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Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8249f4jz

Journal
Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 28(1)

ISSN
0041-5715

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Publication Date
2000

Peer reviewed
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Don’t call me ‘you qat, you qat,’ [instead] address me as ‘Allah’s Leaf’.
-Harāri proverb/saying

Known by dozens of names, including qat, khat, c’at, gad, jimma, miraa and mairungi, the leaf catha edulis forskal is chewed by many millions of men and women, primarily in eastern and northeastern Africa and Yemen. When chewed (or sometimes drunk), qat enhances wakefulness, lessens hunger, and increases physical energy and mental concentration; in regard to its effects on sexual desire and performance, testimonies and claims vary widely. Often labeled a narcotic, qat is classified as a controlled substance in at least Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Spain and Sweden. It is illegal in at least Canada, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, Tanzania, and the United States (where it is classified as a Schedule I drug, alongside heroin, LSD and marijuana).

This article presents a sampling from and introductory explanation of qat-related vocabulary employed in discussions about the leaf and its use in Harār, Ethiopia, historically the premier Islamic town in the Horn of Africa. The farmlands around Harār comprise a major center of qat production, and qat-chewing is deeply rooted in the town’s culture. Studies of the leaf—based on research in Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Yemen and elsewhere—have been published by agricultural economists, anthropologists, botanists, chemists, historians and others. Nonetheless, this article does not delve into the existing literature or the debates about qat’s effects on economy, health or society. Rather, it begins by reviewing various historical attitudes about the leaf that interested readers might compare with the ideas found in the listed vocabulary (including terms in Harāri, Amharic and Oromo) from Harār. Most of the text consists of words and definitions that will hopefully help to provide
a new scholarly view of qat culture (in general, but in Harār in particular) and generate ideas for further research on the “Leaf of Allah” wherever it is consumed.

The Leaf: Background

_Qat_-chewing sessions, known as bärc’a (singular and plural) in Ethiopia, are social gatherings, usually consisting of at least three and frequently more persons. In Harār, bärc’a are most often segregated by sex and have long been an integral part of all social and religious gatherings of any significance, from friendly get-togethers to weddings, funerals and holiday celebrations. Bairu Tafla has summarized that “The Adārē [Harāri], the Afar, the Somali, and the Oromo counted it among the essentials necessary for living, work, and enjoyment. Guests were welcomed with it; prayers were kept long and lively with it; in wedding and funeral ceremonies as well as other social gatherings people were supplied with bunches of the leaves as a matter of course.” Today, many people in Harār spend at least part of their afternoon chewing and it would probably be extremely difficult to get beyond a superficial first-hand understanding of the town or its culture without regularly attending bärc’a.

Popular oral traditions posit two explanations for the discovery of qat’s widely appreciated properties. The first is that Muslim scholars, frustrated by their inability to stay awake long into the night to read and study, prayed to the Almighty to provide them with something that would enable them to do so; subsequently they were granted qat. This story may explain one of the monikers by which qat is known in the Harāri language: zallahu qui (the Leaf of Allah). The second is that one day long ago an observant shepherd noticed that after nibbling on a certain type of shrub his goats refrained from sleep and exhibited increased energy. Curious, he tried it himself. Today, sometimes, with a mischievous glint in his eye, an Ethiopian will elaborate on the tale, adding that the he-goats also showed greater than usual interest in their flock’s females; noting this, the shepherd tried chewing some qat before retiring for the night and both he and his wife were delighted with the results.

_Qat_ has long held a fascination for strangers to its consumption and culture. In the preface to his 1856 travelogue about Harār, Richard Burton explained his reasons for visiting:
...the region...was previously known only by the vague reports of native travelers... The ancient metropolis of a once mighty race, the only permanent settlement in Eastern Africa, the reported seat of Moslem learning, a walled city of stone houses, possessing its independent chief, its peculiar population, its unknown language, and its own coinage, the emporium of the coffee trade, the headquarters of slavery, the birth place of the kat plant, and the great manufactory of cotton-cloths, amply, it appeared, deserved the trouble of exploration.7

In Harār, the adventurer found the local leaf more tasty than the Yemeni variety with which he was already familiar. Overall, however, he was not much impressed with qat’s intoxicating powers:

Europeans perceive but little effect from it...the Arabs, however, unaccustomed to stimulants and narcotics, declare that, like opium eaters, they cannot live without the excitement.8

During the Egyptian occupation of Harār from 1875-1885, at least one of Khedive Ismail’s officers also recorded his observations about qat. Mohammed Muktar asked the Harārī why they chewed and reported their explanation that the plant was known to be an herb of the saints and that they ate it so that they could stay awake late into the night to worship Allah. His colleagues were not so easily swayed, however, and one policy of the Egyptian forces was to suppress qat-chewing.9

Later references to qat in Harār are similarly disapproving, but are of more general historical interest in the way they evidence an attitudinal divide between Christians and Muslims.10 In the first decade of the 20th century a French Capuchin missionary wrote that “...most of the old Muslims, each chewing his qat, who stretch out at the foot of a scrawny mimosa, snort, grunt and cough when one passes too near.”11 In 1915, a Muslim appeared in the state court before a Christian judge after having been caught stealing qat in the fields. The defendant admitted his misdeed, explaining that he committed the crime only because he was suffering from harara.12

The unimpressed judge sentenced him to one month of hard labor,
thereby probably illustrating the contemporary Christian Abyssinian (Ethiopian) disdain of the substance, which allegedly induced laziness. The following decade Fitawrari Tāklāhawariyat was appointed governor-general of Chercher, a particularly fertile and economically and politically important region near Harār. There, he sought to have Muslim Oromo cultivators uproot all their qat shrubs and instead plant coffee. Challenged about the necessity for implementing such a strong order, he “argued that chewing would lead to reduced productivity, diminished reproductive capacity and increased mental problems.” And numerous 1940s government security reports from in and around Harār clearly linked the bārcha of Muslim Harāri and/or Somali men with the threat of political subversion—an especially worrisome possibility at the time owing to uncertainty about the post-World War II political status of the Somalias and the Muslim-inhabited Ogaden region of Ethiopia.

Across the Bab al-Mandab, in Yemen, European travelers typically have also had less than complimentary remarks to make about the leaf, which one described as “...the most debilitating time-wasting scourge of Yemen.” W. Wyman Bury observed that:

...parties of kāt-eaters will sit up all night discussing anything and everything. By-and-by the habitué finds himself incapable of clear and consecutive thought without the herb, and its deprivation engenders much mental discomfort and nervous irritability. Further addiction induces marked symptoms such as constipation, insomnia and, finally, impotency. The teeth are much affected, becoming permanently discoloured and loose, for the gums become flaccid.

The author concluded that “...the habit has become a serious social evil, undermining the mental and physical health of the native population; the foe alike of thrift and industry.” This sentiment was echoed by an Islamic History professor: “Notwithstanding the praise the Yemenis heap upon Qāt in prose and poetry, it is their ruin both socially and economically. Its price is high for ordinary man, but if he can obtain the leaves he will chew them all day long, and while chewing will do no work.” Most recently, National Geographic Magazine has run photographs of qat-chewing sessions in Yemen alongside similar comments about the large amount
of time and family income devoted to the leaf, or about how it is banned in other countries. In another article, in process, I explore more deeply the history and use of qat in Harār. Here, I seek to provide a sampling of qat-related vocabulary from in and around Harār town. Because the leaf is chewed daily over a vast region, encompassing (at least) parts of Kenya, Somalia, Ethiopia, Jibuti and Yemen, there are undoubtedly many parallel vocabularies that could be gathered (and in far greater detail). Nevertheless, in the relatively extensive literature on the topic, few authors list more than just a few words. I hope that the following examples will serve to: 1. provide insight into the richness and detail of a major qat-culture, 2. encourage further research on the cultural and linguistic aspects of qat generally, and 3. provide a useful contribution to available data that might comprise the basis for at least preliminary comparative study. I have divided the collected terms into seven categories.

**Qat-related Terminology and Literary References from Harār**

The following sections list samples of qat-related terms to give some idea of the diversity and range of qat-related concepts conveyed in a few Ethiopian languages, as spoken in and around Harār. Because I did not consistently record these words, I do not have versions from even the main languages for each one. When possible, I have tried to specify which languages the words are from, but whether I have or not it should be kept in mind that in some cases the same words obtain in more than one language. Overall, there seems to be a heavy Oromo influence on qat vocabulary in other languages, but this is a topic that has not been studied in detail and my data are not sufficient to generalize confidently.

**Category 1: Preparing Leaves, Chewing, and Getting Merqana**

*Merqana* is the state of feeling induced by qat. The nature of *merqana* varies from person to person. When asked how they know when they have reached or gotten *merqana*, chewers gave a variety of answers. Some said that normally they are talkative and active, but when they have *merqana* they get quiet and do not talk much. A few replied that they become determined to read or study,
or otherwise begin to focus on only one activity. Others claimed that they felt ready to do work, whether it be gold- or silver-smithing, carpentry, accounting, music composition, writing, or farming. All said that their thoughts become very focused or concentrated; then, after the intensity “cools off” a bit (Amharic: tennesh käqäzáqqäzä bähwala) they are able to read, pray, study or go for c‘äbsi (see Section 4). For the most part, people enjoying a bärc‘a together will reach merqana at about the same time. That general moment is obvious to all present because everyone becomes quiet and subdued or commences preparing to leave. It all starts, however, with consuming gat, which is done by chewing or drinking. There are three ways to prepare fresh leaves:\textsuperscript{22}

1. (\textit{am-\textit{y}]=[\textit{mÄ}m}) mäqmah’ (Harári): when one picks off shoots and pops them directly into the mouth

2. (\textit{atrr}) a térärä (Harári): when one picks off shoots but holds them together in the palm until it is full and then pops the handful into the mouth

3. (\textit{am-\textit{q}a}) muqächa (Amharic; in Harári moqäc’ is “mortar”): pounding leaves into a mush;\textsuperscript{23} during this process a little water is added to the leaves being crushed and, if the imbiber so desires, so is a little sugar; the mixture is then consumed in one of two ways: if the user is a chewer and wants something in his/her mouth, he or she will eat it with a spoon; or, if the user does not want to chew anything, he or she will mix it with water and drink the concoction; this latter method is most common among older persons who have lost teeth and can no longer chew as effectively (if at all) as they once could

Also, there are two ways of chewing the leaves. The first is to get a nice “wad packed into the cheek” (Arabic: takhžín) going and to munch on the leaves for a period lasting anywhere from 15-20 minutes to four or five (or sometimes more) hours. The second is to chew the leaves for a little while and then wash them down with water (Harári: gumuc‘ bayā; see Category 4). Unlike some gat chewers elsewhere, the Harári and others around Harár do not expectorate the leaves, rather swallowing them along with the juice that has been chewed out of them. \textit{If the pace of consumption is}
similar, the merqana obtained from each of the methods of preparing / chewing leaves is different:

-with mäqmáh’ the merqana comes on gradually

-with atérrài the merqana comes on a bit faster than with mäqmáh’

-with mágächa the merqana comes on very fast; also, it is much stronger than the others because when qat is pounded/crushed, all the leaves—even the garaba (see Category 4)—are tossed in and pounded; according to some chewers, when branches are cut from the tree, the dryer leaves on it are stronger than the fresh ones; regardless, few people chew them because they are too hard and do not taste as good

Category 2: Kinds of Qat

In the 1960s Bob G. Hill commented that “Cat might very well be called the plant of many names, as well over fifty different common names and at least six scientific names can be found in publications relating to this plant.” The list would balloon if the names of different kinds or types of qat were included. Based upon my data it is not possible to provide an even remotely complete introductory listing of Haräri qat types. In fact, I cannot distinguish systematically between terms that differentiate between the type or variety of qat, the place where qat is cultivated, the measurement by which qat is sold, or the various physical qualities of qat—all of which are incorporated into qat names. Nevertheless, after this caveat a few of the “types” of qat found in Harär are:

(afir _POSITION(C) abu mesmar: comes in at least red and gray colors, with both long and short stems; the leaves are moderately sized; it is grown predominantly in Aw Aday and often sold by the kilo, which brings from 100-600 birr; its taste is very sweet and its merqana is very strong; it is favored by wealthy persons and Jibutian or Arab tourists; its name means either 1) “father of the nail,” referring either to the fact that it is so strong it hits chewers like a nail, or 2) “one with the shape of a nail,” because of the way the ends of its branches look when they break smoothly and neatly from the trunk of the qat plant; abu mesmar is one of the main varieties of qat that
is exported; it is universally acclaimed as of the highest quality, and some say it is a new variety.

(አወላሃ ክልብ) adoba zalba (Haräri): this is fungus-infected qat which is said to come from lazy farmers, who do not take care of their fields; the fungus affects chewers’ mouths and gives them lots of gas; it is only purchased when there is no other qat available, when it may fetch as much as 8 birr per aqara (see below, Category 4), otherwise it sells for as low as 2 birr; some believe that it comes from “dirty rain,” or rain that follows a dust storm.

(አመራ እሱት) amara ko’ot (Haräri): red and green qat mixed together; in Haräri the name means “Christian two.”

(ወላላ) c’äbala: it comes in all colors, but its leaves are broad and hold a lot of water; it is available only during the rainy season when there is a lot of rainfall; it is not reputed to have much taste and its price ranges from 2 1/2-3 birr per aqara; its merqana is not particularly strong and some chewers claim it does not satisfy them; some say the term is synonymous with tac’ero (see fah’aqa, Category 4) and that it refers to leaves that come from the lower branches of the qat tree.

(አላቸል) dalacha (Haräri); (አላቸልል) dalächa (Amharic); dallotta (Oromo): medium green (or yellow-green) in color, perhaps accounting for the name (Oromo): dalacca gray; has many branches and leaves; sold by the aqara (price ranging from 3-10/15 birr); is said to be a popular type, which gives a “normal” merqana; dalacha is also one of the two main “types” of qat, the other being qay (Amharic: red; see qēh qat); commonly, it grows in regions such as Wäbära, Chercher and Dädära.

(አዋርሱስ እሱን) färäs uzun (Haräri): in Haräri, it means “horse ears,” referring to the shape of the leaves, all of which are the same size (and small); although most people I spoke with had not tried chewing it, it has a powerful and wide-spread reputation of being exceedingly strong, and even regular chewers of several decades expressed no curiosity at all at the idea of trying it for the first time.
(71. gey aqara (Harāri): qat grown on Harāri farms and wrapped in banana leaves for sale; gey means that it is Harāri and aqara refers to the amount it is sold by; is most available and best tasting during January-February; it has a very nice taste and is sweet, even during the dry season, when other varieties tend to be particularly bitter; its merqana is moderate and it does not prevent sleep.

(72. qārt'i: qārt'i may be taken as a "brand name" for quality qat; its color ranges from gray to brown, usually more to the brown side; its size varies, the longest stems coming from Aw Aday (a town west of Harār famed for its excellent qat, of different types); it has few branches but lots of leaves; the stem is chewed as well as the leaves; its taste is very sweet and it is expensive, an aqara often costing 2 ½ times as much as other types; the Aw Aday qārt'i is the most expensive of all owing to its esteemed reputation; it is available at all seasons (though it is best in January and February) and is good even during the dry season.

(73. gēh' c'at (Harāri); diimma (Oromo); qay c'at (Amharic): name means "red qat" in Harāri and Amharic; resembles dalacha except in color; though sold by the kilo in other places, in Harār it is sold by the aqara (price ranging from 2-8/10 birr); when there has been too much rain the leaves get soft and squeak when rubbed together; its taste is best towards the beginning of the rainy season; when the rains are letting up it has little taste at all; its merqana is very strong; some chewers complain it gives them headaches, especially during the dry season, and others are said to pass semen when they urinate after chewing it.

(74. quda (Harāri/Amharic): color ranges from red to gray (there may be gēy quda or dalacha quda); stems are both short and long, with few leaves, all of which are very small (but which broaden during the rainy season); it is neither bitter nor sweet in taste; it is strongest in the dry season, but owing to the small size of the leaves it is only possible to pack a good takhzin during the wet season; quda is qārt'i qat whose growth was retarded by a grasshopper (Amharic: quda), after which rains stimulated further growth—the soft and tender post-rain growths are quda.
Umar Kule: Umar Kulé is a place name, which is applied to any number of different types of qat that come from there.

Category 3: Parts of Qat

When qat chewers discuss qat they refer not just to names or types, but also to specific parts of the plant. For example, when discussing a type or variety of qat and the merqana it brings on, chewers will describe the physical properties of the qat plant and the feelings that chewing its leaves produces. They sometimes attribute factors such as strength or taste to the size, shape or color of different parts of the qat plant. Some of the terms thusly used are:

- **branch:**
  - damé (Oromo); (ኣምatti) qerenc ’af (Amharic)
- **eye:**
  - (ihilation) in (Harari); ija (Oromo); ( Halifax) ayn (Amharic)
- **flower:**
  - (ания) h’abäri (Haräri); abaabo/daraarra (Oromo); (ания) abäba (Amharic)
- **leaf:**
  - ( 是否) qut’i (Haräri); baala (Oromo); ( 是否) qet’äl (Amharic)
- **qat tree:**
  - (።△△△) c’at enc’i (Haräri); muka jimma (Oromo); (።△△△) yüc’at enc’ät (Amharic)
- **stem:**
  - muka (Oromo); ( ▣ ▣ ▣) gend (Amharic)

Category 4: Assorted Nouns, Verbs and Adjectives

This list is a “catch-all” one, for various commonly used words that do not fall neatly into the other categories.

(qat) aqara: a unit of measurement for qat, commonly the amount chewed by one person during a normal bärca’ a
(አርማር) c’äbsi (Haräri/Oromo/Amharic): from the Oromo for “break,” c’äbsi is the term that references the substance or activity that is “used” to “break” a merqana so that one can sleep; commonly c’äbsi means the drinking of alcohol, but some Muslims instead drink milk or juice; similarly, manual labor, extended prayer, or some sort of focused study also “breaks” a merqana, though owing to the word’s association with alcohol these meanings are sometimes invoked jokingly; Haräri men reported that Oromo farmers who are truly dependent upon qat cannot sleep without eating a bit more—the handful or so that they will take after dinner as c’äbsi to induce sleep is, in Haräri, called ወሎስ (delegot mocc’a), meaning “the tiredness/fatigue swallow of qat and water”

(አርማር) däräq c’at (Amharic): literally “dry qat;” qat which is not fresh

(አርማር) fah’aqa (Haräri: meaning “remaining qat”): loose, short branches and stems of various types of qat; measured by the handful and sold in plastic bags; each handful will range in price from 50 cents to 2 birr; a full plastic bag might cost 5 birr; it is available at all times of the year and is cheap and of low quality; it is what poor or temporarily broke people chew; synonyms that I was given are እርሶ (West Harärge Oromo: stemless) and c’era (Dire Dawa Oromo: stemless)

(አርማር) garaba (Haräri/Oromo/Amharic): the leaves and branches which are not chewed by most people, but rather discarded because they are too hard, tough and/or dry; in Harär there are homeless (some of whom are obviously mentally ill) who wander house to house collecting garaba (to chew because they cannot afford to buy qat); the “service” is appreciated by Haräri and other chewers, who thereby do not have to deal with the “throw-away” qat they do not consume; sometimes regular chewers have arrangements with poor men, in my observations usually Oromo, who will perform certain services, such as going to purchase milk for Haräri kids’ breakfast the following day or getting Babile bottled water or cigarettes for chewers enjoying a bärc’a, in exchange for some qat branches and/or the garaba from the bärc’a
gäräfi (Harāri); dugugi (Oromo): means “the last;” is qat with short branches that is left over after qat has been sorted for export

gudor c’at (Harāri): long [stemmed] qat

gumuc’ bayä (Harāri): to swish water around the mouth and to swallow the water and the qat together

h’arara (Harāri/Amharic/Oromo): the psychological condition experienced by a habitual chewer who cannot get qat; some people liken it to a smoker trying to go without cigarettes; others explain that it makes people short-tempered, angry or aggressive; it varies from person to person, but is widely claimed not to happen when a regular chewer goes on a trip to another region and does not chew; chewer testimonies, references in the scholarly literature and my personal experience maintain that a change of locale and daily schedule breaks the sometimes felt urge to chew; this fact undermines the idea that qat is physically or physiologically addictive

manac’ah’a (Harāri): the very good, choice branches which are inserted into an otherwise unattractive bundle of qat in the hope that someone will see the choice manac’ah’a branches and buy the whole bundle; in effect, it is a sales gimmick to trap the unwise, the unwary, or the gullible

merqana (Amharic); maqah’ (Harāri): merqana is the result of chewing qat: it refers to the physical/mental condition induced by qat’s active ingredients; though Rushby, in the classic travel writer tradition, sometimes degenerates into sensationalism, gets his facts wrong or shamelessly exaggerates about what is really the mundane, some of his descriptions of merqana are the best to be found in print

mäth’orära (Harāri): I was told this Harāri word (which is an infinitive/verbal noun) means “all night bärć’a;” Wolf Leslau defines it as “keeping up awake late at night during the Ramadan period chatting and reciting the Koran or performing prayers; probably from the [Oromo] ätorara ‘keep awake at night taking cät…”
takhzin (Arabic): the wad of qat that is built up in one side of a chewer’s mouth, between the teeth/gums and the cheek; in most cases, there is a noticeable bulge in the cheeks of chewers; but according to my observations, the takhzins of chewers in Ethiopia and Somaliland are considerably smaller than those of their Yemeni counterparts, who really pack it in

(yaddära) (Amharic): meaning “that which spent the night,” this term refers to day-old qat, which is stronger than fresh qat but is drier and does not taste as good

Category 5: Insults

Insults the world over may be intended to discourage individuals from beginning or delving more deeply into practices such as eating too much, drinking alcohol, smoking tobacco, or doing illegal drugs. Some analogous Harari language insults refer to people who chew qat more than is judged to be socially acceptable:

-44-t. (fuqra) one who is not totally habituated to chewing, but wants to chew a lot; he does not neglect his professional/personal life, but does not function easily without qat

-44-t. 4HH (fuqra fazaza) a step above fuqra, when one does not think about anything in particular in a sustained way, instead just staring at things around himself and/or at one spot

-6äf. 7H. (c’at qâf) literally meaning “qat excrement,” this term is applied to someone who chews so much that his stool turns green; generally it means “thinking about nothing except qat;” a few persons said this insult is worse than jâzba, but most disagreed with that assessment

-154 28A (nâdâba gaddala) someone who just wants to chew qat, and, if he gets some, will never get up from the nâdâba to do any work; this type of person will neglect work in favor of chewing qat—a clear sign that he has a problem
one who chews morning, afternoon and night but does not think about work and neglects himself, his clothes, his kids, etc.; in popular description a jāzba does not even wash himself (e.g., if he fell and his body were covered with dirt and leaves he would not care as long as he got more qat); this term is the highest qat insult and, in Harār at least, one to be avoided.

Category 6: Stages of Psychological Dependence

Regarding the issue of dependence, everyone I spoke with said it is a problem. It is said to affect men and women, young and old, Muslims and Christians alike. “Most people,” in fact, are generally said to have it. For example, when asked if it is common, one man replied “Yes, as I think you know, almost everyone who goes on two legs has it.” The following words are used in Harāri to describe four stages of psychological dependency:

- h'arara (harara) someone who is normal, but slightly “hooked,” like smoking only a few cigarettes daily
- qāmah' (qāmah') someone who chews a lot of qat on a regular basis
- fuqra (fuqra) someone who thinks all the time about qat, but whose use of it does not badly affect his work, family, personal appearance, etc.
- jāzba (jāzba) someone who thinks only about qat and neglects himself, his family, his work, his personal sanitation, everything, as a result

Socially acceptable degrees of habituation are limited to h’arara and, sometimes, qāmah’. Fuqra may not lead to serious
problems, but by that stage members of the community will probably have spoken to the individual about his chewing, urging him to lay off the leaf. The time for intervention may vary according to how much one is chewing, what one is doing afterwards, and other factors such as age and marital or family status.

Category 7: Literary Influences

In addition to having given rise to specialized vocabulary describing various aspects of the qat experience, qat has also long been the subject of or provided the imagery for Harrari prayers and poetry, as well as inspiring metaphors for expressing human feelings and emotions. Below are nine selected proverbs, sayings, and lines from religious and secular poetry that deal with qat. Each quotation is followed by comments aiming to ground the “message” in Harrari culture.37

One (from the poem Mäsnoy38):

\[
\text{C'at dawana c'atlé c'aya dawana} \quad \text{Qat is medicine; in qat is the cure for shadows}
\]

\[
\text{C'atum dawana bila miy adawanina.} \quad \text{Qat is medicine; [but] without water, it is an enemy}
\]

Comments: Qat can be dangerous (or an enemy) without water because if some leaves go down the wrong pipe or get stuck in the esophagus and there is no water with which to wash them down, the unfortunate person may choke to death. Some men claim to have known such incidents to occur. I cannot attest for the Harrari language, but in Amharic “shadows” has several negative meanings, including “personal charm; baleful influence cast on a sick person by a visitor who is ritually unclean; …party, faction; sorcery…” If these meanings are shared by Harrari, the first line of this verse evidences the historical appreciation of qat’s physical and/or spiritual benefits.
Two (from the poem Māsnōyā):  
Antiqoc’ antiqoc’wa  May we not be estranged, may we not have a falling out

Qānbāt’ yatqoc’  May the qānbāt’ be cut (off),

Gadāmu zari tabē  Before the bush duiker sees it.

Comments: Qānbāt’ is qat that sprouted only this year and is therefore very soft and sweet; one can chew the top six inches or so of this type of qat. Presumably, the saying means that if there is qānbāt’ and a duiker sees it, the animal will eat it because it is so soft and delicious. It is possible that the poetic power of these lines comes from a play on the root (qoc’), meaning both “being estranged, having a falling out (breaking off a relationship)” and “being cut, being cut/broken off.” The implication may therefore be that if a duiker does not eat the qānbāt’ then the two people will be able to sit and chew together and thereby reconcile themselves after a dispute or just generally strengthen their friendship.

Three (from a love poem):

She is a bunch of c’at from the golden Ras gardens.  

Comments: This line is but one in a series praising the beauty of a young woman. Likening her to a bundle of qat—a wonderful thing—is a means by which to show how incredibly beautiful she is. The comparison also demonstrates the high regard in which qat is socially held.

Four (a proverb/saying):  

 Comments: 
C'at c'èbé yeglizalachuw yekhâshumél. *Qat* does not want those that begin with *c' (c'è).

Comments: This proverb/saying rests on the idea that *qat* is a good thing but that it does not want other things that begin with the same “sound” (i.e., *c’*), for they are somehow generally undesirable. In the Harârî language these might include: *c’ilmâ* (darkness), *c’iqna* (stench, rotten/vile odor), *c’inqi* (distress, anxiety, problem, suffering), *c’irlc’irîr* (scream, loud crying). Also, the idea may be extended to terms in the Amharic language: *c’egeq’eq* (disturbance, problem, unrest), *c’efera* (dancing). In other words, *qat* is a good thing and it should not be polluted by negativity.

**Five (from an unspecified Harârî dhikr**

Mâyâlê c’atu näqmâh’a Let’s chew mâyâl qat,

Bih’ayatem näqmâh’a Let’s chew while we’re alive,

Qalâwa qilaw nah’dâgema Let’s desist from babbling nonsense

Nâbiw bayti nâbzah’a. Let’s repeatedly say the prophet [’s name].

Comments: Mâyâlê qat is a type which is neither red nor white, but somewhere in between. The line “let’s chew while we are alive” might possibly also mean “let’s chew with vigor.” This verse provides an example of the use of *qat* in religious ceremonies, and demonstrates the ideal Harârî opinion that after chewing people should not simply waste their time on useless and idle talk but rather in worthy and useful economic or religious activity. I was told that when the entire *dhikr* is recited, this saying may sometimes be spoken, sometimes not; in fact, even within the same group reading, some persons may say it and others may not.
Six (a Harari proverb/saying)

\[ \text{C'atow, c'atow atålåna, zallah'u qut'iw bålåna.} \]

Don’t say ‘you qat, you qat’ to me, [instead] address me as ‘Allah’s leaf’.]

Comments: In Harari, zallah’u (literally “of Allah”) means “pure,” so the phrase might also be translated as the “Pure Leaf.” The proverb is uttered when someone wants to show appreciation for qat, when someone wants to express happiness, or when old men are talking and qat comes up in conversation. The expression may sometimes also be said to mark the end of a discussion (among old people) about any topic(s). Middle- and older-aged men report that sometimes young people say it when they are debating the good and bad things about qat, but they may not know where it comes from or what it really means. The proverb illustrates the respect to which qat is believed to be entitled.

Seven (an Oromo proverb)

Jimman sitti baala (2X), natti dulluu gaala.

To you qat is simply a leaf (2X), but to me it is the hump of a camel.

Comments: The first part (Jimman sitti baala) of the proverb is said in a song-style type of voice and is repeated two times. Meat from the hump of a cow or camel is particularly delicious and it is the widely preferred cut. Thus, the proverb shows how highly the speaker regards qat.

Eight (a Hararí poem)

\[ \text{Ah'atañ gumuç'a qāru moc'a} \]

First swallow of qat and water, stretching out,
Second swallow of qat and water, sitting up straight,

Third swallow of qat and water, expelling last night's excrement,

Fourth swallow of qat and water, tossing one eye back and forth,

Fifth swallow of qat and water, setting two eyes to darting back and forth,

Sixth swallow of qat and water, pulling out hair,

(Seventh swallow of qat and water, in search of c'äbsi.)

Comments: This poem traces the stages that a chewer goes through before getting mergana; the various verses have apparently changed or been added over time; the first three allegedly trace to long ago, while the fourth and fifth are more recent. The difference between
“one eye” and “two eyes” in the fourth and fifth lines is not important or literal: Since it is probably impossible to move only one eye around while the other sits still, the “one eye” line just means that the person is starting to look around and the “two eye” line means that he is doing so more intensely than before. Line six refers to the observable fact that when they get mergana, chewers frequently play with their mustaches, beards or hair. The seventh line is placed in brackets because it was narrated to me only as a joke (which some—perhaps many—people would consider in poor taste), with an emphasis on the fact that it is not a common verse in this poem.

Nine (an Oromo saying)

In this saying, qat is speaking to a person:

Oromo: Na dhabduu lafa hin kaatu, na argaatuu narra hin kattu.

English: If you do not get me [qat] you will not get [up] off the ground; if you do get me, you will not get off me.

Comments: This saying, more than any other qat quotation I heard, alludes to the psychological dependence many regular or heavy qat chewers seem to develop. The first half means that a psychologically dependent user without qat will not get up off the ground (read: “do anything productive”) because he thinks he needs qat to muster the energy necessary to do so. The second part means that someone who develops a qat habit will not stop chewing regularly because he will think that he needs qat to get sufficient energy to do his work or other daily requirements.

Concluding Remarks

The farmlands around Harar, Ethiopia, are one of the major qat producing regions in the world, and qat chewing is deeply embedded in the culture of Harar town. Thus, it may be reasonably expected that qat-related vocabulary from the area will be particularly rich. This article presented an introductory listing and preliminary explanation of some of that vocabulary, though my data do not permit full listings of the included terms in even the three main
languages: Amharic, Härari, and Oromo. Many similar or parallel terms undoubtedly obtain in Somali, Yemeni Arabic and Swahili, as well as other languages spoken in Kenya, particularly around Meru District. Regardless of language, the words used to describe various aspects of qat and its consumption provide insights that otherwise might be overlooked. This article aimed at calling attention to selected linguistic aspects of Harär’s qat culture that may be of use to other researchers of the “Leaf of Allah,” regardless of discipline or country of study.

* This article is dedicated to the memory of the indefatigable Richard Wilding. Best known in scholarly circles for his archaeological work at Axum and on the east African coast, Richard was tragically killed in an automobile accident near Nairobi in 1996. During his many years in Ethiopia he conducted research in Harargé and was responsible, when I studied under him as an undergraduate in Kenya, for sparking and encouraging my interest in Ethiopia, and Harāri history and culture in particular. While I do not recall that he held an especial taste for qat, he was clearly a great lover of Ethiopian languages and he definitely enjoyed a good berellé of t’äjjj, with which I salute him.

Notes

1 Most of the following data was gathered as a side-project during research stints funded by the Social Science Research Council International Predissertation Fellowship Program (1993-94) and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (1997-98). I am particularly indebted to the hospitality of Abdullah Ali Sharif and Mufid Mohamed Ali, who hosted many excellent bärč’a at which much of this data was gathered. Thanks are also due to Getnet Bekele for his comments on an earlier draft.

2 Although c’at is the appellation of choice in many of Ethiopia’s urban centers, including Harär, in this article I prefer qat, which is the best transliteration from the Arabic of a name choice likely to be familiar to a broad, multi-disciplinary audience. In the system of Ethiopic syllabary transliteration employed here, t’ corresponds to the glottalized dental t; c’ represents the glottalized alveo-palatal
ch; and h’ is the voiceless pharyngeal fricative h. Vowels follow the Wright system, with the “fifth order” represented by é and the sixth by e.


5 This same story is also invoked to explain how the powers of coffee beans were discovered.

6 Aphrodisiac effects are however not commonly associated with qat. In fact it is better known for inducing the opposite condition, especially among regular and long-time chewers. As with so many questions about qat, there is no consensus on this issue, but my work indicates that a variety of factors are relevant, including how much or how often one chews, how many years one has chewed regularly, and the type or variety of qat being consumed.


The legal permissibility of chewing qat has long been debated in certain Islamic circles, generating myriad angles of argument from both sides. A humorous example, crossing the religious divide, may be seen in the following alleged exchange: “When a former British official in the Aden Protectorate was expostulating with an Arab for his too great indulgence, he remarked that the use
of the drug would surely have been forbidden, had the Prophet ever heard of it. “No doubt,” replied the Arab, “but, praise be to God, the Prophet never did hear of it.” Hugh Scott, In the High Yemen, London: John Murray, 1947: 95.

10 It must be pointed out that, at least among younger generations, Christian disapproval or avoidance of qat has been considerably reduced, to say the least, in recent years.

11 Semeur d’Éthiopie, March-April 1911, 49.

12 Harara is the mental or physical condition that emerges when a habitual chewer cannot get qat (see Category 4, below).

13 Institute of Ethiopian Studies #797, 7 Säné 1909 (14 June 1915). Other thieves were sentenced to jail terms “for a while” (ezäbteya qoyto), apparently until they were released by political officers on festive occasions. Verdicts specifying hard labor were most commonly pronounced only for particularly egregious violations.

14 Translated and quoted in Ezekiel, Consumption, 85.


16 For example, see the Internal Security Forces statements of Ahmad Hassan, (no title), 29 Tegemt 1939 (8 November 1946); and of Captain Tafara Badane, “News from Town” 16 Säné 1939 (23 June 1947). Both are contained in the Harärí National Archives, File #96, Special File Mä/2, Harärí Regional Secretariat, 1st Registry, Dossier #12, Sleeve #1, “Information from the Jijjiga Subprovince Concerning the Somali Organization.” For the broader historical context at the time, see Tim Carmichael, “Political Culture in Ethiopia’s Provincial Administration: Haile Sellassie, Blata Ayele Gebre and the (Hareri) Kulub Movement of 1948,” in Mel Page et al., eds., Personality and Political Culture in Modern Af-


22 Leaves are also dried and prepared for consumption in a variety of ways, usually for someone who is traveling or residing overseas, where qat may not be available. Because I was most interested in qat use in Harâr, drying leaves was not something about which I gathered much information. It is now done less frequently in Ethiopia, where the railway, roads, cars, trucks and planes transport fresh leaves around the country each day. Most commonly, as I was told, leaves are dried so that they can be sent to relatives living abroad, in Europe or North America, where qat is believed to be unavailable or difficult to obtain. As I understand it, dried leaves are usually added to water or tea for consumption, though sometimes a paste-like mixture is chewed. The difference would depend on whether the dried qat is pounded into a powder (which is then mixed with liquids for drinking), or whether it is left in leaf-form, which is soaked in water and after becoming somewhat reconstituted can be chewed normally, albeit with far less tenderness and taste than fresh
qat.


25 The prices that are listed in this section were recorded during June-July 1998.

26 The name is common in all languages, though in Haräri one also sometimes hears *mesbar/meshbar*.

27 This final quality relates to the ambiguity about whether qat is an aphrodisiac or not. In Yemen I was told of one type of Ethiopian qat which is avoided at all times except at weddings, when it is given to the groom to give him appropriate “strength” for the evening ahead.

28 The “eye” comprises the topmost leaves, which are the smallest, softest, most moist and sweetest leaves on any branch or stem of qat. Offering a handful of “eyes” to another person at a bärc’ä is considered to be a very gracious and kind gesture, and usually takes place only between close friends or special guests.

29 Also see: Leslau, *Ethiopians Speak*, pg. 39.

30 For a photograph showing a large amount of garaba on the floor (between chewers), see Cockburn, “Yemen United,” 42-43.


Most said, in fact, that they had personally experienced the symptom underlying this potential insult, but that such events did not necessarily mean that one had a problem with *qat*.

*Náddábas* are the raised platforms, serving as furniture of a sort, characteristic of Haräri family rooms.

I conducted most of my conversations and interviews in the *de facto* national language Amharic and frequently encountered the word *sus*, which means "firmly rooted habit, addiction" (Thomas Leiper Kane, *Amharic-English Dictionary*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1990, 500). For *qat*, based upon my reading of the scientific literature and my fieldwork, I prefer the term "habituation" to "addiction."

At this stage of my work, owing to my rudimentary Haräri skills and almost total ignorance of Oromo, I have had to rely on the linguistic assistance of others, sometimes translating across two languages. Thus, these versions should be regarded as preliminary.

*Mäsnøy* is a classic Haräri poem extolling in cultural imagery the beauty of a young woman. A copy has been published in Muhammad Ibrahim Sulayman, *Qät’äbti Mudy*, Addis Ababa: Artistic Printing Press, 1997, 197-206. This verse is found on 199. Unfortunately, to my knowledge the poem has not been translated from Haräri into a more accessible language.

Kane, *Dictionary*, 2083.

I recorded this version in Harär. A variant is found in Muhammad, *Qät’äbii*, 204, but after the plea it adds "my beloved" and it does not contain a reference to a duiker or antelope. It seems to mean something like "let the *qänbät’* be broken, I do not want for us to be broken (or estranged)," but my Haräri is not sufficient to be certain. The next verses in Muhammad’s version are identical, but substitute *qärt’i* (see Category 2) for *qänbät’*. Muhammad’s text may or may not be preferable, but the one I heard was translated into Amharic for me and I have found it easier to go by.

42 This example was provided by Ato Effendi Addus, who explained it is from a text of *dhikrs* and poetry written in a mixture of Arabic and Harāri by the Harāri saint Aw Hakim. Aw Hakim is said to have lived in the time of Aw Abadir (about 1000 years ago). If true, and if the *qat* reference is not a later addition, this would push much farther back in time the first Ethiopian reference to *qat*. A variant I recorded is: *c’atw nāqmāh’a bihayata, nābiw bayti(w) nābzaha*.

43 When the two eyes move around, however, it may be for a variety of reasons, such as concentrating on work, an idea, or something that is happening in the room.