

## Discussing the Leaf of Allah: Linguistic Aspects of Qat Culture in Harär, Ethiopia\*

Tim Carmichael

ጭቶው ጭቶው አተለኛ ዛላሁ ቁጠው  
በለኛ።

Don't call me 'you *qat*, you *qat*,' [instead] address me as 'Allah's Leaf.'

-Haräri proverb/saying<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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 Harär, Ethiopia, historically the premier Islamic town in the Horn of Africa. The farmlands around Harär 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 Haräri, Amharic and Oromo) from Harär. 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 Harär 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 Harär, *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 Adäre [Haräri], 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."<sup>3</sup> Today, many people in Harär 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.<sup>4</sup> 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 Haräri language: *zallahu quti* (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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

*Qat* has long held a fascination for strangers to its consumption and culture. In the preface to his 1856 travelogue about Harär, 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.<sup>7</sup>

In Harär, 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.<sup>8</sup>

During the Egyptian occupation of Harär from 1875-1885, at least one of Khedive Ismail's officers also recorded his observations about *qat*. Mohammed Muktar asked the Haräri 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.<sup>9</sup>

Later references to *qat* in Harär are similarly disapproving, but are of more general historical interest in the way they evidence an attitudinal divide between Christians and Muslims.<sup>10</sup> In the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> 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."<sup>11</sup> 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 *h'arara*.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> The following decade Fitawrari Tāklāhawariat 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."<sup>14</sup> 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<sup>15</sup>—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.<sup>16</sup>

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."<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

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."<sup>19</sup> 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."<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

In another article, in process, I explore more deeply the history and use of *qat* in Harär. Here, I seek to provide a sampling of *qat*-related vocabulary from in and around Harär 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 Harär**

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 Harär. 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 kāqāzāqqāzā bāhwala*) they are able to read, pray, study or go for *c'ābsi* (see Section 4). For the most part, people enjoying a *bārc'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 *qat*, which is done by chewing or drinking. There are three ways to prepare *fresh* leaves:<sup>22</sup>

1. (መቅማላ) *māqmah'* (Harāri): when one picks off shoots and pops them directly into the mouth
2. (አቴረረ) *atérärä* (Harāri): 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. (መቀጫ) *muqācha* (Amharic; in Harāri *moqāc'* is “mortar”): pounding leaves into a mush;<sup>23</sup> 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: *takhzin*) 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 (Harāri: *gumuc' bayä*; see Category 4). Unlike some *qat* chewers elsewhere, the Harāri and others around Harār do not expectorate the leaves, rather swallowing them along with the juice that has been chewed out of them. *If the pace of consumption is*

similar, the *merqana* obtained from each of the methods of preparing / chewing leaves is different:

-with *māqmah'* the *merqana* comes on gradually

-with *atērärä* the *merqana* comes on a bit faster than with *māqmah'*

-with *muqächa* 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 “*Cát* 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.”<sup>24</sup> 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:<sup>25</sup>

(አቡ ምሥማር) *abu mesmar*<sup>26</sup>: 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.

(አደባ ዛልባ) *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.

(አማራ ኮኦት) *amara ko'ot* (Haräri): red and green *qat* mixed together; in Haräri the name means "Christian two."

(ጨባላ) *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 ½-3 *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.

(ዳላቻ) *dalacha* (Haräri); (ዳለቻ) *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 *qéh qat*); commonly, it grows in regions such as Wäbära, Chercher and Dädära.

(ፈረስ አዙን) *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.

(ግይ አቃራ) *gáy aqara* (Harāri): *qat* grown on Harāri farms and wrapped in banana leaves for sale; *gáy* 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.

(ቀርጢ) *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.

(ቁሕ ጫጉ) *qéh' c'at* (Harāri); *diimma* (Oromo); (ቃይ ጫጉ) *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.<sup>27</sup>

(ቁዳ) *quda* (Harāri/Amharic): color ranges from red to gray (there may be *qéy 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 *takhzín* 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*.

(ኢጣር ኩሌ) *umar kulé*: 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:	<i>damé</i> (Oromo); (ቅርንጫፍ) <i>qerenc'af</i> (Amharic)
eye: <sup>28</sup>	(ኢን) <i>in</i> (Haräri); <i>ija</i> (Oromo); (ኢደን) <i>ayn</i> (Amharic)
flower:	(ሐበሪ) <i>h'abäri</i> (Haräri); <i>abaabo/daraarra</i> (Oromo); (አበባ) <i>abäba</i> (Amharic)
leaf:	(ቁጠ) <i>qut'i</i> (Haräri); <i>baala</i> (Oromo); (ቅጠል) <i>qet'äl</i> (Amharic)
<i>qat</i> tree:	(ጫት እንጨ) <i>c'at enc'i</i> (Haräri); <i>muka jimma</i> (Oromo); (የጫት እንጨት) <i>yäc'at enc'ät</i> (Amharic)
stem:	<i>muka</i> (Oromo); (ግንድ) <i>gend</i> (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.

(አቃራ) *aqara*: a unit of measurement for *qat*, commonly the amount chewed by one person during a normal *bärc'a*

(ጩብሲ) *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 ደልጎት ጥጫ (delegot moc'a), meaning "the tiredness/fatigue swallow of *qat* and water"

(ደረት ጫት) *däräq c'at* (Amharic): literally "dry *qat*," *qat* which is not fresh

(ፋሐቃ) *fah'aqa* (Haräri: meaning "remaining *qat*")<sup>29</sup>: 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 *tac'ero* (West Harärge Oromo: stemless) and *c'era* (Dire Dawa Oromo: stemless)

(ጋራብ) *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;<sup>30</sup> 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 Babilé bottled water or cigarettes for chewers enjoying a *bärc'a*, in exchange for some *qat* branches and/or the *garaba* from the *bärc'a*

(ገረፌ) *gäräfi* (Haräri); *dugugi* (Oromo): means “the last;” is *qat* with short branches that is left over after *qat* has been sorted for export

(ገደር ጫጉ) *gudor c'at* (Haräri): long [stemmed] *qat*

(ገመጫ ባዩ) *gumuc' bayä* (Haräri): to swish water around the mouth and to swallow the water and the *qat* together<sup>31</sup>

(ሐራራ) *h'arara* (Haräri/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

(ማናጫሐ) *manac'ah'a* (Haräri): 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

(ምርቃና) *merqana* (Amharic); (ማቃሕ) *maqah'* (Haräri): *merqana* is the result of chewing *qat*: it refers to the physical/mental condition induced by *qat*'s active ingredients; though Rushby,<sup>32</sup> 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

(መጉሐረራ) *mäth'orära* (Haräri): I was told this Haräri word (which is an infinitive/verbal noun) means “all night *bärc'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] *atörara* ‘keep awake at night taking *cät*...”<sup>33</sup>

*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

(ዖደረ) *yaddärä* (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 Haräri language insults refer to people who chew *qat* more than is judged to be socially acceptable:

-ፋቅራ (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*

-ፋቅራ ፋዛዛ (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

-ጭጭ ገፍ (c'at gäf) 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 *jäzba*, but most disagreed with that assessment<sup>34</sup>

-ነደባ ጋዳላ (nädäba gaddala) someone who just wants to chew *qat*, and, if he gets some, will never get up from the *nädäba*<sup>35</sup> to do any work; this type of person will neglect work in favor of chewing *qat*—a clear sign that he has a problem

- ጆዝባ (*jāzba*) 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 Harär at least, one to be avoided

### Category 6: Stages of Psychological Dependence<sup>36</sup>

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 Haräri to describe four stages of psychological dependency:

- ሐራራ (*h'arara*) someone who is normal, but slightly "hooked," like smoking only a few cigarettes daily
- ቀማሕ (*qāmah'*) someone who chews a lot of *qat* on a regular basis
- ፋቶራ (*fuqra*) someone who thinks all the time about *qat*, but whose use of it does not badly affect his work, family, personal appearance, etc.
- ጆዝባ (*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 Haräri 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 Haräri culture.<sup>37</sup>

One (from the poem *Mäsnoy*<sup>38</sup>):

ጫት ዳዋና ጫትሌ ጫያ ዳዋና

*C'at dawana c'atlé c'aya dawana*

*Qat* is medicine; in  
*qat* is the cure for  
shadows

ጫቱን ዳዋና ቢላ ማይ ለዳዋኒና።

*C'atum dawana bila miy adawanina.*

*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 Haräri 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..."<sup>39</sup> If these meanings are shared by Haräri, the first line of this verse evidences the historical appreciation of *qat*'s physical and/or spiritual benefits.

Two (from the poem *Mäsnoy*<sup>40</sup>):

አንቲቆጭ አንቲቆጭ

*Antiqoc' antiqoc'wa*

May we not be  
estranged, may we not  
have a falling out

ቀንበጥ ያጎቆጭ

*Qänbät' yatqoc'*

May the *qänbat'* be cut (off),

ጋደሙ ዛሪእታቤ

*Gadämu zari'tabé*

Before the bush duiker sees it.

Comments: *Qänbät'* 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 *qänbät'* 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 *qänbät'* then the two people will be able to sit and to 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.<sup>41</sup>

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):

ጫት ጩቤ ዩግሊዛጎቹው ዩኸሹሜል።

C'at c'ébé yeglizalachuw yekhāshumél. *Qat* does not want those that begin with c' (c'é).

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 Harāri language these might include: c'ilmā (darkness), c'iqna (stench, rotten/vile odor), c'inqi (distress, anxiety, problem, suffering), c'ir/c'irir (screech, scream, loud crying). Also, the idea may be extended to terms in the Amharic language: c'eqec'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 Harāri *dhikr*<sup>42</sup>)

መይደል ጫቱ ነቅመሐ

*Mäydäl c'atu näqmäh'a*

Let's chew *mäydäl qat*,

ቢሐያትዎ ነቅመሐ

*Bih'ayatem näqmäh'a*

Let's chew while we're alive,

ቃለዎ ቁላው ናሕደግማ

*Qalāwa qilaw nah'dägema*

Let's desist from babbling  
nonsense

ነቢው ባይቲ ነብዛሐ

*Näbiw bayti nābzah'a.*

Let's repeatedly say the  
prophet [s name].

Comments: *Mäydäl 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 Harāri 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 Haräri proverb/saying)

ጫቶው ጫቶው አተለኛ ዛላሐ ቁጢው በለኛ።  
*C'atow, c'atow atäläñä, zallah'u qut'iw bäläñä.*

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

Comments: In Haräri, *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 Haräri poem)

አሐታኝ ጉሙጫ ቀሩ ሞጫ  
*Ah'atañ gumuc'a qäru moc'a*

First swallow of *qat* and water, stretching out,

ኮላታኝ ጉመጫ ፉዲቤ ቅማጫ  
*Ko'otañ gumuc'a fudibé qemic'a*

Second swallow of *qat* and water, sitting up straight,

ሸላሽታኝ ጉመጫ ሐዳር ገፍ ሙሉጫ  
*Shi'ishtañ gumuc'a h'adar gäf muluc'a*

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

ሐራታኝ ጉመጫ አሐድ ኢይን ቢሊጫ  
*H'aratañ gumuc'a ah'ad iyn bilic'a*

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

ሐማስታኝ ጉመጫ ኮላት ኢይን መውጫጫ  
*H'amistañ gumuc'a ko'ot iyn mäwc'ac'a*

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

ሰዲስታኝ ጉመጫ ጨገሩው መንጫጫ  
*Sidistañ gumuc'a c'igäruw mänc'ac'a*

Sixth swallow of *qat* and water, pulling out hair,

(ሳታኝ ጉመጫ ጨብሰ ማፋጫ)  
*(Satañ gumuc'a c'äbsi mafac'a.)*

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

Comments: This poem traces the stages that a chewer goes through before getting *merqana*; 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.<sup>43</sup> Line six refers to the observable fact that when they get *merqana*, 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 Harär, Ethiopia, are one of the major *qat* producing regions in the world, and *qat* chewing is deeply embedded in the culture of Harär 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, Hārari, 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 Harār'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 Harārgé 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'ājj*, with which I salute him.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> 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 *bārc'a* at which much of this data was gathered. Thanks are also due to Getnet Bekele for his comments on an earlier draft.

<sup>2</sup> Although *c'at* is the appellation of choice in many of Ethiopia's urban centers, including Harār, 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*.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Jon Abbink, "Ch'at in popular culture: a "prayer" from Harär, Ethiopia," *Sociology Ethnology Bulletin of Addis Ababa University*, 1, 2 (1992): 89.

<sup>4</sup> Most commentators claim either Yemen or Ethiopia for the leaf's homeland, but there is no "undisputable evidence" either way. Ezekiel Gebissa, *Consumption, Contraband and Commodification: a History of Khat in Harerge, Ethiopia, c. 1930-1991*, Ph.D. Diss., Michigan State University, 1997, 75.

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

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> Richard F. Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa or, An Exploration of Harar*, Two volumes in one, edited by Isabel Burton, Dover Publication, Inc.: New York, 1987 (reprint of 1856 edition): Vol. I, Xxvi (emphasis added).

<sup>8</sup> Burton, *First Footsteps*, Vol. II, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Mohammed Moktar, "Notes sur le Pays de Harrar," *Bulletin de la Société Khédiviale de Géographie*, 1, 4 (1886): 368-69.

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.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> *Semur d'Éthiopie*, March-April 1911, 49.

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

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

<sup>14</sup> Translated and quoted in Ezekiel, *Consumption*, 85.

<sup>15</sup> For examples of official opposition to *qat* in the Somalias and Kenya, see Lee V. Cassanelli, "Qat: changes in the production and consumption of a quasilegal commodity in northeast Africa," in Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 250-55.

<sup>16</sup> For example, see the Internal Security Forces statements of Ahmad Hassan, (no title), 29 *Teqemt* 1939 (8 November 1946); and of Captain Tafara Badane, "News from Town" 16 *Säné* 1939 (23 June 1947). Both are contained in the Haräri National Archives, File #96, Special File Mä/2, Haräri Regional Secretariat, 1<sup>st</sup> 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-*

rica, Boston: Boston University African Studies Center Press, 1998: 195-212.

<sup>17</sup> D. Ingrams, *A Time in Arabia*, London: John Murray, 1970: 113, quoted in John G. Kennedy, James Teague and Lynn Fairbanks, "Qat Use in North Yemen and the Problem of Addiction: a Study in Medical Anthropology," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 4 (1980): 312. For references to similar comments, see Daniel Martin Varisco, "On the Meaning of Chewing: the Significance of *Qât* (*Catha Edulis*) in the Yemen Arab Republic," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 18 (1986): 11, n. 2.

<sup>18</sup> G. Wyman Bury, *Arabia Infelix, or The Turks in Yamen*, London: MacMillan and Col., Ltd., 1915: 152.

<sup>19</sup> Wyman Bury, *Arabia Infelix*, 154.

<sup>20</sup> A. Farougy, *Introducing Yemen*, New York: Orientalia, Inc., 1947: 17.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., Noel Grove, "North Yemen," *National Geographic*, 156, 2 (1979): 252-3; Andrew Cockburn, "Yemen United," *National Geographic*, 1999, 4 (2000): 37, 42-3.

<sup>22</sup> 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 Harär, 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*.

<sup>23</sup> See also Wolf Leslau, editor, *Ethiopians Speak: Studies in Cultural Background, I. Harari*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965, 99-100.

<sup>24</sup> Bob G. Hill, "Cat (*Catha edulis* Forsk)," *Journal of Ethiopian Studies*, 3, 2 (1965): 13.

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

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

<sup>27</sup> 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.

<sup>28</sup> 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'a* is considered to be a very gracious and kind gesture, and usually takes place only between close friends or special guests.

<sup>29</sup> Also see: Leslau, *Ethiopians Speak*, pg. 39.

<sup>30</sup> For a photograph showing a large amount of *garaba* on the floor (between chewers), see Cockburn, "Yemen United," 42-43.

<sup>31</sup> The phrase is either incompletely or incorrectly defined in Abdulrahman Muhammad Qorram's useful *Chuqti Ketab: Haräri-Amareñña Mäzgäbä Qalat (Small Book: a Haräri-Amharic Dictionary)*, Addis Ababa, 1991-92: 187.

<sup>32</sup> Kevin Rushy, *Eating the Flowers of Paradise: a Journey Through the Drug Fields of Ethiopia and Yemen*, London: Constable, 1998.

<sup>33</sup> Wolf Leslau, *Etymological Dictionary of Harari*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963: 87.

<sup>34</sup> 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*.

<sup>35</sup> *Nädäbas* are the raised platforms, serving as furniture of a sort, characteristic of Haräri family rooms.

<sup>36</sup> 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.”

<sup>37</sup> 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.

<sup>38</sup> *Mäsnoy* 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 Muday*, 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.

<sup>39</sup> Kane, *Dictionary*, 2083.

<sup>40</sup> I recorded this version in Harär. A variant is found in Muhammad, *Qät'äbti*, 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.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted from Duri Mohammed (translator), “Two Haräri Songs,” *Ethiopia Observer*, 2, 2 (1958): 88. See also: Leslau, *Ethiopians Speak*, 97.

<sup>42</sup> 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'atuw nāqmāh'a bihayata, nābiw bayti(w) nābzaha*.

<sup>43</sup> 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.