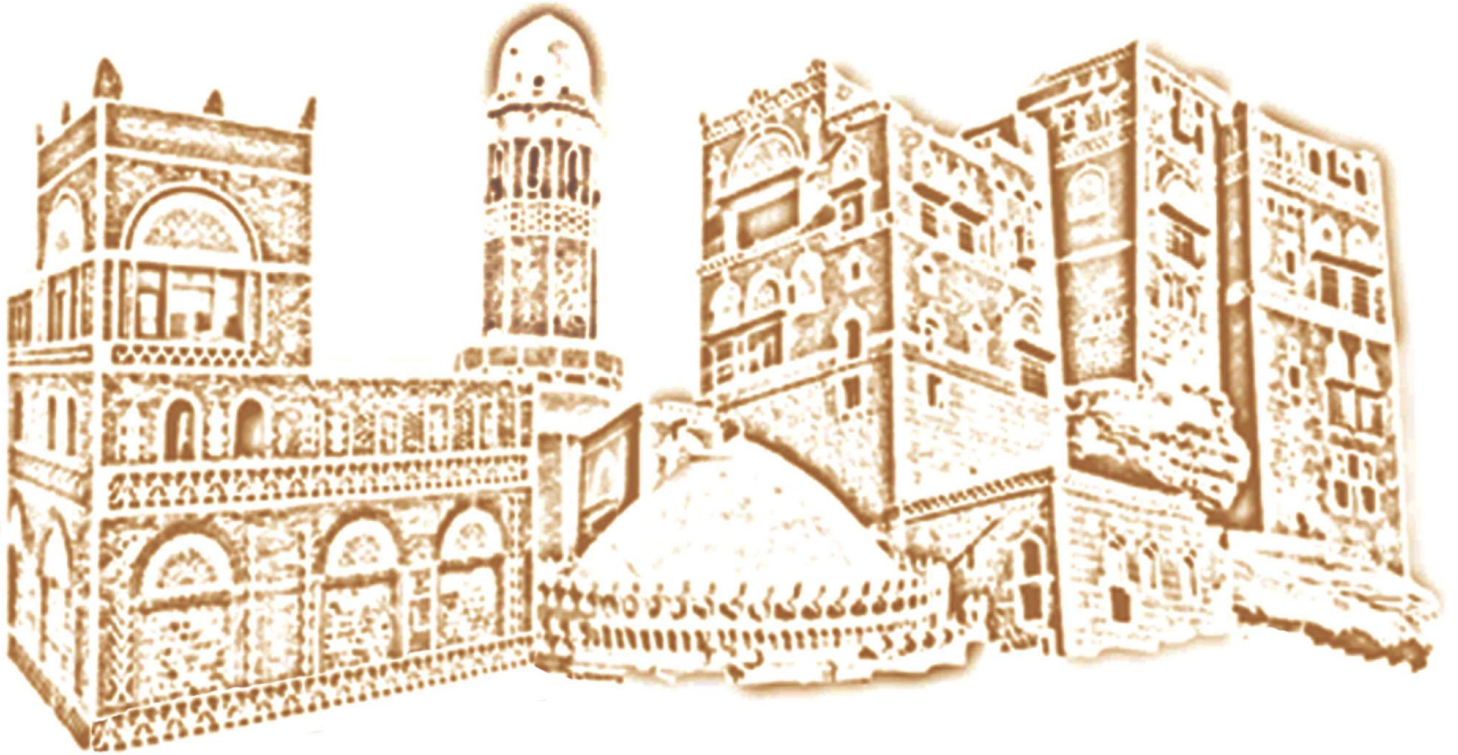


الكلية اليمنية لدراسات الشرق الأوسط
Yemen College of Middle Eastern Studies



A Guide to Living in Yemen

Yemen College of Middle Eastern Studies

26th of September Street, Building II

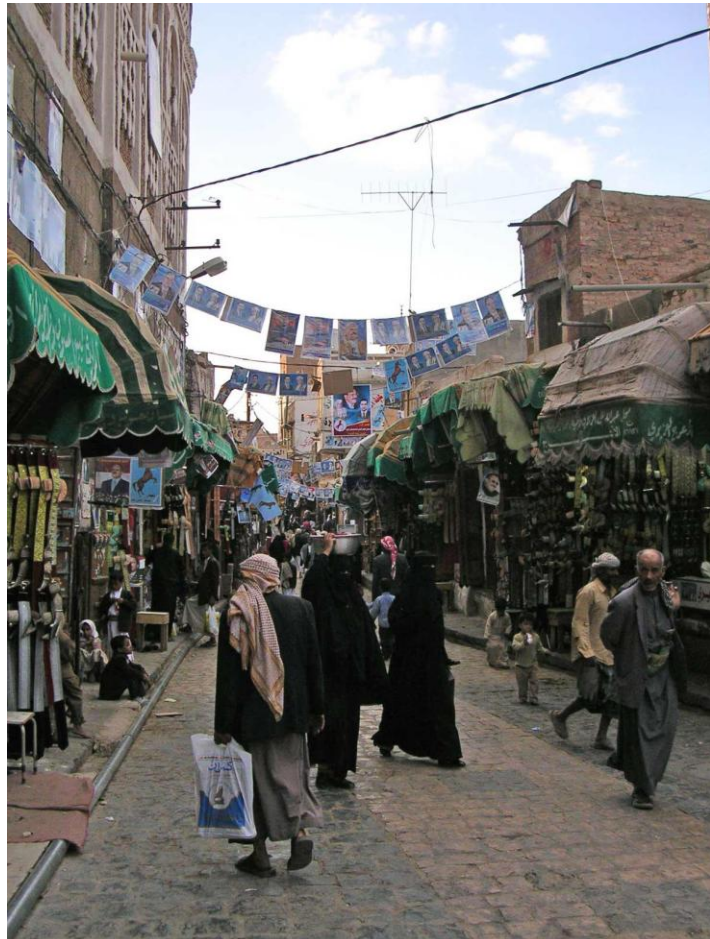
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Yemeni Culture

Yemeni culture is a combination of socially conservative Islamic ideals with local Arab character and deep tribal traditions. Though many social attributes found in Yemen are universal in the Arab world (emphases on family, religion, honor, and gender roles), Yemenis hold fast to these values in a way that visitors rarely see replicated in other parts of the Arab world, creating a unique cultural outlook. Yemenis are very proud of their cultural traditions and eager to share them with foreign guests. As guests in this country, students witness extreme generosity from their Yemeni hosts and are often taken aback by their hospitality. Still, other students experience the alienation of being a lonely foreigner amidst a seemingly curious and intimidating society. Since many social events take place amongst intimate circles of friends, it is recommended to slowly penetrate the society by creating a few close friends and networking through these.



Though Sana'a has many modern amenities and imported goods, travel to the villages can seem a bit like stepping back in time. Many rural areas in Yemen are agricultural and traditional farming techniques are still widely used. Surprisingly, villages in the north are considered to be more relaxed on Islamic social standards than the capital. Due to a Saudi-Wahabi influence beginning in the 1970's, the northern cities, especially Sana'a, have adopted a more conservative approach to Islamic practices. The southern cities have remained more liberal, though with reunification in the 1990s the North has pressured some groups in the South to adopt similar Islamic standards.

The nuclear family (parents and children), called "usra" in Arabic, is the most basic social unit in Yemen. Yemeni families tend to be quite large and several generations of extended family usually live together in one large home with separate floors for each usra.

Social Events

The most important event a foreigner is likely to encounter in Yemen is Ramadan, the holy month of fasting. During this time all Muslims (except children, the sick, the elderly, and other groups as stipulated by the Qur'an) abstain from food, drinking, smoking, and sexual activity during daylight hours. As the Islamic calendar is a lunar calendar, the time of Ramadan falls eleven days earlier each successive year. The evening brings celebrations and the breaking of the fast, known as iftar; the feasting and merry-making often last until dawn. Although non-Muslims are not required to observe the fast, eating, drinking, and smoking around those who do is inconsiderate. Thus, during Ramadan, such activities should be confined to the privacy of one's own home. At the beginning and conclusion of Ramadan, small gifts may be given to children. It is also appropriate for invited guests to bring gifts of sweets to families for iftar. When giving gifts, offer them with either the right hand or with both hands. Presents are not usually opened in front of the giver.

Weddings are joyous occasions in Yemen and one should feel honored if invited. Parties for men and women are almost always held separately, and generally speaking, members of one sex are not invited to the other sex's ceremonies. Both parties usually consist of an afternoon spent socializing with the bride or groom in their home. Afterwards, their friends gather to sing religious songs, songs in praise of the bride or groom and his/her family, and to dance. Just as Yemenis will arrive for the wedding clothed in their finest attire, foreign guests should do likewise with dress from Yemen or their country of origin.

Married couples visiting a home together may be separated soon after arrival, the male guest sitting with his male host(s) and the female guest with her female hostess(es). In these situations, married couples may be expected to understand subtle hints or suggestions by the host proposing to separate them into two groups. Unmarried couples visiting a home should exercise discretion;



the rarity of friendships between unmarried men and women in Yemen, it is usually unadvisable to make the relationship known or to make visits "as a couple." One should always take off one's shoes when entering a Yemeni home and mafraj. Also, keep in mind that not all invitations must or should be accepted. Offering an invitation is a feature of Arab culture, but one should consider whether the host will be extremely inconvenienced before accepting.

Religion

Nearly all Yemenis are Muslims. Minority communities of Jews, Christians (mostly expatriates), and some Hindus (mostly immigrants) also exist. Estimates suggest that 50-55% of Yemeni Muslims are Shafi'i Sunni, 40-45% are of the Zaydi sect of Shi'a, and 2-5% are of the Ja'fari, Western Isma'ili sect. It is assumed that students going to Yemen will have some prior knowledge of Islam, and several books for the beginning student have been listed Further Resources.

As a foreign visitor, people will naturally be curious about you and may often inquire about your religious persuasion. In Yemen this is not considered an intrusive or impolite question, so a reaction that indicates offense on your part may insult the person inquiring. In these situations, the best response is to be as direct as possible, although replies such as "I don't believe in God" may be met with incredulity or genuine shock. The rule here is to tread sensitively, and if someone tries to argue or debate with you over religious differences, refuse politely. Most Yemenis – the vast majority, in fact – will treat you no differently for being a non-Muslim. The Qur'an enjoins believers to treat Jews and Christians with friendliness and respect, as these "People of the Book" are followers of the holy tradition, and therefore are religious cousins to Muslims.



As a foreigner, remember that the obligation to assimilate culturally is, for better or for worse, placed squarely on you. Therefore, emphasizing religious differences between foreigners and Yemenis, or between Christians, Muslims, or Jews will only render your task more difficult. Proselytizing on the part of any religious group is forbidden, so students with strong feelings about their particular religion are advised for their own benefit not to share them aloud.

Most mosques in Sana'a are closed to non-Muslims, although it appears that this restriction is not universally enforced. An individual who wishes to enter a mosque must ask first. If s/he wishes to take photographs s/he should again inquire to see if this is permitted. Both men and women should always remove their shoes before entering a mosque, and women should cover their hair. Of course, persons wearing inappropriate clothing will not be admitted to a mosque.

There is a single church in Sana'a supported by the expatriate community where several major Christian denominations offer worship services at separate times. Small Christian study/discussion groups composed of expatriate residents also exist, and welcome new members. There are presently no functioning synagogues in Sana'a, although diminishing communities of Jews can still be found living to the north of the capital, near the city of Sa'ada. At last report, the Jewish community in Sa'ada numbered 500 people, down from 2,000 only a few years ago.

Social Relations

Most Yemeni people observe traditional Yemeni gender roles; men are more active in public and commercial spheres, and women in the home and family environment. The strict social divisions between men and women surprise many foreigners. Men and women can be thought of as living in two parallel worlds. When people gather for social events and celebrations, men and women do so separately. At wedding celebrations, for example, two separate parties are held, one for men and one for women. Wealthy families with members educated in Western institutions are more likely to relax social restrictions.

The public workforce in Yemen is still dominated by men, though women can be found working as secretaries, assistants, bank tellers, school teachers, and in an expanding realm of positions outside the home. There is a large and growing number of young Yemeni women enrolled in universities throughout the country studying a variety of subjects, including business and medicine.



Relations between men and women, particularly unmarried men and women, are subject to scrutiny throughout Yemen. You will notice immediately that virtually all women in Sana'a are covered by the long and formless baltu or sharshaf, which leaves no part of the body visible to the eye. Foreign women are not expected to dress in this manner, but they should be prepared to act in a reserved and conservative manner while in public, consistent with Yemeni values.

For foreigners coming from North America or Europe, it is entirely normal to have friends and acquaintances of the opposite sex. In many parts of Yemen, however, such friendships are abnormal and frowned upon. You should not expect, therefore, to have many (if any) good Yemeni friends of the opposite sex. This is somewhat less true for foreign women, who are not expected to observe all the rules which govern the behavior of Yemeni women. For them it will be somewhat easier to make friends of the opposite sex, although these relationships will necessarily be somewhat formal in nature. Within the confines of the Yemen College of Middle Eastern Studies, there is a good deal of interaction between men and women involving teachers and students. While these relationships are essentially friendly, they should nonetheless maintain a degree of professionalism and should certainly conform to the cultural/social standards of Yemen. Relations between westerners are a private matter and should be conducted as such.

Questions posed to Yemeni men concerning the female members of their household are generally considered embarrassing and rude. On most visits to a Yemeni home, in fact, where the male head of the household is the host, the female members of the family will not be introduced to guests, or even be visible to them. It is important to note, however, that exceptions to this custom do exist, most often in wealthy, highly educated, or consciously non-traditional families. When foreign men come into contact with Yemeni women, they should generally let her take the initiative to shake hands, start conversation that extends beyond common pleasantries, and so forth. As long as male students understand the social distance that exists between men and women and avoid mannerisms which suggest familiarity or intimacy, they should experience no problems.

Among Yemeni women, foreign women can freely discuss almost any subject, including husbands or male family members. Indeed, this is often a frequent topic of conversation among groups of women. Foreign women are typically free to shake hands or start conversations with men in professional settings, though again they should maintain a sense of discretion and decorum. Women who project an air of confidence and comfort in these situations will encounter little difficulty or awkwardness.

Interactions between foreign men and women in public should conform to Yemeni standards of conduct. Intimate or affectionate behavior, such as hugging or kissing, is absolutely forbidden in public, and will earn the offending couple an extremely negative response from bystanders. In addition, calling late in the evening at the home of a friend of the opposite sex, or spending the night there, will likely offend residents of the neighborhood. Indeed, it is not unknown in Yemen for foreigners who have behaved insensitively to find their homes vandalized, or their laundry stolen from the line, in an expression of their neighbor's displeasure. Some reactions from Yemenis might be more subtle, but nonetheless will be felt by the offender, and the larger non-Yemeni community.



These incidents are rare, but foreigners should be conscious and exacting in their public behavior, and expect the same of their peers. The missteps of a few foreigners can reflect on the larger group, obscuring the genuine effort most non-Yemenis make to assimilate into Yemeni life, and obstructing the ability of researchers and field workers to conduct their work in Yemen.

Making Friends

Foreigners, because of shyness or uncertainty about the expectations and obligations that friendships with Yemenis may entail, often have some initial difficulty in meeting and making friends. Fortunately, these problems are easily overcome when individuals are friendly and open. Yemenis, especially young people, are enthusiastic to meet their foreign counterparts and share their lives and interests. Indeed, it is completely normal for a friendly Yemeni to approach you on the street and strike up a conversation with you (although it bears mentioning again that this type of contact



between members of the opposite sex is generally regarded as inappropriate). You are encouraged to pursue and cultivate these contacts, and to seek out opportunities to meet and converse with Yemenis (in Arabic, of course). Some suggestions for meeting people are: visits to the hammam (public bath), Sana'a University, public parks and gardens, teahouses and small Yemeni hotels, restaurants, and the souq. You will have numerous opportunities for attending qat chews, weddings, and other social occasions. Take advantage of these opportunities to meet and speak with Yemenis in their own environment; your efforts will be generously repaid in warm friendships and improved Arabic skills. However, one should always be aware of the context of the friendship, as there are some people (as in any country) who will try to take advantage of you.

Dress

Yemenis are very proud of their cultural traditions. Although Western dress can be spotted on some professional men, the majority of the Yemeni population dresses in traditional style: thoub (full, white dress), mawaz (a skirt worn by men), kufia (head scarf), and jambiya (curved knife worn on an ornamental belt). Slight variations in this outfit indicate the wearer's geographical origin. Older women in Sana'a, or those from more traditional families, can be seen wearing traditional sitaras (large colorfully died cloths) and village women outside of the capital can be found wearing a rich variety of traditional dress.



Dress requirements for men and women are extremely important in Yemen, so it is indispensable that foreigners take as much care as possible when selecting clothes to bring to Yemen, especially women. Awareness of general sensitivities on the subject of dress is essential for relating to people without inadvertently causing offense, or inviting unwanted attention. If you choose to wear Yemeni-style clothing, be aware that the way you move, sit, and carry yourself will certainly be different from any Yemeni person and may cause offense to Yemeni men or women. Wearing loud colors or fancy items should be avoided, as this will without a doubt make you “stick out” in public. Also, you should be especially aware of the manner in which you are sitting, for example in a mafraj. The best advice is to look to a Yemeni as a model for appropriate decorum. Remember that your outward appearance is seen as a reflection of your private self, and that inappropriate clothing will discourage many Yemenis from attempting to communicate with you or will be taken as an open invitation for comments.

Men are expected to wear either pants or jeans, without holes, and shorts should be avoided. T-Shirts are acceptable, although the sleeveless variety is inappropriate. Long hair (particularly on men who do not wear a beard or mustache) will elicit occasional puzzled looks or questions, and may invite some teasing or mildly provocative comments. Exposed piercings or tattoos will also draw unwanted attention in public.

For women, pants or jeans should be covered by a skirt or tied scarf, especially when traveling in rural areas of the country. Generally speaking any article of clothing which might remotely be

considered revealing is questionable in Yemen. Light, translucent materials or tight clothing that reveals a woman's form are also problematic. Women are recommended therefore to bring long full skirts (no slits) and blouses as a practical complement to the T-shirts and jeans they might be accustomed to wearing at home. Foreign women are not expected to cover their hair, except when entering mosques or other religious places. Shorts, or short skirts, and sleeveless and/or form-fitting tops are altogether unacceptable and will most likely cause a woman trouble in public places. Heavy make-up is highly discouraged as most women, in Sana'a especially, go without any make-up. Some foreign women do choose to wear the Yemeni baltu, but if you choose to wear it, you should be aware that there is a certain way to carry yourself in public when wearing such clothing. Underneath a baltu, a woman is still expected to dress conservatively if removing the outer cloak during class



(shorts, sleeveless shirts, low necklines, etc. are considered inappropriate dress for class). When in the house, students may choose to wear whatever they wish, but in public (including classrooms), fashion should be conservative. The Arabic teachers at the YCMES are Yemeni, and while they do have experience with Westerners, they nonetheless deserve the same respect as Yemenis you would run into on the street.

In general, clothing for men and women should be conservative and modest. If you are unsure as to the appropriateness of a particular article of clothing, the best advice is to leave it at home. Erring on the side of the caution will serve you unfailingly. Proper dress will help you earn the respect of Yemenis who will understand that you have attempted to take notice of their social customs and have adapted accordingly; improper clothing will have the opposite effect.

Food Etiquette

Yemeni food and eating customs vary from region to region. Generally speaking, however, the noontime meal is the largest and most important of the day. Breakfasts and dinners tend to be smaller and less elaborate than the typical lunch. In most major cities, you will find Yemeni, Arab, and a few foreign-style restaurants at different levels of price and quality.

Restaurants tend to be most crowded during lunch, or from about 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Most establishments close for the afternoon, reopening at 5:00 and serving dinner until approximately 10:00 p.m. All but the most expensive restaurants insist on cash payment, though even in hotels you will want to pay cash since the exchange rate on credit cards is unfavorable.

Before sitting down at a table, it is customary in Yemen to first wash your hands. Sinks are provided for this purpose in every restaurant. One always eats with the right hand, as the left hand (reserved for washing oneself) is considered unclean. This custom takes on added importance in Yemen, since in most restaurants food is eaten without utensils. The same table manners you would practice at home are generally applicable in Yemen as well: blowing one's nose, loud speech, or belching during a meal are all considered impolite.



As in other social situations, the space in restaurants for men and women is dictated by Yemeni social customs. Many restaurants will have a “family room” used by Yemeni families for dining out. Foreign women may sit in the purely male section as long as they feel comfortable, but they should not hesitate to ask for the family section if they would prefer more privacy.

Women's Issues

A woman's place in Yemen may appear limited and restrictive to foreigners, but it does offer security: women's bodies are absolutely sacrosanct and inviolable. However, one should realize that especially in the crowded suqs contact will occur between men and women in passing. This should not be considered harassment unless it is obviously targeted and of a sexual nature. Foreign



women are able to move freely through any part of the city without difficulty, and are welcome in nearly all public establishments, even those mainly frequented by men, such as large restaurants. However, it is clear that opportunists take advantage of crowded situations and you may wish to take care and be alert when in particularly busy areas of Sana'a, such as Bab al-Yemen or Suq al-Milh. When taking a local taxi, a woman should always ride in the back seat and be sure the doors work from the inside, and on buses a woman may expect other passengers to offer their seats to her, often next to another woman. The same is usually the case when traveling on inter-city taxis and buses. Likewise, a woman traveling by herself outside of Sana'a should experience little difficulty, though of course the same precautions she would take at home should also be applied in Yemen. Hitchhiking should be avoided and unsolicited rides declined. In hotels, a woman should insist on a single room, preferably near other foreign travelers. Especially in small villages, conservative dress is essential. It is advisable to not smoke cigarettes in public spaces, and to be discreet if deciding to do so. More than hard rules or advice, however, a woman traveling in Yemen is advised to rely on simple common sense, consideration, and awareness of local conditions.

The most common difficulty foreign women encounter in Yemen is street harassment, usually in the form of stares, whistles, catcalls, or pinching/grabbing (although this is somewhat less common). Apologists may claim that it is only the rare Yemeni who harasses foreign women, but reports from our students suggest that harassment is nearly as common in Yemen as in most Mediterranean societies, at least in the urban areas. Perhaps it is wisest to assume you will encounter harassment and develop personal strategies accordingly. Women who have lived in Yemen for long periods, or in other Middle Eastern countries, differ widely on their advice for dealing with harassment. Some advise ignoring such behavior altogether, others suggest publicly berating or embarrassing the harasser, still others advocate punching him! You will have to decide which course of action feels most appropriate and comfortable for you. Be assured that in public, however, a pinch or grab can permissively be met with a loud and angry response from you; such behavior towards a Yemeni



woman is grossly unthinkable, and the same standards of respect apply to your person as well. You can be guaranteed that in such situations, your reaction will immediately draw a crowd to remonstrate the harasser. More serious forms of harassment, including sexual assault, physical violence, or rape, are so rare as to be virtually unheard of in Yemen. Stares are quite common in Yemen, by both men and women, and should be understood as mere curiosity. Eye contact should be avoided, however, as this is often interpreted as an invitation to move beyond curiosity. Sunglasses allow you to look around discreetly. You should be careful in Yemen, but you do not need to be scared or overly sensitive.

Tampons are not available in Yemen therefore women are advised to bring their own supply with them; sanitary napkins are widely available. Additionally, a supply of medication for simple yeast infections and other common gynecological problems should be brought from home. Upon request, your embassy in Sana'a can provide you with a list of reputable local physicians practicing women's health and gynecology.

Qat

Qat is an evergreen plant originally from East Africa. A shrub or small tree growing to 5–8 m tall, with leaves 5–10 cm long and 1–4 cm broad, qat is classified as an illicit substance in most of the world. It is not considered physically addictive, although many chewers claim dependency. The chewer puts qat leaves in his/her mouth and chews them slowly for hours, alternately sucking the liquid out of the qat and sipping a beverage (usually one that is quite sweet, like soda.) The qat is not swallowed.



Qat has a negative effect on the kidneys and liver. Coupled with related harmful activities, such as smoking while chewing, qat can significantly shorten the lifespan of the heavy chewer. Qat is also considered to have a negative effect on the Yemeni economy. It is not an exportable product, yet a considerable amount of the country's natural resources, labor force and, perhaps most significantly, water is spent to cultivate the plant. Qat, however, is far more profitable for the rural farmer than produce, a fact that has led to the steady increase in qat production and decreased production of other agricultural products. Others believe that qat is a reason for family breakdown because it strains family financial resources and damages family bonds due to the frequent absence of male family members who chew away from home.



There are certain benefits for a foreign student who chooses to chew qat while in Yemen. Since qat chews are the most prevalent social activity in Yemen, it helps a student infiltrate many circles of Yemeni life. Qat is chewed at weddings, negotiations, government events and even daily working environments. It is so important to Yemen's social, political and economical venues that those who do not chew often find integration into these realms difficult. Some people think that qat makes them physically and mentally active. Yemeni college students often claim qat is an important part of their study practices. In the afternoon, a visitor to Yemen will notice that the majority of men have begun to chew, and it would be difficult to find a taxi driver, for example, who does not begin chewing shortly after lunch. Whatever one's position on qat in Yemeni society, its presence is undeniably pervasive and impossible to ignore.