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Peer Gatter

## The Ismailis' « War » against Qat in Harâz

### Between Community Mobilization and Politico-Economical Constraints

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Peer Gatter

## The Ismailis' « War » against Qat in Harâz

Between Community Mobilization and Politico-Economical Constraints

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*Uprooting qat trees from the fields of farmers is easy, but asking them to stop chewing and uproot qat from their hearts and minds is nearly impossible.*

*H. E Salmân Rashîd, Spiritual Leader of the Bohra in Yemen, 13. June 2005*

- 1 While being considered a narcotic drug in most Arab and European countries (e.g. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Sudan, France and Germany), there is no legislation controlling the cultivation and sale of qat leaves (*Catha edulis*) in Yemen. 72% of Yemeni men and 33% of women above the age of 12 consume the stimulant. 42% of male consumers chew the bitter leaves five to seven days per week and display compulsive habits.<sup>1</sup> The plant is intensively grown in Yemen's western highlands and the 'Asîr mountains of Saudi Arabia. Across the Red Sea it is found in many of Eastern Africa's highlands, ranging from the southern Sudan to Madagascar and the Transvaal.
- 2 The hardy tree that is famed by farmers for its drought resistance, is grown on 12 % of Yemen's agricultural area and its cultivation covered 121,000 hectares in 2003<sup>2</sup>, though some Yemeni researchers believe the actual figure may be double as high.<sup>3</sup> Qat accounts for 10% of the country's GDP, for a third of agricultural GDP, and for 10.5% of household expenditures.<sup>4</sup> In poor families qat related spending even reaches 28% of the family budget.<sup>5</sup> The qat sector provides employment for one in every seven working Yemenis. In the capital Sanaa alone some 13,000 persons are involved in the sale of qat<sup>6</sup>. As the predominant cash crop, the income qat generates plays a vital role in rural economies and prevents people in many of Yemen's highland areas from drifting into the cities in order to seek work. But qat also depletes scarce water resources, contributes to soil degradation, and has crowded out production of essential food crops and agricultural exports. Qat consumption and qat-related expenditure also contributes to poverty, malnutrition and the disintegration of families. For its producers and consumers alike, qat is seen as one of the main health hazards in Yemen, mainly due to the unregulated use of pesticides. Given the economic importance of qat, it is not surprising that taxes stemming from the production and sale of the plant are substantial and constitute the main local revenue source of governorate and district administrations. Qat sales tax in 2005 amounted to 2 billion Yemeni Riyals (US \$ 11 million).<sup>7</sup>
- 3 Over the past decades the Yemeni Government has been for the most part passive concerning qat. The few exceptions did not bear fruit due to the massive resistance met from qat cultivators and consumers. An anti-qat initiative launched by Prime Minister Mu/hsin al-'Aynî in 1972 led to his downfall a few months later<sup>8</sup> and a 1999 campaign by President 'Alî 'Abd Allâh / Sâli/h who claimed to stop chewing in order to learn English and computer-use instead, soon died down. A law passed in 2002 proscribing the chewing in government facilities is largely ignored and some government building as Sanaa's Central Statistical Organization even have a *mafraj*, a room consecrated to the sole purpose of chewing. Many ministerial afternoon work sessions are thus held within a qat setting.
- 4 Despite qat being the only agricultural crop for which a consumption or sales tax is due in order to discourage cultivation, the government has unintentionally promoted the spread of qat with customs exemptions for well-drilling equipment and water pumps, as well as a diesel subsidy that makes irrigation of qat a profitable venture even in arid zones such as Nihm and Khawlân on the eastern plateau.

5 Shortly after President 'Alî 'Abd Allâh /Sâli/h had publicly renounced chewing, even more sensational and distressing news circulated in Yemen's press in 1999 and were widely discussed in Sanaa qat sessions. « *Haraz people start a revolution against qat and Farmers uproot qat trees to plant coffee instead* » **read the headlines.**<sup>9</sup> But even the press did not seem to know the motives behind these strange events. On October 30, 1999 *al-Thawra* reported:

« A number of /Harâz qat farmers in Manâkha uprooted approximately 50,000 qat plants. Apparently, these farmers intend to stop growing the bitter tasting leaf on their farmland. They claimed that they will plant olives, coffee and other useful products instead. With utter conviction they stated that they will never go back to growing qat as this only leads to destruction of health and finances. More and more farmers are following their example. »

6 Many chewers were concerned that this could not only have an effect on qat supplies but also on prices. Most educated Yemenis however just raised an eyebrow or shook their heads in disbelief about so much foolishness. Did these /Harâzî farmers not throw away their livelihoods and would inevitably drift into bitter poverty ? It seemed unlikely that many qat farmers would follow this « irresponsible example » and try making a living from olives or coffee.

7 Visiting the /Harâz in early November 1999 with colleagues from the Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation and the Ministry of Planning and Development<sup>10</sup> in order to investigate the matter, we soon learned that it was members of the Shiite Bohra community who were uprooting their qat trees on the eastern escarpment of the /Harâz range. In several of the villages visited<sup>11</sup>, deep craters were found in the terrace fields, left behind from digging up qat trees with their roots. The initiative, we were told, was triggered by a religious ruling issued by the spiritual leader of this Ismailiscommunity.<sup>12</sup>

## The Ismâ'ili community in Yemen

8 The Ismailis have been living in the Harâz since 883 A.D., when the 'Adenî cotton merchant Ibn /Hawshab established himself in Jabal Maswar, west of Sanaa and from there spanned a network of religious propaganda across Yemen. In 1038, the Ismailis *Dâ'î* and *qâdî* of the Jabal /Harâz, 'Alî ibn Mu/hammad al-/Sulay/hî founded the dynasty of the Sulayhids that ruled over Yemen and parts of Oman for a century and that in 1068 founded a first Ismailis satellite community in India.<sup>13</sup> The last and most notable of the Sulayhi rulers was al-Sayyida bint A/hmad (better known as queen Arwâ, 1067-1138), who shifted her capital from Sanaa to Dhi Jibla and who, with a clever move, rid Yemen of Fatimid suzerainty.<sup>14</sup> With this the /Tayyibiyya was born, a splinter group of the mainstream Fatimiyya, which was to flourish in Yemen, the Najrân and India.<sup>15</sup>

9 During Imam /Tayyib's seclusion the leadership of the Yemeni /Tayyibiyya passed into the hands of a *Dâ'î al-Mu/tlaq*, a supreme *Dâ'î* and the centre of the community soon became the /Harâz.<sup>16</sup> Its population had been converted by /Hâtim ibn Ibrâhîm al-/Hâmidî, the third *Dâ'î al-Mu/tlaq* (died 1199), whose grave is found in the /Harâzî village of al-/Hu/tayb and has become a destination for tens of thousand of Bohra pilgrims each year.

10 The political and religious interests of the Yemeni Ismâ'iliyya conflicted with those of the Zaydî Imams who were expanding their sphere of influence from /Sa'da in the north over all of the Yemeni highlands. The base of power of the *Dâ'î* was soon reduced to the impregnable mountain villages of the /Harâz and continued Zaydî eradication campaigns led to a shift of the center of the *da'wa* to India in 1539.

11 Since a schism occurring in 1591 after the death of the 25<sup>th</sup> *Dâ'î al-Mu/tlaq* the Ismailis of the Harâz have been split into two groups, the Sulaymânîs and Dâwûdîs. While the first number today some 120,000 persons, mostly living in Yemen and the Saudi Najrân, the latter number some 18 million, most of whom live in India, Pakistan, Kenya, and Tanzania. The Dâwûdî

are generally referred to as Bohra, derived from the Gujarati word *vohorvû*, meaning trading, since traditionally many of them have been traders.<sup>17</sup>

- 12 In Yemen, the Bohra community is today quite small and numbers only around 12,000 persons. Some 3,000 of them (589 families) live in the eastern /Harâz scattered over 52 villages. The bigger ones among these settlements are home to up to 60 families (e.g. al-Manqadha, Jerma, al-'Ubarât or Saw/t), whereas in some of the smallest ones only one or two families have resisted the drift to the cities and emigration to India or East Africa (e.g. al-Qishba, al-Thajra or al-Ashyab). Other Bohra communities in Yemen include Sanaa with some 6,000 persons, and smaller congregations in Ibb, Ta'izz, al-Hodeïda and Aden.<sup>18</sup> By mainstream Shiites and Sunnite Yemenis alike, the Bohra are today viewed with caution and suspicion. Development efforts in the /Harâz financed with community funds from India are jealously followed and many false rumors regarding Bohra dogma are circulating<sup>19</sup>.



Qat uprooting Campaign of the Bohra Community in the /Harâz mountains

## The Bohra and the qat

- 13 The Bohra of the /Harâz have been growing qat for centuries, although on a comparatively small scale and mostly for subsistence purposes. Chewing levels were in the past fairly low. Over the last four decades however qat was increasingly grown for the ever-expanding domestic market, and by the 1980s the crop had become the principal source of revenue for a majority of Bohra farmers. According to estimates of the Office of the Representative of the *Dâ'î al-Mu'tlaq* in Yemen, by 1999 as many as 95% of the /Harâzî Bohra were involved in qat farming.
- 14 When on pilgrimage in Yemen in September 1999, the spiritual leader of the community, **the 52nd Dâ'î al-Mu'tlaq and Sul'tân al-Bohra**, Dr. Burhân al-Dîn saw that it was time to act and issued several *fatwâ* proscribing qat.<sup>20</sup> He publicly called for the uprooting of all qat trees on Bohra lands, launching a programme for qat substitution, and expressing his readiness to provide financial aid to farmers growing coffee and fruits instead (US \$90,000 were initially earmarked for combating the « *evil tree* »<sup>21</sup>). During his journey, Dr. Burhân al-Dîn personally assisted in the uprooting of the first 30 qat plants.
- 15 The venerable *Dâ'î*, born 1915 in Surat, India, had warned his followers of the « *Evils of Qat* » since he first visited Yemen in 1961. He had brought the issue to the attention of Yemeni

religious and political leaders from Imâm A/hmad to President /Sâle/h and had urged them to declare the plant */harâm*. But the answer all had given him, was that such a move would mean riots or even revolution.<sup>22</sup> After succeeding his father on the throne in 1965, Burhân al-Dîn issued annual *fatwâs* against the cultivation, sale, and consumption of the drug in his letters to the Yemeni Bohra community. In *The Sources of venerable Blessings*, the message for the year 1423 *hijra* (2002/03) **he writes:**

16 « *All of you, men and women, boys and girls... know that unless you distance yourselves from dreadful prohibited acts, you will neither obtain help and deserve happiness in this life, nor in the next. Hence, avoid the chewing, cultivation, sale and purchase of qat, and seek earnings in what God - praise be to Him - has permitted.* »<sup>23</sup>

17 In *The Essence of the Distinguished Record*, the Sul/tân's message for the following year, we read:

« ...be useful to your homeland by means of your agriculture, commerce and crafts. You should also bear in mind that God – praise be to Him - has permitted what is useful for you and what is good for your two lives... God has permitted those things that He will help you to obtain, and He has prohibited [other] things that He has enabled you to do without. Accomplish thus upright deeds for the benefit of your two lives, and for the benefit of yourself, your kin and country. Avoid what God has prohibited, especially usury, tobacco and qat. »<sup>24</sup>

18 Salmân Rashîd, Representative of the Bohra in Yemen, recalls that Yemeni politicians warned the *Dâ'î* of this venture in 1999, « *not even at gunpoint you will manage to have farmers uproot their qat* ». « *But we succeeded* », Rashîd says « with love, love for God and our people. »<sup>25</sup> In September of that year 30,000 trees were uprooted and by late October the number had risen to 50,000.<sup>26</sup>

19 To cope with the immense task of eradicating qat in the /Harâz, the *Dâ'î* appointed Rashîd in 1999 as spiritual leader of the Yemeni community. The Indian-born metallurgy-engineer had lived for over 30 years in the US where he had run a hardware business before being appointed leader of the Chicago and Detroit Bohra communities.

20 With the assistance of a project manager, the charismatic Indian merchant Najm al-Dîn ibn Sayf al-Dîn and a number of other Indian volunteers, Rashîd developed a multi-faceted programme for substituting the cultivation and consumption of qat in order to « provide alternatives for the welfare of farmers ». This included the introduction of new crops, alternative income generation activities such as animal husbandry, bee-keeping, handicraft workshops for women, a credit scheme, as well as an educational program for the young. In 2006 the project employed 25 people in al-/Hu/tayb and surrounding villages.

21 At the outset of the uprooting programme, the number of qat trees grown by Bohra farmers was estimated at 1.2 million (statistically 100 trees per community member). Over half of these trees were owned by some 800 Bohra families originating from the /Harâz, but living today in Sanaa. Another 250,000 qat trees were grown mostly on small properties, owned by some 555 /Harâzî Bohra families, and the remaining 280,000 plants belonged to four influential clans of al-Ma/halla Banî A/hlas village (4 km southeast of al-Hu/tayb).<sup>27</sup> They had become rich during the severe drought of the early 1940s, by the sale of cereals to the starving, who had nothing else to offer as payment than their ancestral lands.<sup>28</sup>

22 It was especially the poorer community members that were willing to follow the *fatwâ* of the *Dâ'î*, « *out of love and deep respect* », as **Nâ'air /Husayn (born 1939), a farmer of Akama al-Kurûf** put it.<sup>29</sup> The rich, especially the four big landowning families of Banî A/hlas resisted. Also some Ismailis villages of the Sulaymânî doctrine followed the Bohra example (notably /Salûl and Banî Zâ'id), where about 4,000 trees have been uprooted (see picture 1). Farmers participating in the campaign in 1999 for the most part uprooted only a fraction of their trees, planning to cut down the remaining ones, once the newly planted coffee and cereals started to bring profit. Remittances sent by family members from Sanaa were also hoped to help survive

during the initial years of hardship resulting from this shift in cultivation. In many cases the Bohra community paid for the uprooting of qat trees. Cost varied considerably from YR 50 to 1,000 depending on the size and age of a tree.<sup>30</sup> Merely cutting the trees was not sufficient, since the hardy plants would have grown back even stronger from the roots. Farmers were not paid premiums for giving up qat cultivation, as was soon reported in the press.<sup>31</sup> Before long rumors spread that farmers had received up to US \$ 5,000 for each tree they uprooted. To many Yemenis it was simply too incredible to believe that a farmer would uproot a qat tree without force or financial incentives.

23 « *The value of one single qat tree is 50,000-60,000 Riyâl [in 1999 \$ 310-375]* », says Salmân Rashîd, « how could we ever pay farmers to uproot their trees. We could not and should not have rewarded them, for it is God alone who will reward and provide for them, as we live by the maxim - If you help God, He will help you and make firm your feet » [Qur'ân 47:7].<sup>32</sup> The crop substitution program launched in 1999 however provided a number of other incentives that would benefit farmers who obeyed the *fatwâ* and followed the Bohra model outlined by Rashîd « *you prove your love for God and the Dâ'î by uprooting qat and thereby help yourself, then we may help you, too* ». <sup>33</sup> Until October 2006 the campaign uprooted approximately 210,000 qat trees, or 17.5% of Bohra holdings. Up to 80,000 trees have been uprooted by farmers themselves without community aid, mainly in the enthusiasm of the first months. The remaining trees were uprooted with labor paid for by the community and meticulous statistics were kept on each tree. To assist in this « *war against the Devil* », Bohra youth groups from Sanaa (up to 100 boys) have been shipped by bus to the /Harâz – « our Qat Army », as Salmân Rashîd smilingly calls them.

24 Assessing ownership rights of the lands on which qat was to be uprooted did not prove easy, since a majority of fields were the property of extended families or absentee landlords. In order to eliminate qat plants, all shareholders had to agree to the uprooting. As a consequence, the Bohra leadership developed a declaration of consent that had to be signed besides the landowner(s) also by four community members bearing witness of the ownership rights:

« ... I hereby abide by his high command [that of the Dâ'î] in uprooting all the qat trees [growing] on my plantations and lands. It is [thus] incumbent upon me to uproot the qat myself and moreover, permit, enable and authorize those charged with this splendid service to uproot it from my plantation and land. I intend and am determined to not at all grow qat on my land, and will not permit anyone to plant it on my lands, this all being by my consent and not through compulsion or coercion from anyone. Instead of qat, I will plant fruit trees. ... ».

25 Looking into qat supply and prices in Manâkha and al-Maghraba markets in 1999, it was found that prices were indeed much higher than usual and supply was short, but none of the 20 merchants questioned attributed this to the « *war waged by the Bohra against Qat* ». <sup>34</sup> The unanimous reason given for high prices was the unusually cold November weather that affected qat production at the time.

## Substitution Projects

26 After the launch of the anti-qat initiative, several thousand coffee seedlings have been purchased from Yemeni coffee growers and provided at a favorable price to Bohra farmers who had pledged to uproot their qat. Since this soon proved very costly and demand before long exceeded domestic supply, in early 2000 a coffee nursery was established in Qâ' al-Hajjar (2,150 m a.s.l.) at a cost of YR 7 million (\$ 43,000) (see picture 2). <sup>35</sup> In 2000/2001, 15,000 coffee seedlings of the *Jâdî* variety - considered highest quality and most drought resistant - were produced and sold to Bohra and Sulaymânî farmers at cost (YR 40 as compared to a market price of YR 150/piece). <sup>36</sup> In the following years output was increased to 20,000 seedlings/year, but the severe drought that plagued the /Harâz since 1999 led to a continuous decline in demand (from 12,000 plants in 2002 to only 7,000 in 2004). The operational cost of

the nursery (YR 700,000/year, \$ 3,700 in 2005) could so far not be recovered by the sales of seedlings. It is anticipated however that by the marketing of organic coffee, especially among Bohra pilgrims from abroad, the running cost may be met in the future. Due to stagnating demand for coffee seedlings, the nursery expanded its activities in spring 2005 towards greenhouse farming, promoting drip irrigation. Three locally manufactured greenhouses were set up for the experimental cultivation of cucumbers, tomatoes, sweet peppers and zucchini.<sup>37</sup> Farmers it was hoped would adopt this water-use efficient technique, which however only generate profits after 3-4 years due to the high start up cost of YR 200,000 (ca. \$ 1,050 in 2005).

- 27 In a second nursery in al-/Hu/tayb almond trees have been propagated and transplanted successfully. Also six varieties of olives were grown, but cultivation experiments in seven locations of /Harâz, Dhamâr and Ibb failed (in elevations of 1,800-2,400 m). Mango seedlings purchased in Zabîd were planted with success on the southeastern flank of the /Harâz in Wâdî Manqadha (1,300-1,500 m) but it will take 4-7 years before they bear fruit.



The coffee nursery at Qâ' al-Hajjar (2,150 m a.s.l.).

## Animal Husbandry Scheme

- 28 In 2001 a nursery for raising livestock was established on the slopes above the village of al-/Hu/tayb at a cost of YR 12 million (\$ 73,000) employing two full time staff (see picture 3). Activities were limited to breeding sheep and goats, since rearing bovines proved too difficult due to fodder shortages in the drought years of 1999-2004. Some 500 animals have been raised here until 2006. Young animals were given to farmers at subsidized rates of YR 2,000 per head (half their market value) and could be bought on credit and paid back once the grown up animals had been sold. Profits of participating shepherds were considerable since within one year a male animal sells for YR 12,000 (during Rama/dân and *'îd al-a/d/hâ* even for YR 16,000).<sup>38</sup> The Bohra also hope to find markets for their livestock in Saudi Arabia, to where annually millions of animals are imported from Somalia and India. An important component of the project is education in animal hygiene (cleaning and disinfecting stables, recognizing diseases) and Bohra herders are frequently visited by project staff and a veterinary surgeon.



The animal husbandry facility at al-/Hu/tayb

## Honey Bee Project

29 In 2001 a « Bee Distribution Program » was instituted and beehives purchased from apiarists in the /Harâz and the Ti/hama. They also were distributed at subsidized prices to farmers who had uprooted their qat. Due to high demand and cost, as well as increasing difficulties to procure beehives on the market, in spring 2004 an apiculture center was set up in a remote side valley of Wâdî Manqadha, at a cost of YR 9.5 million (at the time about \$ 57,000). It held one hundred bee colonies in mid 2005. Until then some 850 hives had been distributed to Bohra farmers in /Harâz and the Wâdî Manqadha.<sup>39</sup> Bee colonies are sold to farmers at YR 5,000 or half their market value, and can be obtained on a two-year credit basis. A hive can produce 5-10 bottles of honey annually (3.75-7 liters), each of which can be sold for around YR 2,500. The project organizes basic courses in bee-keeping in al-/Hu/tayb, attended until 2005 by 75 farmers, a quarter of whom had been sent on further vocational training on queen-rearing in Ta'izz, organized with GTZ support.

## Water Access Project

30 The slopes of eastern /Harâz are much more arid than the « fog zone » of the western escarpment. Many farmers thus depend on small dams and cisterns (*birka*) for rainwater harvesting. Over the past years nine dams have been built in the villages of Banî Murra, Akama al-Qâ/dî, al-/Zahra and Akama al-Kurûf for farmers who now grow coffee. An additional 13 structures were restored and three reservoirs covered in order to decrease evaporation. These works were donated by the *Sultân al-Bohra*, since construction cost was beyond the means of coffee farmers.<sup>40</sup> Benefiting farmers had to sign agreements that they would not use the water for qat cultivation, which is regularly monitored by project staff.

31 In Wâdî Manqadha with its ten Bohra villages, qat farming was not practiced intensively due to the unsuitable climate, and the leaves were mostly used for home consumption. 7,000 trees were uprooted between al-Hazza and Marâba in return for the construction and repair of wells. Nine wells have been hand dug here, employing local labor, and seven others wells restored

(depths of 25-40m). Another 20 wells are planned in the *wâdî* in support of mango cultivation, and there are hopes to bring back villagers to the region, who drifted to the cities due to the current drought.

32 Several other wells have been drilled in the escarpment zone for village supply and irrigation at high cost and with mixed results.<sup>41</sup> Part of this project is also the free water supply for remote mountain villages by 4 WD tanker trucks, which has had a positive impact on school attendance of girls who previously had to spend up to seven hours per day carrying water. The sewage treatment plant in al-/Hu/tayb is also benefiting farmers since the outflow is used for the irrigation of grazing areas, fruit trees, and decorative trees in the village. The sludge is dried and used as fertilizer for coffee and vegetables.<sup>42</sup>

### Women's Handicraft Project

33 Twice weekly some 50 women attend classes in embroidery, knitting and sewing in al-/Hu/tayb. Most of them come from remote mountain villages walking for several hours - proof of their deep interest in this activity. Sewing machines and raw materials are supplied to the women on a credit basis also for home use. Annually ten women are sent on a six-month training to India and function upon their return as teachers in their native villages. A main product are knitted white-golden skull caps, quite popular among the Indian community and sold to Bohra pilgrims.<sup>43</sup>

### Building and rehabilitation of Mosques

34 By 2005 eleven mosques and shrines had been built or restored employing local labor and a further ten are planned. The communities in return (notably al-Manqadha and al-'Abarât) had pledged to uproot their qat and give up chewing. Imâms with a regular salary were appointed. They have to reside in the villages and serve as teachers, which has positively reflected on literacy rates. The structures that follow Egyptian-style and commemorate the Fatimid origins of the community are rather costly (\$ 200,000 in al-Manqadha). In the small /Harâzî villages their pomp and exotic architecture is quite out of place, and some traditional mosques were destroyed.

### Educational Program

35 In Bohra schools around the country, awareness on qat was instituted in the curriculum and its hazards taught. Part of this exercise was to bring Bohra youths from Sanaa back to the /Harâz in order to participate in the qat uprooting efforts. In early 2005 two youth training centers were set up in al-/Hu/tayb – one for boys and one for girls. They are well equipped with computers, a library and sports facilities. While educational activities for girls are offered twice weekly, there are daily activities for boys who are considered more at risk of taking up Qat chewing. Some 50 youngsters, joined on Saturdays by boys from remoter villages, come each afternoon to watch educational films, discuss, and play ping pong or volleyball. There are plans for setting up body building facilities.

### Interest-free Loans

36 The anti-qat campaign was complemented by a credit scheme for farmers providing proof of entirely or partly abandoning qat cultivation and quitting to chew. Interest-free loans (*qar/dan/hasanan*)<sup>44</sup> were hoped to enable them to reorient towards alternative economic activities without falling into poverty. Between 1999 and mid-2006 over 300 families received loans, representing over half of the /Harâzî Bohra community. Loans have been awarded for a wide variety of ventures. Among them the rehabilitation of land after uprooting and the purchase of coffee seedlings, livestock and beehives (57%), for marriage celebrations and dowry (20%), to buy transport vehicles such as taxis or trucks (11%), to travel abroad for a pilgrimage, studies or medical treatment (6%), or to open shops (4%). Marriage at young age is according

to Salmân Rashîd of utmost importance in the fight against qat, for if *people cannot marry and have sexual relations*, « they will fall into the fangs of qat ». Bohras receiving loans for a marriage have to sign that there will be no chewing during the ceremony. In order to make marriages more affordable the /Harâzî community is also asked to abandon the custom of demanding money for their daughters and to refrain from using qat at weddings, since besides the dowry the drug represents the biggest single expenditure at a wedding. During the past years the Sul/tân al-Bohra has sponsored annual mass marriages in order to cut costs (see picture 4). Credits range from a few thousand riyals for buying bees, to several million for the purchase of transport vehicles. Loans usually run over a period of two years, and then have to be paid back in full. After repayment a new loan can be taken up. Despite 13% of bad credit (40 families), the scheme is seen as a success and as fundamental in driving people away from qat.

37 Overall, the campaign has created a more diversified economy for the Bohra of /Harâz, who used to strongly depend on monocultures.

38 If community members approach Salmân Rashîd for assistance, his first question is « how have you helped yourself to help God ? Have you given up chewing qat and have you uprooted the qat trees from your fields. » If the answer is no, the petitioner is asked to uproot at least part of his trees and stop chewing for a period of six months, « only then come back and we will help you ». « We have to be firm », says the Representative of the Sul/tân, « why should we help a chewer and give him a loan of 100,000 riyâls for medical treatment, when we know that he spends 200,000 riyals per year on qat ?»



A Bohra mass marriage in al-/Hu/tayb sponsored by the Dâ'î al-Mu/tlaq  
(photo courtesy of the Office of the Representative of the Dâ'î al-Mu/tlaq in Sanaa)

## Successes and Failures

- 39 By October 2006, 17.5% of qat trees cultivated on Bohra lands had been uprooted and some YR 60 million (about \$ 350,000) spent in labor costs to accomplish this. 45 families (8% of Bohra qat farmers in /Harâz) have entirely removed their trees and another 463 (83 %) have partially cleared the drug off their fields. Fifty one families (9%) however - among them the wealthiest ones – rejected the *fatwâ* of their Sul/tân and continued to grow qat. Since

1999 about 15% of the /Harâzî Bohra have quit chewing, while 25% of the urban community renounced the use of qat.

- 40 Despite growing qat (generally seen as a money-making machine) most of the /Harâzî Bohra families belong the poorest of their community. Rains are infrequent in eastern /Harâz and modern irrigation facilities do not exist. In most years even qat does not bring much profit and returns often fail to cover labor inputs. Much of the production is used for home consumption or given as incentives to field laborers who are otherwise hard to find. Problems of qat theft are widespread and the costs for guarding it reduce profits. In order to leave a life of meager incomes in drought ridden /Harâz, many Bohra were thus eager to receive interest-free loans. This was even the more attractive, since credits could be obtained for partly uprooting, claiming that this was the start of a gradual process leading over time to complete substitution.
- 41 The uprooting campaign was not an ad hoc event and often repeated. Missionary efforts were required to win farmers over to the cause. In some rural communities the persistence of the anti-qat activists was not welcomed, and project staff was asked to leave from several villages, and never set foot there again. « *You are Indians, what do you know about our lives. For generations we have lived off qat, this is our livelihood* », project manager Najm al-Dîn ibn Sayf al-Dîn was told in Banî A/hlas. « *Thank God, we had no shooting incidents so far* », he says. Half fondly and half mockingly, farmers have changed his name from »Star of Religion« into *Najm al-Maghâris*, meaning « Star of Plantations ». In Jirma where the project faced its fiercest resistance thousands of qat trees still surround the coffee nursery on amphitheatre-like terrace fields (see picture 2). 80,000 qat trees are still growing here and only a little over 18,000 could be uprooted. They are a grim reminder of the resistance and plotting by the local Sheikh 'Abd Allah Jirma, who was killed in a firefight with security forces in Sanaa in 2003. Problems faced in uprooting were also of a legal nature. Trees could only be uprooted when the inheritance rights and ownership of a qat plot had been indubitably established (see above). In some cases tenants of qat farms were ready to shift to other cultures, but the absentee landlords would not consent.
- 42 Uprooting is still ongoing, but has slowed down in recent years for a number of reasons. Among these is the low success rate of people having abandoned qat cultivation. While 29 of the families entirely uprooting qat (64%) had done well in their new lives with a mix of economic alternatives, over a third of farmers (16 families) did not succeed. Some were even unable to repay their loans or refused to pay, since they were persuaded that the project was responsible for their ruin. A number of families survived with the help of relatives and remained in /Harâz, partly going back to qat cultivation. Others were forced to sell their land and left, seeking employment as day laborers in Sanaa. At the root of most of these failures, however, was less a conceptual error of the project, than an event that no one had reckoned with, and that was beyond the control of the Bohra community. From its start, the project had to struggle with the severe drought that plagued eastern /Harâz during the period of 1999 to 2004. Droughts have affected the /Harâz once every generation during the past century. The dry periods of 1903-1909, 1940-1942 and 1968-1973 had not only triggered an Ismailismass exodus to East Africa and India, but were also decisive in the shift from coffee growing to qat cultivation among the remaining farmers. In the Bohra settlement zone on the drier leeward side of /Harâz (300-550 mm of rain/year) the effects of droughts are more pronounced than on the windward western escarpment (500-650 mm), where clouds and fog bring moisture and limit evapotranspiration.<sup>45</sup>
- 43 During 1999 and 2000 most farmers uprooting qat had replaced the plants with coffee. When the rains however failed to appear and springs used for *ghayl* irrigation ran dry, many Bohra became hesitant since the water needs of coffee are known to be well above those of qat. Consequently thousands of ordered coffee seedlings were not picked up as farmers said they would rather wait for the rains to return. By 2004 the nursery had 40,000 coffee plants in

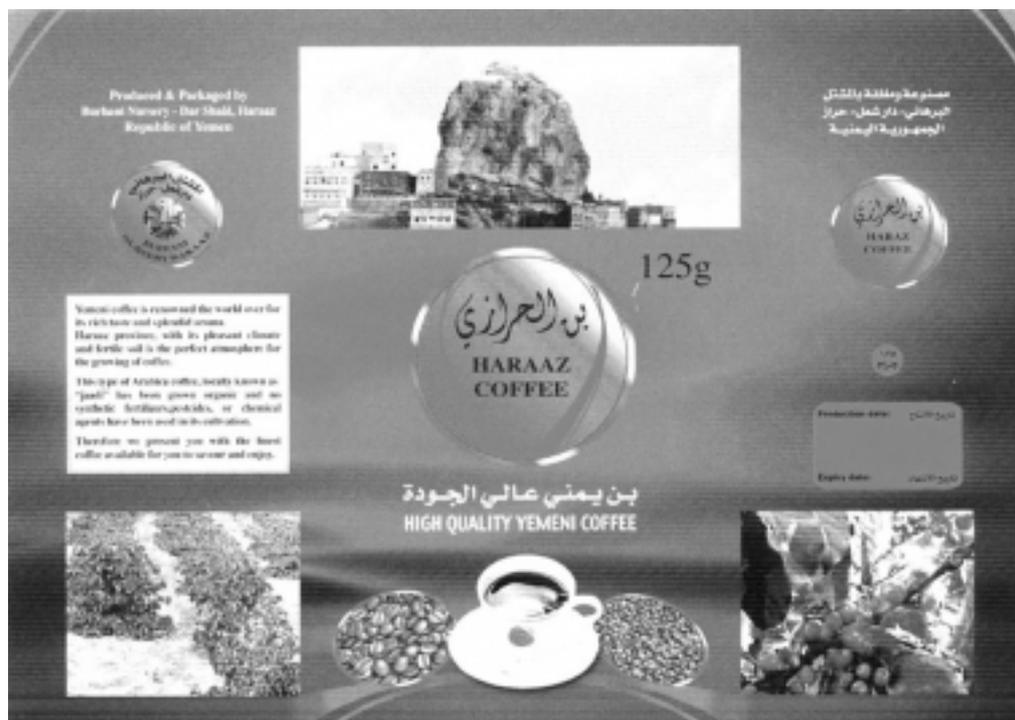
stock and discontinued propagation, since annual demand had dropped to around 7,000. Coffee seedlings were now even sold to farmers from outside of the Ismailiscommunity, and even to those cultivating qat. In spite - or maybe just because of the drought - uprooting continued. Due to the extreme lack of water during 2000-2004 even qat had ceded to generate profits. The hardy plants survived, but produced very few leaves that reached marketable quality. Most farmers were not even able to recover production inputs<sup>46</sup> and according to Najm al-Dîn ibn Sayf al-Dîn even well to do qat farmers owning several thousand qat trees, would have had difficulties to raise YR 10,000 (\$ 55) in cash at the time. It is thus not surprising that cultivators were eager to benefit from credits by partly uprooting their qat and exploring alternative sources of income away from agriculture. At least initially, the anti-qat campaign thus benefited from the caprices of the climate, because the drought had made it easier for farmers to turn their backs on then unprofitable qat.

44 But the longer the drought lasted, the more apparent it became that it affected all project activities and that emergency measures were needed in order not to jeopardize the success of the project. It was not only coffee growers who suffered, but also herders and bee-keepers soon came to realize the health of their animals was deteriorating due to an ever diminishing availability of fodder and nectar. The project initiated a number of rescue operations, such as relocating six herding families from Wâdî Manqadha (where only dry bushes remained) to rented grazing areas in the mountains around al-/Hu/tayb. These were watered during the dry winter months with the outflow of the sewage treatment plant. Also honey output was much lower than expected due to the lack of flowering plants. To prevent the bees succumbing to hunger, during 2001-2004 hundreds of bee colonies had to be carefully transported by truck to leased land in the Tihâma and Ibb Governorate. Clover irrigated with treated sewage water in al-/Hu/tayb helped to boost the availability of food for bees in that area. Despite these challenges the honey project is seen as a success. Before its start an estimated 60 bee colonies existed in the /Harâz, by mid 2005 the number had risen to over a thousand.<sup>47</sup>

45 A side effect of the project was the generation of labor, mainly in the construction sector. Several hundred jobs were created within the community by digging wells, rehabilitating dams, building mosques, educational and project facilities. Also the uprooting of 210,000 qat trees generated some 85,000 men hours of labor.

46 When examining uprooting-statistics it becomes clear that only a fraction of farmers have replaced qat with traditional agricultural activities, such as the cultivation of coffee, fruits or nuts. 210,000 qat trees were replaced with only 60,000 coffee shrubs, 1,500 mango and 200 almond trees. Most farmers have indeed used the credits to diversify their economic activities, and have at least partly turned their backs on agriculture. Some even took the interest-free loans as a welcome opportunity to entirely abandon farming and the /Harâz to open small businesses in the cities, leaving behind a life depending so much on unpredictable rainfall. Not omitting the families and household-heads leaving the /Harâz since they had not succeeded with alternatives to qat (see above), one comes to realize that the project has involuntarily contributed to a rural exodus.

47 By early 2005, the community leadership became aware of this trend and took countermeasures, trying to reverse or at least reduce the drain of human capital from the ancestral Bohra lands, that had already lost so much of their Ismailis population during the droughts of 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was hoped that by improving living conditions in the /Harâz, people could be retained in their villages and be even brought back from Sanaa where many had sought employment with mixed success. Sanitary conditions in many communities were disastrous, with latrines that could not be kept clean. In the villages of al-/Zahra and Banî Murra, especially hit by migration, 28 bathrooms were restored, tiled and equipped with ceramic oriental-style toilets at a cost of YR 50,000 (\$ 275), borne by the Bohra community.



A Bohra organic coffee label

- 48 When the rains came back in 2005, the project hoped that farmers would pick up coffee seedlings they had ordered from the nursery several years before and revert to their decision of planting coffee instead of qat. These hopes were partly shattered, as many farmers after years of drought and hardship had money-making on their mind. 2005 became thus before all, a very good year for qat. With the rains also many qat trees grew back from roots that had been carelessly left in the ground by the « Qat Army » (notably in al-‘Abarât and Jerma). For a number of farmers this was a welcome opportunity for going back to qat farming. Wasn’t this « *Allahs will* » ? Had not *he* made their trees come back ? Project manager Najm al-Dîn ibn Sayf al-Dîn could not hide a sense of resignation when relating an incident in 2005. During a visit to the coffee nursery, he climbed up to Jerma to join the villagers for the Friday prayer. To his surprise he found the mosque deserted. Looking for the village men, he found them in their homes overseeing the packing of qat. »*How can we come to pray, when we have ten packers and ten harvesters in our house* », one replied to Najm al-Dîn’s inquiry, « *we cannot leave our wives and children alone with them* ».
- 49 Hoping that the drought years were now overcome, Najm al-Dîn has not given up hope for the crop substitution scheme. In 2005, he developed plans for establishing an agricultural cooperative for the marketing and export of organic Ismailis coffee and honey. An attractive label for « *Haraaz Coffee* » was designed, « *renowned the world over for its rich taste and splendid aroma... for you to savour and enjoy* » (see picture 5). There were also plans for setting up coffee roasting and grinding facilities in the village of Jerma in order to create jobs and retain more profits in /Harâz.
- 50 The Bohra leadership is conscious that it will take generations to eradicate the habit within their community. For people above age 30 they see little hope to lead them away from qat. « *They are finished* », as Salmân Rashîd harshly puts it, but he believes that through educational programs in their schools, there is real hope that the young will never take up the habit. But even among the older generation a change has become apparent during the last years. The campaign succeeded in stigmatizing qat. When Bohra chewers cross the path of their community leaders, they turn away in shame and try to hide their bulky cheeks. For Salmân

Rashîd the Bohra quest is thus a first triumph over the drug and the right way to go, in sharp contrast to the efforts of other Yemeni anti-qat activists such as the al-‘Affif Cultural Foundation<sup>48</sup>. « *They only talk, have lost their sense of reality and draw satisfaction from publishing leaflets.* » He has witnessed that people who uprooted qat and gave up chewing are the happiest of people, « *their minds are free of qat now, and they can turn towards the important things in life. Many of them come and thank us a thousand times for giving them the spiritual strength to stop. And the proof that they succeeded in overcoming this evil is that their children are healthy and clean and they care much more lovingly for their families.* »<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion

- 51 The Bohra efforts to combat qat and the lessons learnt provide exceptional insights into the challenges of replacing qat. Apart from a 1980s government project in the Fayfa region of the Saudi Arabian Jîzân Province, they also represent a unique experience that will prove highly valuable for any future initiatives for qat-substitution. A thorough outside evaluation and documentation of the project is therefore much desirable.
- 52 The project has demonstrated (a) that alternatives to qat must not necessarily be sought in agriculture, since farmers who were truly successful in abandoning the crop, had embarked on a multitude of economic alternatives, diversifying their income; (b) that the replacement of qat will most certainly be accompanied by significant rural-urban migration; (c) that any efforts to replace the crop and reduce consumption must be accompanied by sound educational measures with qat awareness becoming an integral part of school curricula; (d) that any alternatives to qat, whether agricultural or other, require substantial financial resources, and it will be difficult to replicate the Bohra experience on a larger scale without strong external technical and financial support; (e) that qat is a hardy plant, well adapted to the arid climate with infrequent rainfall and recurrent droughts, and will prove very difficult if not impossible to replace by any alternative high value crops.
- 53 The Government took interest in the qat uprooting efforts of the Bohra community and the 1999 and 2005 reports on the project’s successes and set-backs were vividly discussed in Ministry of Planning and Development and the Ministry of Water and Environment.<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately, despite the attention given to the subject-matter internally, decision-makers opted not to involve themselves with this « *obscure sect that stands outside of Islam* »<sup>51</sup>. Indeed many rumors circulate about the Bohra in Yemen, ranging from unislamic rituals, sexual promiscuity, to plans for overthrowing the Government.<sup>52</sup> This was also the reason for Ministry of Planning and Development to reject a World Bank proposal to let the Bohra present their project at the *National Conference on Qat*. Their spiritual leader Salmân Rashîd, who was invited as a spectator, however managed to make himself heard in the discussion rounds and his aides distributed a message of the *Dâ‘î al-Mu/taq* entitled « **The Evils of Qat** » as well as fliers with quotes of the Yemeni poet al-Zubayrî, labeling qat as « *devil in the shape of a tree* ». In 2005, the Minister of Water and Environment, took interest in the project, but ruled out any cooperation with the Bohra or even a visit to their project site since this would have « enhanced their status ». Instead the Minister sought donor support for developing a parallel project, an initiative however thwarted by his replacement in early 2006.
- 54 This experience shows that the eradication of qat needs a strong political will as well as strong means of moral mobilization by either religious or social concern. Both factors were found within the Bohra community, but despite their presence and the Bohra leadership’s commitment the campaign was not a full success. There is little doubt that only the presence of these elements could help Yemen to face the huge economic, social and environmental challenges that qat represents for this country. At the national level, however, these seem to lack entirely today. We may thus wonder whether and how the Government of Yemen will address these problems over the coming years.

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## Notes

1 Gatter, 2006, p. 18.

2 Central Statistical Organization, 2005, CSO/EU Agricultural Census of 2003.

- 3 Dr. 'Alî No'mân, Director of the Qat Research Unit, Ministry of Agriculture, *Personal communications*.
- 4 Gatter, 2006, p. 36.
- 5 Lenaers & Gatter, 2000, p. 13.
- 6 Gatter, *Qat market survey*, 2005, unpublished.
- 7 Gatter, 2007, p. 154.
- 8 Schopen, 1978, p. 182-183.
- 9 *Yemen Times*, Sept. 6, 1999 and *al-Jumhuriyya*, Sept. 11, 1999.
- 10 Qa/h/tân 'Abd al-Malik, General Director for Irrigation (MAI) and Khâlid Mu/hammad Sa'îd, General Director for Agricultural Projects and Fisheries (MOPD).
- 11 Villages visited in the Manâkha District where farmers uprooted trees included al-Zayâ/h, al-'Abarât, al-Ma/halla Banî A/hlas, Marâba, Banî Murra, al-/Hu/tayb, Akama al-Kurûf, Ashraf, and the *sulaymânî* village of /Salûl.
- 12 Gatter et al., 1999.
- 13 Ladj, 1992, p. 38.
- 14 When the Fatimid caliph, al-Amîr was assassinated in Cairo in 1130, Arwâ supported the candidacy of his infant son, al-/Tayyib Abû al-Qâsim who had mysteriously vanished after his father's death. While in Egypt and Syria the claim of succession of al-Amîr's cousin, al-/Hâfiz, was recognized, Arwâ actually put Yemen under the rule of a caliph in seclusion.
- 15 Halm, 1988, p. 193-231.
- 16 Moncelon, 1995: <http://cy.revues.org/document79.html>
- 17 Halm, 1988, p. 232-243.
- 18 H.E. Salmân Rashîd, Representative of the Bohra in Yemen , *Personal communications*, 2005.
- 19 Some religious zealots even claim that the Bohra have left Islam and deserve punishment for this crime. Bohra efforts to restore the palace of queen Arwâ in Jibla have thus been halted and denounced by clerics and political leaders as attempts of reestablishing Ismailisrule over Yemen.
- 20 Gatter et al., 1999.
- 21 H.E. Salmân Rashîd, *Personal communications*, 2002; *Yemen Times*, 6. Aug 2001.
- 22 H.E. Salmân Rashîd, *Personal communications*, 2002-2005.
- 23 *Yanâbî' al-Baraka al-Sharîfa*, 2002/03, p. 12.
- 24 *Zulâl al-Sijil al-Agharr*, 2003/04, p. 10.
- 25 Author's interview in al-/Hu/tayb on Jan. 15, 2005.
- 26 *Yemen Times*, Sept. 6, 1999; *al-Thawra*, Oct. 30, 1999.
- 27 Najm al-Dîn ibn Sayf al-Dîn, *Personal Communications*, Jan. 15, 2005 (results from a qat census carried out by the uprooting project in late 1999).
- 28 This also explains why in the villages of al-Kharâba, al-Qadma and Jirma today - although being locates within vast qat cultivation areas - many of the inhabitants do not own a single qat tree, but work as tenants on lands now belonging to the Banî A/hlas families.
- 29 Author's interview on Nov. 8, 1999. He used to own 250 qat trees, of which he uprooted 130 in 1999, receiving a total of YR 6,500 (ca. US \$ 40) in assistance to pay for the uprooting labor. Until then his income from qat amounted to YR 30,000-50,000 per year (ca. US \$ 190-310), mainly depending on the amount of rainfall.
- 30 Some of the trees were said to be over a hundred years old and were over 15 meters tall. In some cases entire terrace fields had to be broken down and then rebuilt, since the roots of the trees reached too deep.
- 31 *Yemen Observer*, July 23, 2001.
- 32 Author's interview on June 13, 2005.
- 33 Also before the start of the qat uprooting Program, the Bohra community has received assistance of their Indian leadership. A road was built in the 1980s (asphalted 1998/99) to connect al-/Hu/tayb with Manâkha (5 km) and tracks have been bulldozed to connect most Bohra villages. There is also a plan to pave the 6 km gravel track between the coffee nursery and the main road and thereby connecting the villages al-/Zahra, Shâriqa and Jirma.

- 34 *Yemen Times*, Aug. 6, 2001.
- 35 Including a land purchase of YR 320,000 (ca. \$ 2,000 in the year 2000) beneath the mountain village of Jirma.
- 36 Most farmers purchased coffee seedlings on credit, repayable free of interest after two years.
- 37 With a surface of 7x10 m, 3.5 m in height and each equipped with 8 rows (90 m) of plastic irrigation pipes.
- 38 Female sheep and goats are used in Yemen mostly for reproductive purposes and are rarely sold and consumed. Their meat achieves low prices of around YR 6,000 (8,000 in Ramadân) and is little to the liking of the Yemeni palate, as an old proverb illustrates: *shuwâkh al-talî wlâ maraq ummuh*, « the wrin of the ram is better than the soup made from his mother ».
- 39 Mostly the trapezium shaped *Top-bar* or *Kenyan hives* produced locally at YR 3,000 (\$ 16 in 2005), but also the more expensive square-shaped *Langstroth* or *American hives* (YR 4,000).
- 40 A structure built in Akama al-Kurûf (1900 m a.s.l.) with a capacity of 35m<sup>3</sup> was built at a cost of YR 500,000, equivalent to \$ 3,000 at the time.
- 41 While a well at al-/Hu/tayb (depth of 200 m) produces 15 l./sec. and wells in al-/Hujba (200 and 250 m) pump 15 and 4 l./sec. respectively, a well at the coffee nursery (depth of 550 m) has an output of only 0.04 liters/sec. not allowing continuous pumping (cost of the nursery well was \$ 38,000 for drilling and \$ 71,000 for hardware).
- 42 The modern treatment plant (capacity of 150 m<sup>3</sup>/day) connects the 30 houses of al-/Hu/tayb. The daily average inflow is around 30 m<sup>3</sup> (80 m<sup>3</sup> during pilgrimage season). The outflow is 75% of inflow. Sludge output is 2m<sup>3</sup>/day.
- 43 Raw materials for the fabrication of a scull cap costs around YR 300. After a work input of 1-2 days (depending on the level of proficiency) a cap can be sold for YR 1,300.
- 44 Taking interest is contrary to the Islamic belief and considered usury (Qur'ân 2:275-276).
- 45 See also *Ladj* 1992, p. 25-27 and *Gerholm* 1977, p. 35.
- 46 Interviews with seven farmers in the villages of al-/Zahra, Shâreqa, and Jirma (Jan. 15, 2005).
- 47 A beekeeper who started out with one hive in 2001, had become an expert for creating new colonies by splitting bee populations. In 2005 he owned 52 hives and the project was using his expertise to teach others.
- 48 An NGO founded by the former Minister of Education A/hmad Jâbir al-'Affif with the intent to promote non-qat related leisure activities.
- 49 Author's interview with Salmân Rashîd, Jan. 15, 2005.
- 50 Gatter et al., 1999; and Gatter, 2005.
- 51 *Personal communications*, 1999-2001, Ministry of Planning and Development; and 2005, Ministry of Water and Environment.
- 52 Compare e.g. an article in *al-Balâgh*, Aug. 6, 2002: « Plans to overthrow Government by Bohra Sect revealed ».

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### ***Pour citer cet article***

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### ***À propos de l'auteur***

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***Résumé / Abstract***

La « guerre » des ismaéliens contre le qat dans le Haraz.

Entre mobilisation communautaire et contraintes politico-économiques

En 1999, la communauté ismaélienne des Bohra, du massif du Harâz a lancé une campagne pour remplacer la culture du qat par d'autres activités économiques. Fortement motivée sur le plan religieux, cette campagne visait aussi à la suppression de la consommation du qat. Plus de 200 000 arbustes de qat ont été arrachés, auxquels on a substitué des caféiers et des manguiers. Les moyens pour générer les revenus alternatifs incluaient aussi l'élevage, l'apiculture, la planification du développement d'artisanat, à quoi s'ajoutaient des projets d'irrigation, des programmes éducatifs et des prêts sans intérêt pour les investissements dans d'autres secteurs économiques. Bien que cette campagne ait été entravée dès le début par une sécheresse sévère ainsi que par l'absence d'aide gouvernementale, il a abouti d'une part à une réduction réelle de la culture et de la consommation du qat, et à la diversification importante de l'activité économique des fermiers. Mais le projet a aussi entraîné une migration accrue de la campagne vers les villes et l'abandon de nombreuses terres cultivées. Cependant, malgré ces limites, ce projet, unique au Yémen par son haut niveau de la mobilisation sociale, apporte des leçons précieuses concernant les contraintes politiques et économiques qui pèsent sur toute tentative de développer une agriculture sans qat dans les montagnes du Yémen.

In 1999, the Ismailî Bohra Community in Yemen's Harâz mountains launched a drug substitution programme in order to replace the cultivation of qat with other economic and social activities. Motivated by religious concern, this campaign aimed at suppressing the consumption of qat. Over 200,000 qat trees were uprooted and coffee and mango trees planted instead. Alternative means of income generation included animal husbandry, beekeeping and handicraft schemes, complemented by irrigation projects, educational programmes and interest free loans for investments in other economic sectors. Even though the programme was hampered from its start by a severe drought, and in spite of the absence of governmental support, it resulted in a sharp reduction in the cultivation and consumption of qat and a significant diversification of the farmers' economy. However, the project led also to rural-urban migration and abandoning agricultural lands. But despite its shortcomings, this project, unique in Yemen by its capacity of social mobilization, provides precious lessons on the political and economical constraints which bear on any attempt to develop in Yemen mountains an agriculture which would be free of qat.