorged on a feast of bubbling *saltah*, thick *sahawi* and warm flat bread as the afternoon sun splashed through the ornate, centuries-old window frame. Once the meal was over, the ceremony began. Mohammed made a call on his battered mobile phone and soon four middle-aged men arrived. Dressed in white robes, their *janbiya* daggers glinting, they greeted me like an old friend. Scalding hot sugary tea was dispensed by Mohammed's sons while he left the room, returning with a newspaper wrapped around thick, loose bundles of qat, its leaves an almost translucent green.

Mohammed is one of the most important men in Hajjah, a walled town perched on a mountain in the Hajjah Governate in northwestern Yemen. Before lunch, his two sons had taken me on a tour of the village. We walked past a deserted synagogue (The Jews “decided” to leave in the Sixties, Mohammed's son said), and through narrow, winding lanes, surrounded by looming stone houses and, beyond, glimpses of a stunning rocky vista. The village has only one door – a thick, wood and iron structure

country? What age do you marry? How much is a wedding? What do you think of Yemen? Where is your family? How much does a mechanic make in London? Where do people in New York keep their animals?” After about 30 minutes or so, the noise, the questions, the laughter, all die down. The conversations take place between groups of two or three, some whispered. Things seem clearer; the shafts of light, the laughter of children in a nearby courtyard. Eventually, this too disappears and quietness descends. After three hours or so, the participants get up to leave. They return to their homes or their stalls – or in my case a nerve-racking drive back to Sana'a – the social event over for another day.

MOHAMMED WAS A GRACIOUS host and a loving father. But his crop is responsible – according to many – for the desecration of the Yemeni economy, its water shortage, and the moral failings of a nation. Qat was declared a ‘drug of abuse’ by the World Health Organization in 1980 and is illegal in several countries including the United States and Canada.



Something to chew on

Almost every Yemeni man over the age of 14 chews qat (1) on a regular basis. The drug is a central part of the country's economy – even children sell it (2) – but has also played a major role in Yemen's growing water crisis (3). The World Bank says that growing qat (4) is responsible for 40 per cent of the water usage in a country which, it's estimated, may be the first in the world to completely run out of water.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: REUTERS; OPPOSITE PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: REUTERS; AFP PHOTO; MATILDE GATTONI 2

And Mohammed is far from alone. On a typical Friday afternoon it is estimated that more than 70 per cent of the population of the country's 24 million people are chewing qat. It is the equivalent of 200 million people in the U.S. leaving work at midday to go and get stoned for the afternoon.

Of course, Yemen is not the States. As many Yemenis point out, they don't have bars, cinemas, or home computers. In a life marred by poverty, hunger and disenfranchisement (35 per cent of the population is unemployed, according to Reuters), qat is the one thing they can enjoy.

Yemen in 2011 is in a bad way. Rampant corruption, rising unemployment, and a dwindling water supply, as well as a growing threat from Al Qaeda and increasingly violent protests on the streets, have left many analysts convinced Yemen will be the region's next failed state. Qat currently grows everywhere from Kenya to Yemen and is chewed worldwide. More than 10,000 tonnes of it are exported to Britain – where the drug is legal – each year. 100kg of qat has a value of about

100kg of qat has a value of about \$150 in the U.K. In Canada, where the drug is illegal, the same amount is worth around \$30,000.

tury, was reportedly astonished by the ubiquity of the drug. Yemenis claim the drug can do everything from relieve colds to imbue men with the energy to climb mountains. In *The Flower of Paradise*, his classic study of qat, John G. Kennedy records these claims: "It relaxes the body and stimulates the mental faculties. The scholar uses it to concentrate, and the pious to stay awake. The businessman chews to comprehend, quickly and alertly, all nuances of the transaction at hand." Kennedy points out that the perception of the drug varies wildly depending on who is doing the perceiving. While Yemenis swear by its medicinal properties, Western (it's almost always Western) aid workers, NGOs and visiting journalists are uniformly against the drug, claiming it is decimating the Yemeni economy, Tim Macintosh-Smith, a British writer who lives in Sana'a – and is a regular qat user – writes scathingly of the drop-in critics who, he feels, simply do not understand the drug:

"We qat chewers... are at best profli-gates, at worst irretrievable sinners. We

faster, to empathize with others and to become wiser and more generous. The facts are rather starker.

The World Bank estimates that Yemenis spend a tenth of their income on the plant and lose about 25 per cent of potential work hours to qat chewing. More than 40 per cent of the country's water supply is used to grow qat and the drug accounts for a third of its agricultural GDP. Yemen, it's estimated, may be the first country in the world to completely run out of water. And qat is only speeding up that process.

But, like any addict, Yemen refuses to quit; and the stoned, red-eyed truck drivers, bankers, shop workers and farmers that chew every day will, at some point, find that the qat fields have run dry. When that happens they will have two choices: give up, or import qat from East Africa. The latter path is the most likely. That will mean more money spent on the drug, and none of it staying in the country. For those worried about Yemen's stability, such a scenario is a nightmare, leading to another Somalia, only one within spitting distance of the Gulf oil monarchies.

QAT CHEWING CUTS ACROSS ALL GEOGRAPHICAL, CLASS AND DEMOGRAPHIC BOUNDARIES. THE PRIME MINISTER CHEWS IT; THE STREET CLEANERS CHEW IT; TO NOT CHEW IT WOULD BE TO EFFECTIVELY TAKE YOURSELF OUT OF YEMENI SOCIETY.

Its origins are unclear – some say the drug was first discovered by the ancient Egyptians, who considered the plant a "divine food," believing that those who chewed it would become closer to God. Others say the plant was introduced by Abraha, a man who did not like Muslims and so – after failing to destroy the Kabah in Mecca – brought qat to the Arabian Peninsula.

The reasons for its widespread popularity are more prosaic: Ottoman Rulers in the 19th century imposed heavy taxes on Yemen's coffee crops, so farmers were forced to turn to qat to make a living. To focus on economics, though, is to miss the point. The aim of chewing qat is to attain a state of 'kayf.' There is no literal translation of the word, although Sir Richard Burton offered this: "The savoring of animal existence... the result of a lively, impassible, excitable nature, and exquisite sensibility of nerve; it argues a facility for voluptuousness unknown to northern regions."

The legendary explorer, Carsten Niebuhr, who was sent to Yemen by the king of Denmark in the middle of the 18th cen-

are in the thrall of the 'curse of Yemen' and 'the greatest corrupting influence on the country' (two British ambassadors to Yemen); we are in danger of 'loss of memory, irritability, general weakness and constipation,' and from our water-pipes 'there is certainly a danger of getting a chancre on the lips' (*Handbook of Arabia*, 1917); worse, we are prone to 'anorexia', and to becoming 'emotionally unstable, irritable, hyperactive and easily provoked to anger, eventually becoming violent' (*A Journal of Substance Abuse*, 1988), while in Somalia, qat has 'starved the country's children' and 'exacerbates a culture of guns and violence' (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 1993); even if we don't turn nasty, we 'doze and dribble green saliva like cretinous infants with a packet of bulls-eyes' (the English writer David Holden). In Saudi Arabia, we would be punished more severely than alcohol drinkers; in Syria the blue-eyed Muhammed [Macintosh-Smith's qat seller] would be swinging on the end of a rope."

The claims of qat's defenders are equally outlandish. Yemeni men will tell you, without batting an eyelid, that it increases sexual appetite, makes a man stronger, more intelligent and quicker to make decisions. That it enables him to work harder and

Ironically, though, the use of qat is probably the main reason why the recent protests in Yemen took longer than elsewhere in the region to reach boiling point.

As one Yemeni – who was leaving a protest – told Reuters: "I'm going to the souk right now to buy qat. I'll have lunch, and then I'll chew qat with friends. In Yemen, people protest in the morning, but in the afternoon they go to chew qat."

Indeed, as Yemen falls apart at the seams, no one seriously expects the usage of qat to stop, or even to slow down. While Al Qaeda's offshoot (Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) continues to grow in influence in Yemen, they have not made any effort to clamp down on qat production or consumption. They may be extremists, but they are not stupid – any attempt to curtail the use of qat would see their support drop to almost zero. In 1972, then prime minister Mohsin Al Aini began a campaign against qat, railing against the influence of the drug in the media, at public events and even in poetry. The result? Al Aini was kicked out of office three months later.

It is a story that sums up Yemen's relationship with qat – a plant its people can't stop chewing, and one that will, one day, most likely destroy the country. ➤