

21A.506 Section III: Module 1

Summary of “The Politics of Deliberation: *Qāt* Chews as Public Spheres in Yemen”

“The Politics of Deliberation: *Qāt* Chews as Public Spheres in Yemen,” by Lisa Wedeen, is an anthropological analysis of *qāt* chews in Yemen based on over eighteen months of fieldwork in Yemen from 1998 to 2004. Wedeen demonstrates that, despite the absence of a democratic regime in Yemen, citizens enact democratic practices in the form of *qāt* chews, where participants engage in deliberation and criticisms and renegotiate power relationships.

Wedeen argues that the modern conception of democracy is limited and does not encompass other forms of democratic practice such as those present in Yemen. It is widely taken as fact that “in order for a government to be democratic, political succession must be accomplished by competitive elections in which outcomes are uncertain and losing candidates agree to abide by results” (Wedeen 61). This view of democracy is Western-centric and fairly narrow; Wedeen invites us to shift our attention away from formalized definitions of democracy to focus instead on the “phenomenological dimensions of participatory politics” (Wedeen 63).

Qāt chews are an example of such participatory politics in a society where democracy, in the sense of contested electoral outcomes, does not prevail. *Qāt* chews in Yemen are “lively public sphere activities” (Wedeen 60), analogous to European salons and coffeehouses in the 17th and 18th centuries. *Qāt* is a leafy stimulant drug chewed during structured conversations which occur regularly, where strangers “debate critically about literary matters, political life, and social problems” (Wedeen 64). They discuss current events, listen to guest speakers, read aloud articles from newspapers, and debate amongst themselves.

As is the case in most publics, *qāt* chews are segregated in terms of sex, and hierarchies of power and social status are reproduced. More men chew than women, and men’s conversation tends to be about political issues or current event, whereas women’s is generally centered around family members. The seating positions in a *qāt* chew reflects participants’ ranking with respect to one another; more prestigious people sit near the head of the room, whereas lower status people sit close to the door.

The discussions that occur in a *qāt* chew are often “refracted through newspapers, intellectuals’ conferences, and mosque sermons” (Wedeen 66). Therefore, *qāt* chews can be seen as a public in a sense because participants are “debating issues that others are discussing, thereby constituting a public in a broad, anonymous, non-face-to-face sense” (Wedeen 66). Thus, they are active and anonymous participants, two characteristics of a ‘public’ according to Habermas, and as described by Warner. In addition to being public, *qāt* chews are political in four senses: actual policy decisions are made, information about political events is shared and discussed, power relationships between elites and constituencies are negotiated, and the public of a *qāt* chew is a “lived forum for political self-fashioning” (Wedeen 67). While policy-making may not be democratic, the other three senses certainly have democratic components. In short, *qāt* chews enable the “performance of oppositional, critical publics” (Wedeen 68).

Wedeen demonstrates that *qāt* chews are intrinsically democratic, despite the absence of a democratic regime in Yemen. They “promote citizen awareness and produce subjects who critically debate political issues” (Wedeen 72). They are sites where discussions between citizens and politicians can occur, and these discussions are often be circulated to the political elite, who find out what is being discussed and what positions citizens are taking regarding issues. While elections may be flawed, *qāt* chews allow and encourage citizens to act politically nonetheless. They enable citizens to discuss strategies, take action, and try to influence policy. Even if their actions are futile, since corruption abounds and bribes are common, *qāt* chews produce public awareness and could, in some cases, promote collective action against the regime.

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