



Free *qat* handouts secure a high voter turnout in Yemen's elections

For Imam Yahya, one of Yemen's last kings, *qat* was a delight that he praised in poems. For his adversary, the revolutionary al-Zubayri, the plant was the "devil in the shape of a tree".

Still today the views on *qat* greatly diverge. For some, *qat* farming is the *perpetuum mobile* of Yemen's rural economy and *qat* chewing an age-old social pursuit that has helped to preserve Yemeni identity in a rapidly changing world. For others, *qat* is the main inhibitor of human and economic development in Yemen and is to blame for poverty and corruption, the depletion of Yemen's water resources and the country's sloppy approach to fighting Islamist terror.

While some believe that *qat* chewing was the very motor of Yemen's "Arab Spring", others hold it responsible for Yemen's muddled revolution with its high blood toll. In internet blogs even *al-Qaeda*, its affiliates, and sympathizers discuss the pros and cons of the drug, and a number of Yemeni suicide bombers have met their fate with *qat*-filled cheeks. A final decision of *al-Qaeda* on what stance to adopt towards the drug has seemingly been postponed. The Jihadists want to avoid alienating Yemen's population with a premature ban of the popular stimulant before having gained firm control over the country. *Al-Qaeda* has learned from the mistakes of its Islamist sister organization, the al-Shabab militia in war-torn Somalia.

With Yemen's 2011 "Youth Revolution", a decade of half-hearted *qat* policies and missed opportunities has come to an end – a decade, however, that has succeeded in lifting the veil of silence that was cast over *qat* in media and politics after President Ali Abdullah Salih came to power in 1978. This whitewash had been part of a ruling bargain between the Salih regime and the unruly tribes that had imparted highland Yemen several decades of relative stability and Salih a 33-year rule.

With the forecast depletion of Yemen's oil and gas reserves within the next decade, the economic importance of *qat* will further increase and will bring about an important shift in the balance of power from the central government towards the *qat* producing highland tribes. The challenge of addressing the *qat* problem is thus tremendous for Yemen's policy makers. While the transitional government is hesitant about its future *qat* course and anxious not to open a "war" on yet another front, Yemen's anti-*qat* activists have seized the current, favorable climate of change. Emboldened by Yemen's revolution and the ouster of President Salih they have recently launched a series of campaigns against the drug, dubbed a "revolution on one's self".

# Politics of Qat

The Role of a Drug in Ruling Yemen

Peer Gatter



Jemen-Studien Band 20.1 · Peer Gatter · Politics of Qat



Reichert

# JEMEN-STUDIEN

HERAUSGEGEBEN VON HORST KOPP

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Band 20.1

Peer Gatter

Politics of Qat

The Role of a Drug in Ruling Yemen

2012

DR. LUDWIG REICHERT VERLAG · WIESBADEN

Cover illustrations:

Front cover: A *qāt* merchant in the highland village  
of al-Jabīn in Rayma governorate.

Back cover: Free *qāt* handouts secured a high voter turnout  
in Yemen's first direct presidential elections in 1999.

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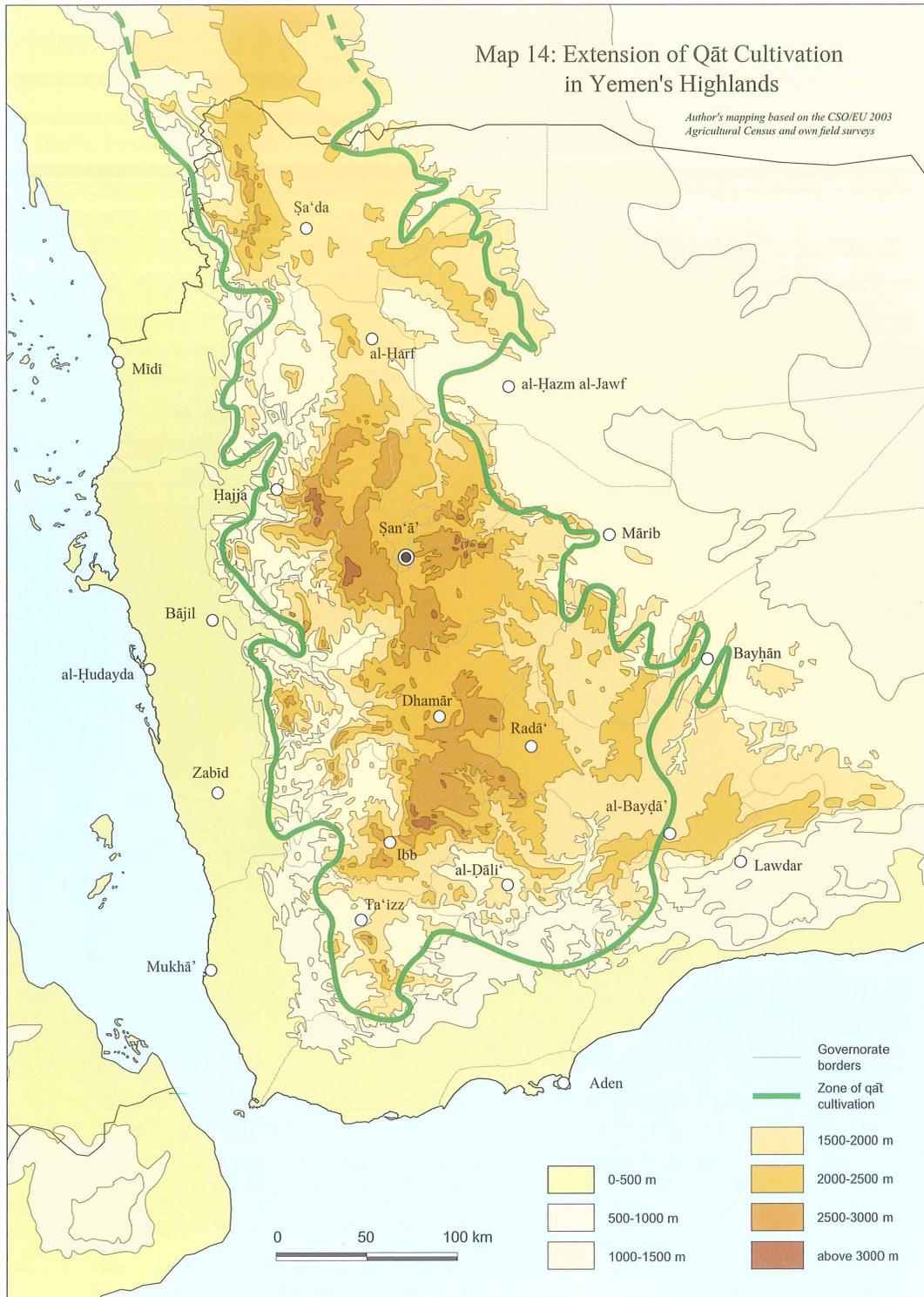
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X. ANNEX

ANNEX A – COLOR PLATES  
(Maps & Photographs)

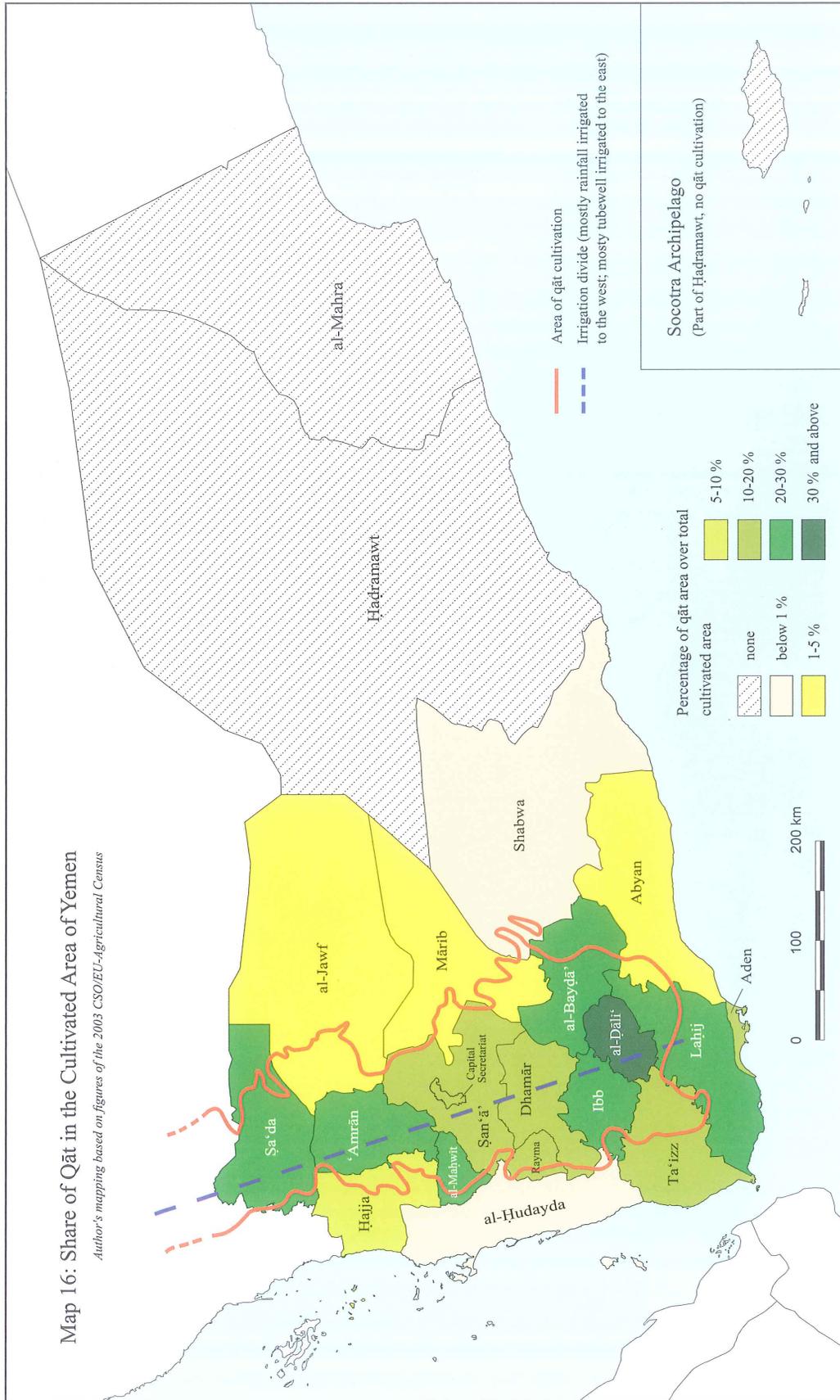




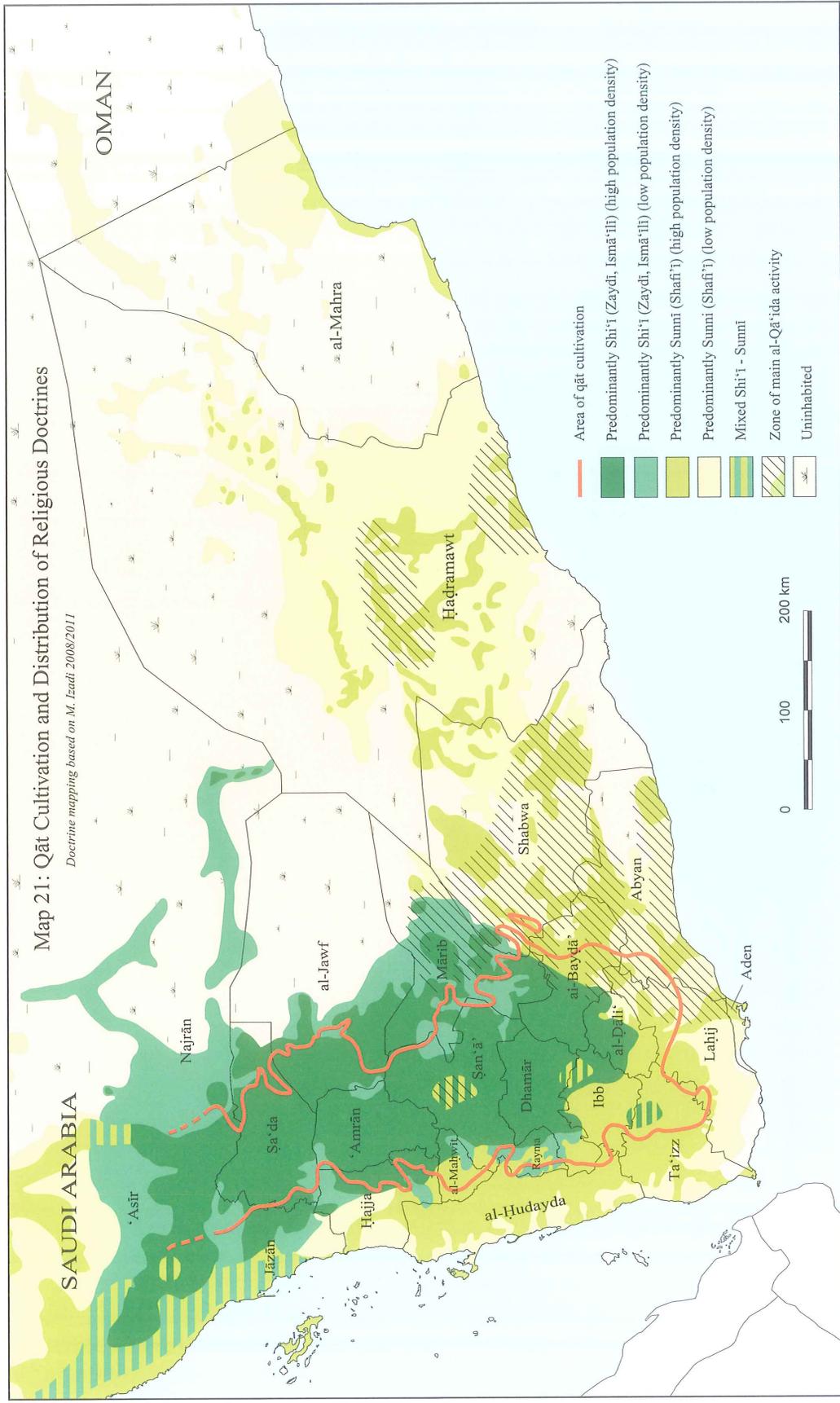
Overleaf, picture 365: View from the cliffs of al-Maḥwit towards the north onto a ridge of *qāt* producing villages. Wādī Qadaḥa is to the left.

Map 16: Share of Qāt in the Cultivated Area of Yemen

Author's mapping based on figures of the 2003 CSO/EU-Agricultural Census



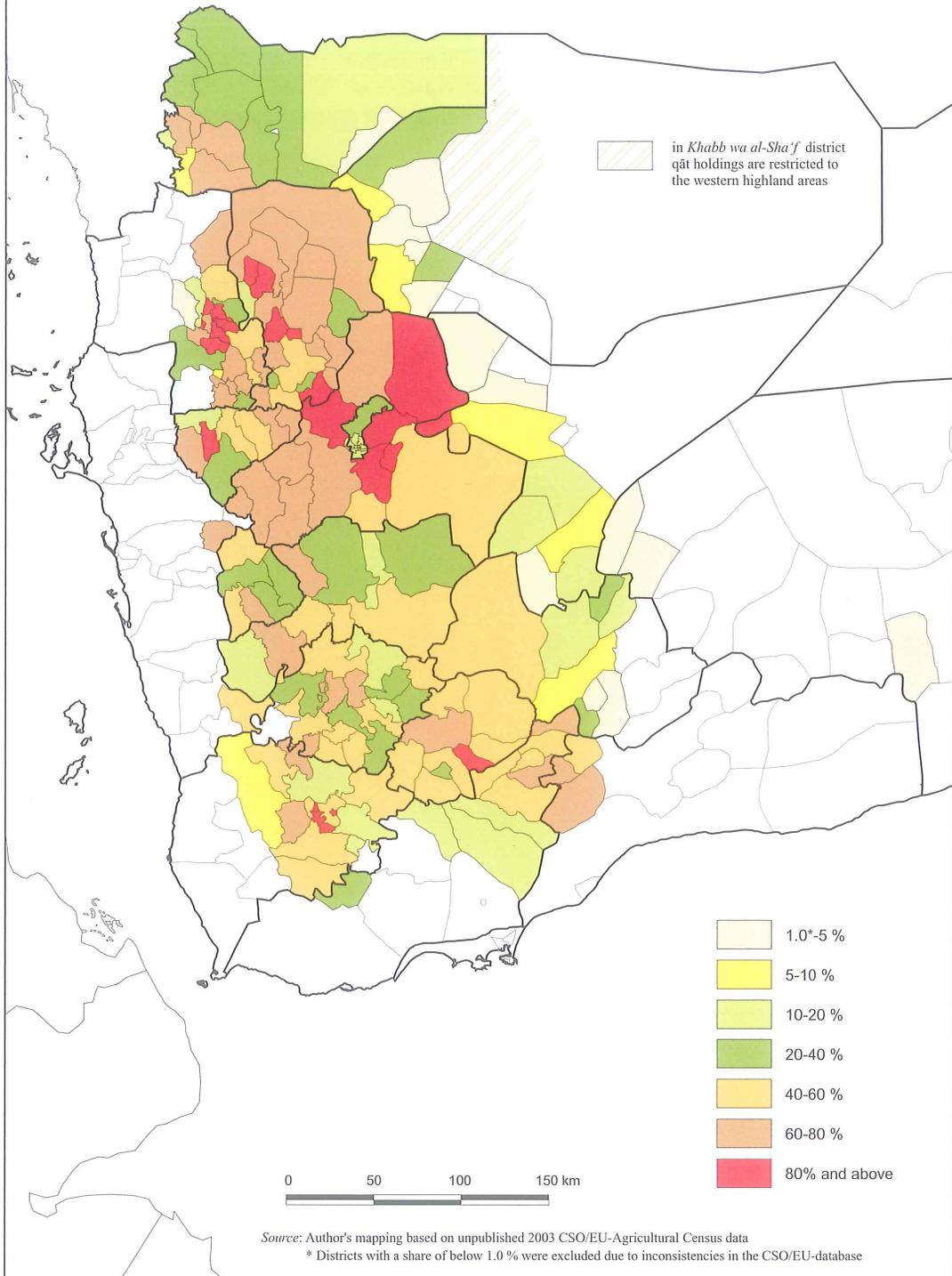








Map 24: Landholders Cultivating Qāt in Yemen  
 In percent of the total number of landholders per district \*

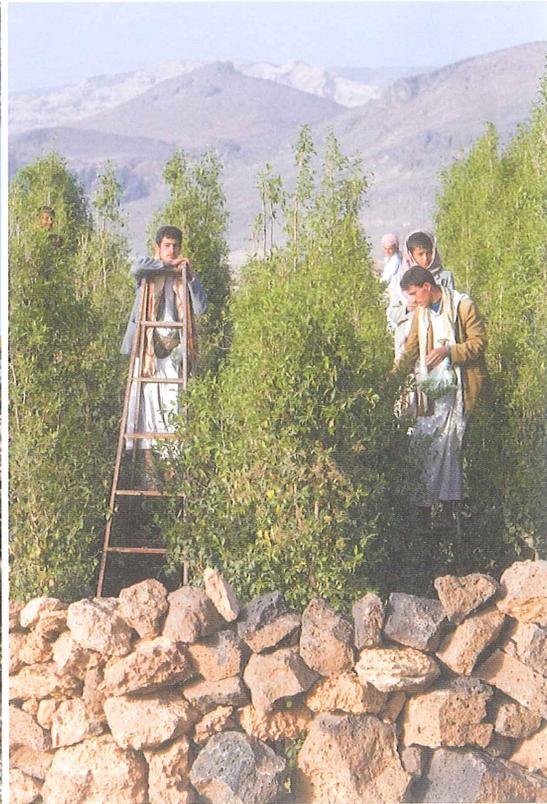
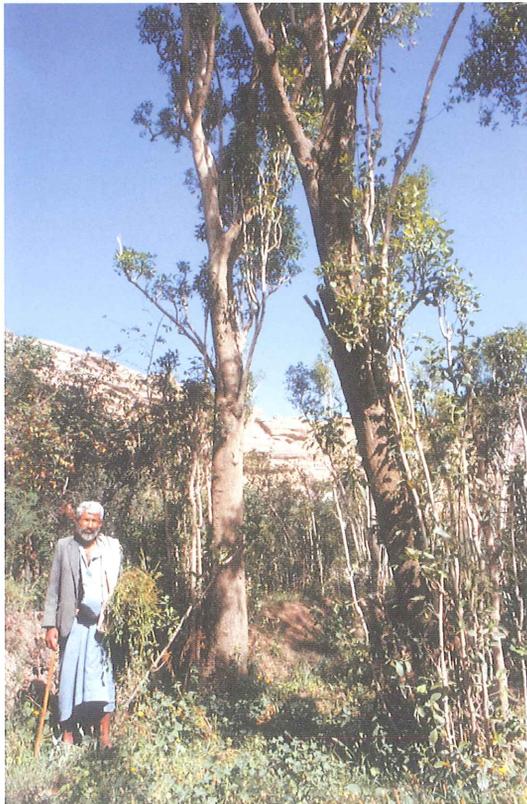




Pictures 368 - 370: Top: View towards the south from Naqīl Yasliḥ (between Ṣan‘ā’ and Ma‘bar). A black & white picture taken by Hugh Scott in 1937/38 shows that in the past only cereals were farmed here.<sup>1</sup> The color picture – taken at the same location in 2008 – shows the rapid spread of *qāt* cultivation in this area due to the proliferation of tubewell technology. Bottom: *Qāt* terrace fields on the northern side of Jabl Ṣabr in Ta‘izz, where according to Yemeni tradition *qāt* was first grown after having been introduced from Ethiopia in the late 13<sup>th</sup> or early 14<sup>th</sup> century.



Pictures 371 - 375: Top: Harvest of rainfed *qāt* in the village of 'Aybih in Yemen's western escarpment (east of Kuḥlān in Ḥajja governorate). Bottom from left to right: *Qāt* flowers, fruits, and fresh shoots.



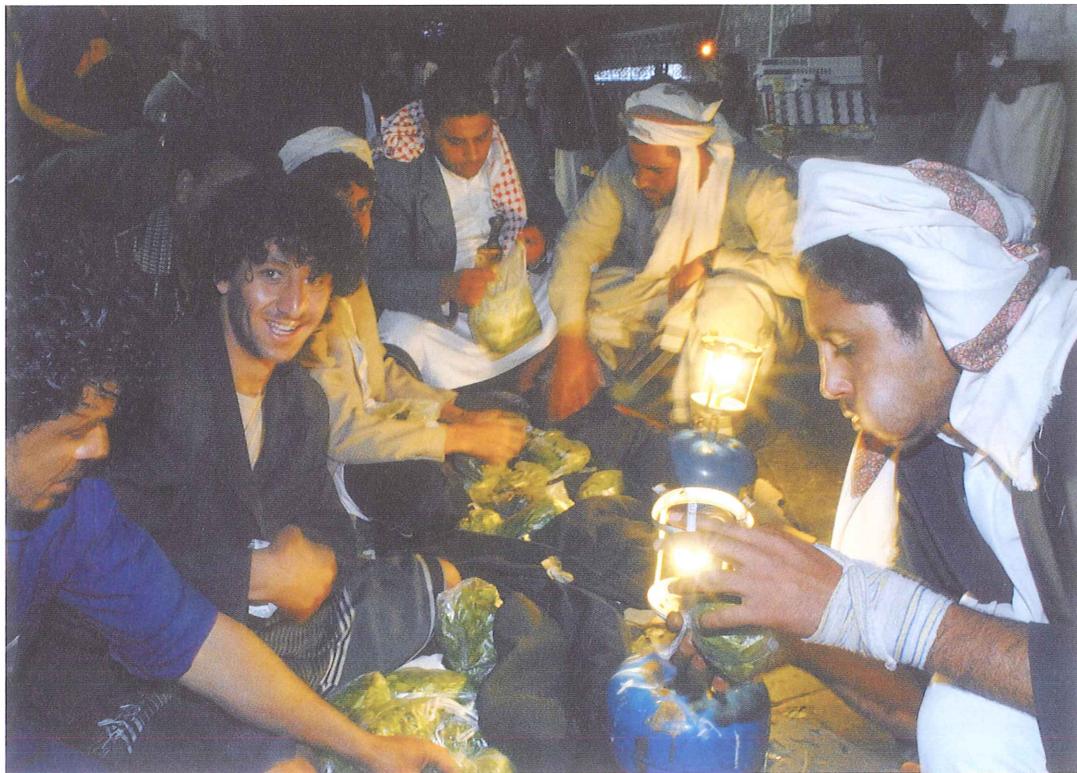
Pictures 376 - 378: Top: Rainfed *qāt* in the village of al-Muḍmār in the Ḥarāz mountains (western escarpment between al-Hajara and Manākha, 2,300 meters above sea level). Bottom left: *Qāt* trees of over hundred years of age in Wādī Ḍahr. Right: *Qāt* harvest in Hamdān, Ṣan‘ā’ basin.



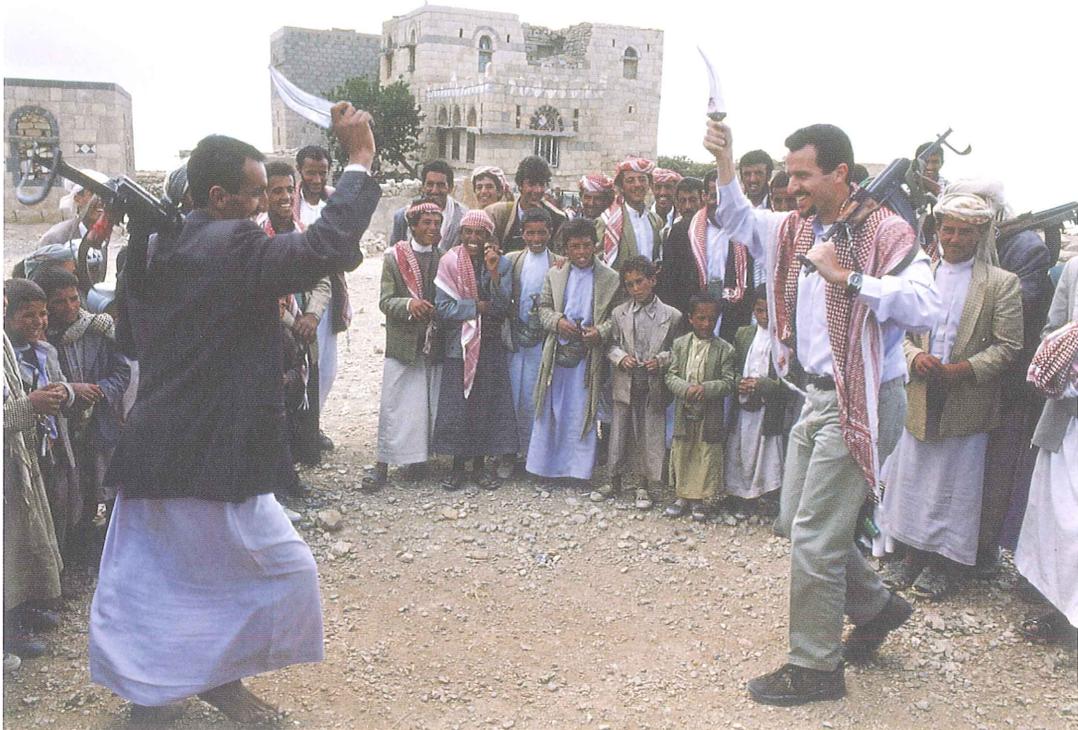
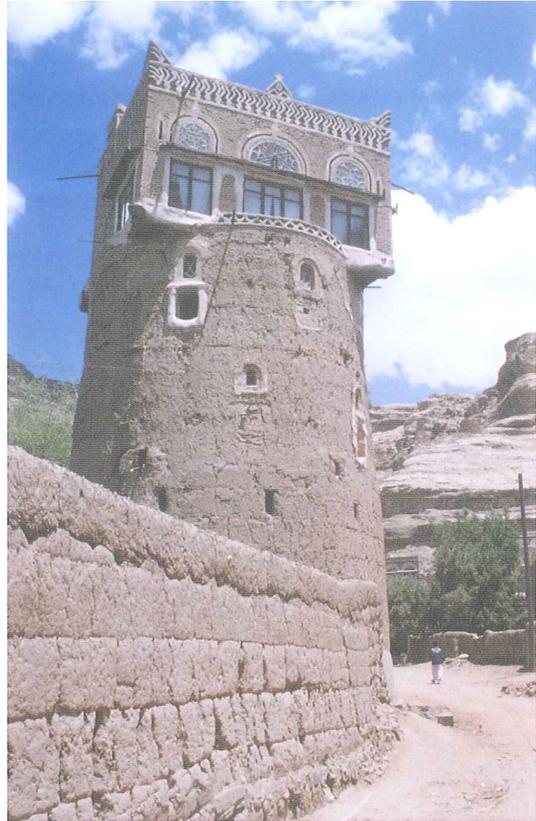
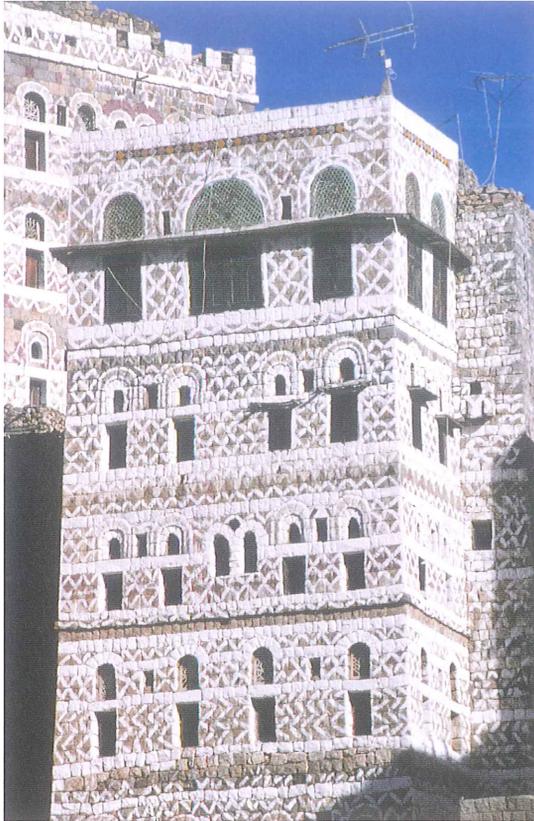
Pictures 386 & 387: While farmers pump enormous quantities of fresh groundwater from tubewells to irrigate their *qāt* plantations, in many villages the population has no access to safe drinking water and is forced to use surface water from cisterns. Top: *Qāt* plantations in Wādī Jubārah in the Murays region of al-Ḍālī' governorate. Bottom: a cistern in Kawkabān (western Ṣan'a' governorate).



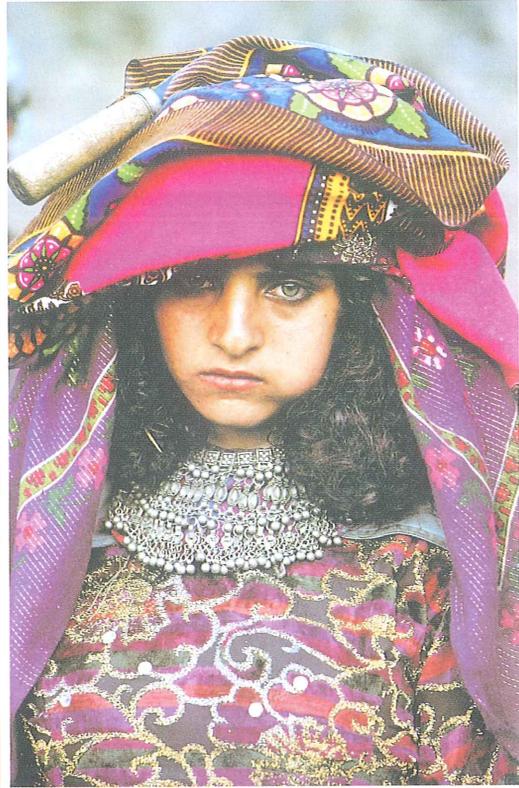
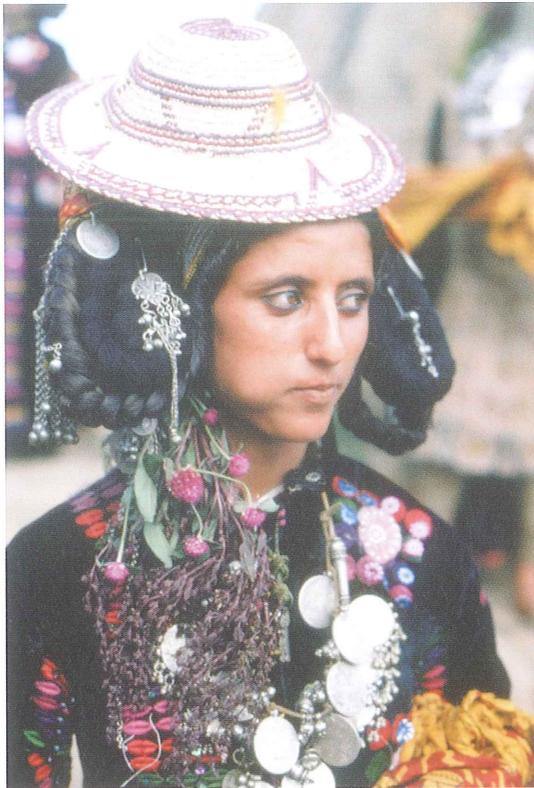
Pictures 392 & 393: In some areas of Yemen *qāt* is sold in wholesale auction markets as the *Sūq al-Jumruk* of al-Dāli', main market for *qāt* expedited to southern Yemen. Top: At night the *qāt* is auctioned off. The auctioneers stand on elevated benches above the crowd of buyers. Bottom: In the early morning hours the *qāt* bunches are packed in the *Sūq al-Jumruk* into large bales by packing crews and are then shipped off to Aden where they arrive just before noon.



Pictures 394 & 395: Top: Nicely wrapped *baladī qāt* bunches from Khawlān in a shop in the Sūq Khawlān of southern Ṣan‘ā’ (these large bundles are also called *malaf*). Bottom: Since the start of satellite TV services in Yemen in the late 1990s, many *qāt* users have started chewing until the early morning hours. *Qāt* markets have adjusted their opening hours accordingly. Here sellers at the Bāb al-Sabāḥ of Ṣan‘ā’.



Pictures 402 - 404: Top: Yemen's architecture has been shaped by the chewing habit. The top room of most houses hosts the *mafraj* where in the afternoons the chewers gather and enjoy the view over the countryside through tall windows. Top left: A traditional stone house in the village of al-Hajara in the Ḥarāz. Top right: An ancient clay tower house in Wādi Ṣāḥr. A square *mafraj* has been added to it in later times. Bottom: The *barra'*, the traditional *jambiyya* dance that precedes *qāt* chewing at this wedding ceremony in the mountain village of al-Zāfin near Kuḥlān.



Pictures 405 - 408: Faces of Yemen in the afternoon. *Qāt* chewing is universal and practiced by women and men, Muslims and Jews alike. Top: Women of the Jabl Miḥḥān and of al-‘Utma in traditional dress. Bottom left: A *qāt* seller in Ṣan‘ā’. Right: Yūsuf Sulaymān Ḥabīb, Ṣa‘da’s last Jewish silver smith (here in 1999).<sup>1</sup>



Pictures 409 & 410: Top: According to Yemeni tradition it was the Şūfī mystics who first used *qāt* as it enhanced their spiritual experience. Chewing helps this pious man in Wādī Zabīd to concentrate on his *Qu'rān* reading. Bottom: *Qāt* chewing in a traditional setting in the old city of Şan'a'. Smoking the hubble-bubble is said to augment the pleasure of chewing.



Pictures 417 & 418: Top: An army outpost in tribal country. The base overlooks Wādī Bājān with its intensive *qāt* farming (southwestern ‘Amrān). With the decline of oil revenue and the government’s decreasing ability to buy loyalty through patronage, the tribes’ *qāt* earnings will permit them to become ever more independent from the state and put the central government on the defensive. Bottom: Shop in the weapons market of Jihāna in southeastern Ṣan‘ā’ governorate. Guns, grenades, rocket launchers and landmines are freely available at decent prices here.



Pictures 419 & 420: Top: In many areas of Yemen guard towers protect *qāt* fields, as theft of the expensive leaves is a frequent danger. The weapons stockpiles in the possession of *qāt* farmers are impressive. Some are even said to protect their fields with landmines. Bottom: Even Yemen's elite troops, the Special Guards, who are commanded by Aḥmad 'Alī Ṣāliḥ, son of the former President, are hooked on *qāt*. Here on patrol in Mārib governorate (the *qāt* bag dangling into the picture from above is attached to the trigger of the heavy machine gun).

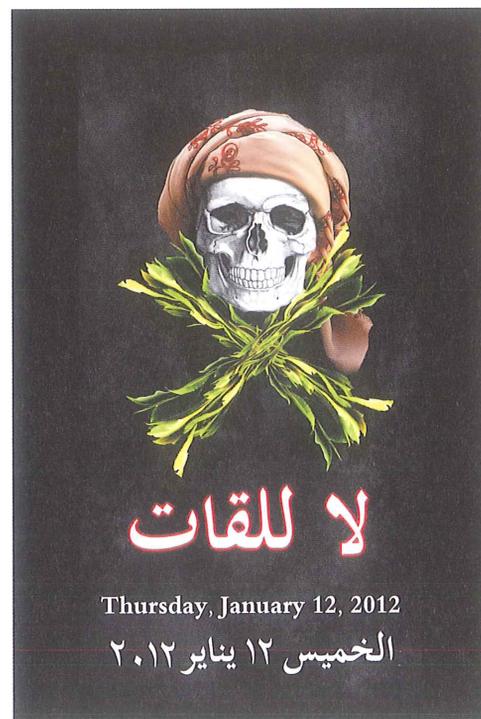


Pictures 423 & 424: Top: Uprooting *qāt* trees in the Buhra village of al-A‘māl in the Ḥarāz following a religious *fatwā* of the supreme leader of this Ismā‘īlī sect (here in 2008 with a view down into Wādī Ḥaḍarayn). Bottom: Founding ceremony of the “*Friends Without Qāt*” association in the stadium of Ibb after a football match between Governor ‘Abd al-Qādir Hilāl, his cabinet, and young local football players (June 9, 1999).





Pictures 440 & 441: Top: A Yemeni tribal delegate chews *qāt* while attending the final session of the general conference of Yemen's Islamist *Iṣlāḥ* party in Ṣan'ā' on March 12, 2009. Chewing *qāt* is considered appropriate even at events of such a formal character. Bottom: Muster of new recruits during the Ṣa'da insurgency (June 2008). The government distributed free *qāt* to strengthen the fighting spirit of its troops and to reduce desertion among the army ranks. Note the two child soldiers in the picture.



Pictures 447 - 449: Top: Facebook page of the campaign “A Day Without Qāt” that was staged during Yemen’s “Youth Revolution” (January 12, 2012). Bottom: Posters of the campaign contributed by the Yemeni Diaspora (see chapter VIII. L for more details on the posters and their authors).