

## Food and Morality in Yemen

*Anne Meneley*

I was sick and moaning after our first meal upon arriving in Yemen's capital, Sana'a. I may have unwittingly taken a sip from the water glass set out on the table. It was not the food, but the water in which the food was washed or cooked that made me sick, as Yemen's water supply was certainly not safe at the time. At the American Institute for Yemeni Studies, a hostel where many academics stay on their way to and from their field sites, a seasoned American scholar of religious studies hurled a bottle of Pepto-Bismol at me, and berated me for being so naive as to travel without it. Soon, I was carrying the pink bottle with me everywhere, furtively taking swigs as one might from a hip flask. Our three months in the capital were spent studying Arabic with a tutor every day, and making countless trips to the Yemen Center for Research and Studies and the visa office, in an attempt to get permission to go to Zabid, where I had planned to carry out my field research. My husband and I and the director of the institute often had lunch at a somewhat depressing little spot down the street from the institute, run by the son of a Vietnamese mother and a Yemeni father who was said to have fought in the Vietnam War. They served a lukewarm, watery sort of Vietnamese soup without spices and slabs of fried *dayrak* (kingfish), an oily fish which to this day I cannot abide.

My main culinary pastime in the capital was an endless quest for meals that would not make me sick: With our Arabic tutor, Ibrahim, we often went out for *ful* (fava beans) which was made in stone pots in a furnace so hot no parasites could have possibly survived. *Salta*, a meat stew seasoned with fenugreek, was cooked in a similar fashion. We also made occasional trips to a beloved Lebanese restaurant for hummus and French fries; I am sure they served more exciting dishes, but my tender stomach craved something safe and bland. I later heard that this restaurant, sadly, had been destroyed in the 1994 Yemeni Civil War. My husband sampled the deep-fried locusts in the *sug*, which he said were like a salty, crunchy snack, but I stuck to getting my salt and crunch from pistachio

nuts. Another culinary specialty, from the coastal plain of the Red Sea, the Tihamah, where we would eventually end up, was fresh fish, slapped on the side of a wood-burning furnace and served with delicious round flat wheat loaves adorned with *hubb as-sawda* (black cumin seeds).

We were eventually allowed to make our way to Zabid in June 1989, after a three-month delay in the capital. While most of Yemen is mountainous and cool, Zabid is located on the humid Tihamah, where T. E. Lawrence, among others, suffered mightily from the blistering heat. We arrived while Zabid's torrid summer was in full swing, which was a shock to our Canadian physiology. Had we not had such difficulty getting permission to go to Zabid in the first place, I would have been tempted to flee the first day. The hottest season was also the most beloved social season: the wedding season. Almost immediately after moving into our house, I was invited to dozens of parties, including wedding lunches, which I initially viewed with absolute dread. One of the reviewers of my book *Tournaments of Value* noted that, while I had plenty to say about competitive hospitality in Zabid, I did not actually mention much about food itself.

When I contemplate why it was that I published so few of my own stories about Zabidi food, I am sure it was because they were often, at least at first, narratives of humiliation. I hated eating in public in Zabid for at least the first four months of my stay. This was not because Yemeni food is inherently hateful or even that unfamiliar, aside from the above-mentioned deep-fried locusts (and sheep's eyeballs and camel-hump fat). In fact, in Zabid, a formal lunch included boiled lamb, rice, potatoes in a tomato sauce, a salad of green onions and tomatoes, okra, and a *maraq* (lamb broth) in which freshly made bread (made from wheat or sorghum, both delicious) is dipped. Dessert consisted of a pastry dish called *bint as-sahn*, or "daughter of the plate," a thinly layered pastry adorned with honey and *hubb as-sawda* (black cumin seeds).

My discomfort about eating in public, therefore, was not really about the food, for which I eventually became quite nostalgic. Nor was it merely because of the food's uncomfortable physiological aftershocks: I was plagued by a parasitical infection I'd gotten from the water, so the ingestion of food was not always followed by a gratifying fullness, but by pain, embarrassing rumblings, and wild-eyed searches for a bathroom, in case my regular doses of Pepto-Bismol or Imodium failed.

Rather, in retrospect, it seems as if my dislike of mealtimes stemmed from my anxiety about being unable to accomplish feats that were ordinary for everyone else I was with, and hence feeling like I was sticking out like a sore thumb. I spent the first few months trying to acquire the everyday "techniques of the body," to use Marcel Mauss's evocative phrase, which are so engrained that the Zabidis take them for granted. I would join the women squatting on the ground around large communal dishes, each person helping herself from the many plates of food. My problem was that squatting was not a technique of the body I could easily accomplish, so I lived in constant fear of flipping over backwards. Like

many Muslims, Yemenis eat only with the right hand. My Yemeni hosts often plunked down a large portion of steaming lamb right in front of me. I found myself struggling to tear off a bit of boiling meat with only my right hand. And I was befuddled by the Yemeni technique of tucking a small handful of rice between one's forefingers and thumb, which was then popped elegantly into one's mouth with nary a grain wasted. In contrast, I ended up with a few grains in my mouth and the rest on my dress. Of course, techniques of the body such as eating are so deeply inculcated as to be taken as natural, so the Zabidi reactions to their awkward guest (my status as an anthropologist was never very interesting for them) from Canada would inevitably include a murmur of surprise: "My God, they don't even know how to *eat* in Canada." Someone else was likely to holler to my embarrassment: "Bring her a *spoon*" (a utensil which I never found of much use when addressing the boiling meat). A child might be sent to bring me a cushion when my wobbling got too obvious. Also be aware that at mealtimes, as at all times in Zabid, I was too hot, and the relentless humidity rendered me a good deal sweatier than is optimal for social engagements.

Any pause in my pace of eating would prompt the hostesses to urge me, the guest, to eat. The cries of "Eat, eat!" would ring out. Or else indignant questions such as, "Why are you being shy?" or, "Aren't you comfortable here?" often made me struggle to continue, despite my difficulty in keeping food in hand as it travelled to mouth. When I had had enough, or at least enough trying, I would rise, saying the only acceptable thing to get oneself out of eating, "*Al-hamdulillah* (Thanks be to God), I'm full" and escape my hostesses' protests that I had hardly eaten a thing. While I was self-conscious about being the center of attention, this urging of the guest to be comfortable and eat her fill was integral to proper moral comportment in Zabid.

Even the young children were trained in this generous behavior: Children as young as three years of age would offer me bits of food or join the others in urging me to eat. This, I might add, is in stark contrast to our own children, who are taught to consider their own needs first. Children were often sent over in the mornings by their mothers or fathers to bring my husband and me fresh limes, dates, or other fruits from their agricultural estates, which surrounded Zabid. I kept a stock of gum, candies, and *batates Nom'an*, small bags of potato chips adorned with the characters from *Ifta ya-Simsim*, the Arabic Sesame Street (the show from which I first learned to count in Arabic), to gift to the young food deliverers. In this way, I entered into food exchange relationships with my tiny, curious neighbors, who loved coming over to our house.

## Gender and Food

In Zabid, we faced a different set of circumstances than we had in the capital, because we began to conform to local gender segregation practices, which were

essential for proper moral comportment. In Sana'a, it was possible for foreign women to go to restaurants (although I would not have tried it without male accompaniment) that Yemeni women would not have gone to, or to go to male *qat* chews, which no self-respecting Yemeni woman would ever have done. But in Zabid, by conforming to gender segregation, I learned much more about how food is prepared and ingested along gendered lines. While it is still commonplace for people to assume gender segregation is the worst form of oppression, it has its advantages. While women do all the cooking in the home, men do all the shopping. So that meant that in the late morning, while I was hanging out with my friends in cool, dark rooms of the old mud-brick houses with their distinctive elegant facades, cracking *zayaka* (toasted watermelon seeds) with my teeth to get the tiny seed-meat, my husband was out in the sweltering sun at the open-air fruit and vegetable markets, haggling over a few cents for a bunch of bananas or a papaya. For the most part, he enjoyed bargaining, but there were occasions when he would have been happy to pay a little extra to get out of the hot sun. If he had, however, he would have been berated by his friends for being a fool *and* driving the prices up. Since food, aside from dry goods, is never kept in the house (very few people had refrigerators and those who did turned them off at night to save electricity), shopping for fruit and vegetables, and fish or meat (caught or slaughtered every morning) was a daily event. After that, men went to the *qat* market to haggle for *qat* for their families, including their wives; women in Zabid, unlike in some parts of Yemen, were daily chewers, at least the married women.

Some older women, over 60, who had been through much in their lives, no longer cared about gender segregation, or veiling for that matter. Our neighbor across the street, Alia, was one such woman. Her husband had died several years before, when her now 20-year-old daughter was still very young. Her daughter wore the all-enveloping black *shaydar*, like the majority of young Zabidi women. But Alia and my elderly landlady wore short-sleeved, midriff-baring shirts and ankle-length skirts while at home or in our neighborhood, dressing more formally only when they left our narrow street. We parked our small jeep outside of Alia's front door; whenever my husband drove up, she would come out and yell, "Whoaa Faidhallah," and they would have a small chat.<sup>1</sup> Alia made and sold *lahuh*, delicious sorghum bread—rich and chewy with bubbles on top. As soon as we moved in, we became regular customers.

The food was bought and delivered by men, but everyday food, such as rice and potatoes, was prepared over tiny propane burners by women. The key spice was a *zahawig* (chili relish) made of hot peppers and garlic, which were ground on enormous mortars and pestles. If invited for lunch by close friends, I would go over early to "help" prepare the meal. I would usually be given some simple task, such as peeling garlic or chopping onions, but it was always clear that they thought that I was monumentally incompetent in the kitchen, an opinion which was not unfounded. One of my favorite dishes was made of ground camel meat

prepared with onions and hot peppers and covered with a pastry topping. It was then sent out to a bakery that had huge wood-burning furnaces. The other pastry dish, *bint as-sahn*, was also sent out to these local bakers. I realize now that I never actually saw one of these bakeries, because while women always prepared the food, the bakers were men, so one of the young boys in the family would be assigned the task of taking the prepared food to the oven and bringing it back after it was baked. Like shopping for food in the market, interacting with the male bakers was a job for men or teenage boys. While in small families, men, women, and children would eat together, in Zabid's *kabir* (so called, great families), they never did, because men would always have to be prepared for unexpected guests to drop by. Some poorer clients ate with the men of the great families every day. So the women and children would eat separately, often entertaining female guests or neighbors for lunch.

I really did not know much about cooking at that stage in my life so, just as Steve Caton recounts in his lovely ethno-memoir of fieldwork in Yemen (2005), we ate a lot of odd tuna conglomerations when we cooked in our own home. While I still like tuna-fish sandwiches, which got me through writing my dissertation, combining heaps of tuna and rice and whatever vegetables we could find into a kind of hash did not constitute a dish that we have ever remembered fondly. When I was given a portion of meat on *'id al-adha* (the feast after Ramadan where sheep are slaughtered), I protested that I didn't know what to do with it. My landlady was appalled by my lack of culinary skills, and because she insisted that it was *baraka* (a blessing), I felt compelled to take it. The other food that was offered on religious occasions was *shafut*, (sorghum bread soaked in watery yogurt and covered in green onions). I literally could not eat this dish without becoming immediately sick, so for months I would accept it and then throw it out, until I realized that it was perfectly acceptable to say that certain foods did not please you. After all, Yemenis, like people everywhere, have particular food aversions and preferences. As long as you established that you did not disdain all Yemeni food, saying that you did not like a particular dish was fine.

Yemenis, like other Arabs, are famed for their generosity and hospitality, which was always dispensed in gender-segregated contexts. What counted for hospitality in Zabid was not necessarily the food itself, as the meal was fairly standard. For the most notable hospitality events, the wedding feasts, the meat and rice were cooked in enormous caldrons by the *muzayyinah*, a status group comprised of butchers, barbers, and circumcisers. The female neighbors would join the women of the host family to prepare the rest of the dishes, the salads and pastries, in evening work parties, which were usually a great deal of fun. The men would have their wedding meal and *qat* chew on one day, and the women would feast the following day. What was really important, for both men's and women's feasts, was the quantity of the food: It was a great shame for a host family to leave a guest hungry. At one wedding, a low-status man, who was one of the

last to eat, exclaimed loudly after lunch that he was still starving. The higher-status guests are served first, but it is a great shame not to have enough food even for the lowliest guest. In this context, a guest is a guest and should be well fed, regardless of status. The neighboring families who heard this comment (it went quickly from the men's gossip circuit into the women's) displayed a certain *schadenfreude*, even glee, at the host family's failure and the besmirching of their honorable status. Despite wealth, considerable landholdings, and influence in the schools and local politics, there was much back-talk about how the family was miserly, how the house was never prepared for guests and that it took forever for guests to even be brought a glass of tea. Talk about the stinginess of the offering of food and drink was skillfully managed: A gossip was careful to know her audience. Had this kind of gossip become known to the host family, there would have been hell to pay, as stinginess, the opposite of the much-praised generosity, is considered a sin in Islam. Proper moral comportment in hospitable behavior was essential for a family's honorable status.

The food product that was used to make qualitative distinctions between guests at weddings was honey. Each region of Yemen has its own honey, the taste of which varies according to the kind of plant on which the bees feed. The honey from the Hadramawt region of Yemen was most prized, and the most expensive. The higher the status of the guest, the higher the quality and more expensive the honey he or she was served, usually poured over the pastry dish *bint as-sahn*. At one wedding, a host eager to show his hospitality to the foreign guest, or perhaps to make sport of him, poured honey directly into my husband's mouth, practically drowning him; this was not at all a regular practice. Yemeni honey has an international reputation: At a honey store in the Old City in Jerusalem, Yemeni honey was accorded a place of honor and was of the most expensive for sale in the shop, which featured honey from all over the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> When I returned to Yemen in 1999, I was surprised to see a very fancy honey store on one of Sana'a's main shopping streets. It resembled the designer olive oil and gourmet food shops found in North American and European cities of late: clean, uncluttered presentations of expensive food items, elegantly packaged. It stood out quite markedly from the usual Yemeni food shops, which tend to be cluttered or presented in the old style of the *sug* [market]. I later heard that this business was a front for Osama bin-Laden's shady interventions in Yemeni politics, although like many rumors in Yemen, this was never confirmed or denied.

Social interactions involving food were occasions when people would position themselves in solidarity with or opposition to others. Over time, one neighboring family started to send one of its young children over in the morning to invite us to join the family for lunch. These casual invitations were an index of closeness, as was the meal itself: We would often be served fish in a tomato sauce, whereas a more formal lunch, as described above, would always include boiled lamb. The family would say, "See how much we love you? We're comfortable to invite you

no matter what we're eating!" A family with whom there was a more competitive relationship would never be invited under such circumstances. A guest would never offer to bring a substantial dish, as this would imply that the host family was unable to afford to feed guests properly, or worse, that the guest feared the host family would be stingy with food. Nonetheless, I felt the need to bring something; we could not reciprocate with a lunch because no one, not even me, had faith in my cooking skills. I was also "alone" (i.e., the only woman in my house), and hosting meals required considerable female labor. When we were in the capital, I would stock up on the kinds of candy, chocolate, and nuts that could not be purchased in Zabid. Upon arriving to someone's house for lunch, I would, without ceremony, hand over the superfluous treats to my hostess, who would chide me saying, "Shame. Why did you trouble yourself?" I would reply, "Oh, these aren't for you, but for the children," which was acceptable.<sup>3</sup>

### Food and Global Political Economies

Practices surrounding the acquisition, preparation, and consumption of food in Zabid are inflected by gender and religion, although people never actually discussed it in such a fashion, as it was simply a part of "practical consciousness." But food production and consumption were also idioms by which moral judgments about global political economies are made. A Zabidi social norm I found it difficult to conform to was the practice of not talking during meals—proof that techniques of the body, once acquired, are as difficult to let go of as new ones are to acquire. The Zabidis tend to eat swiftly and silently. My inclination to chat while eating was indulged but perceived as somewhat bizarre. Yet these mealtime chats, though atypical, were moments when my Zabidi friends made moral evaluations about life in the West. The Yemenis would note that we eat from separate plates, whereas they eat communally, implicitly criticizing the individualization of our society versus the communalism of theirs. A Yemeni friend who married a Dutch woman said that the most jarring thing for him was to go to someone's house for dinner and to have the plates already made up. So instead of allowing the guests to eat as much as they want, the host rations the amount of food that the guests can consume without asking for seconds. To have to ask for more food in Yemen is embarrassing both for the host and the guest.

As I was told by my Yemeni Arabic tutor in the capital, Yemenis find it discomfiting when they are asked by North American or European hosts if they would like something to drink. If a Yemeni guest did agree to a cup of tea, he would further be discomfited by the question, "Do you want sugar in your tea?" Sugar is an index of generosity; to ask if someone wants sugar implies that the host or hostess is a *bakhil* or *bakhila* (miser). In Yemeni households, the tea would simply be brought to the guests. Any time a visitor enters the home of

another family in Zabid, he or she (hosted by family members of the appropriate gender) is brought something hot and sweet to drink, or something cool and sweet. The hot drinks are either tea or *gishr*, a drink made from coffee husks and flavored with ginger, cardamom, and sugar. The cool drinks include a vile fruit syrup called Vimto mixed with water and added sugar, fruit juice, or Canada Dry Cola. This last drink constitutes Canada's sole fame in Yemen, and it is not even sold in Canada. In fact, when we first said we were from Canada, the children would giggle madly and intone, "Canada Dry Cooola"!<sup>4</sup>

While it is the height of rudeness to ask a guest if they want something, as it implies that the guest is not really welcome or the host is reluctant to give, it is also insulting for a guest to refuse to consume what is offered. When I was in Zabid in 1999, for only a short visit, I was accompanied to the home of my former neighbors by a friend, Aysha, who lived in another neighborhood. Aysha seemed very uncomfortable. I later found out that the two families had been involved in a dispute over land, and when the hostess did not ask after Aysha's parents and family, she was so indignant that she left without accepting a glass of tea or *gishr*, deliberately insulting the family.

Sugar is what makes a drink an appropriate item for hospitality. As in our own lexicon, "sweetness" is thought to be a positive quality of a person. In Yemen, as mentioned above, it is also thought to be an indication of the generosity, and not to put sugar in tea or *gishr*, or to ask the guests to help themselves, indicates that the host or hostess is a miser, which is one of the harshest terms of moral opprobrium. An exception is that when visiting following a death, *gishr* is served without sugar; guests appear without makeup or gold jewelry, and sit on couches shorn of their comfortable cushions. All of this signifies that it is not a time for generosity, comfort, or display of any kind. A host family that serves sweet drinks at a funeral reception will be the subject of much negative talk.

If I ever slacked in eating when invited out for lunch, women would ask me, "Do you think the food is better in Canada?" which usually led to a discussion of what in fact we ate in Canada. They asked me if we served lamb to guests, and when I admitted that in my Albertan family, beef was a more common prestige meat, they looked disgusted. I never once was offered beef in Zabid. (I understood why when I later saw the very sad looking Yemeni cows, staggering about in the sweltering heat, if one can forgive the small ethnocentric judgment about the cows of the Other.) I noted that camel meat was completely unknown in Canada, whereas it was common enough in Zabid. Because camels are so big, they are not slaughtered every day as are sheep, since all the meat must be sold and cooked very soon after it is slaughtered or it will go bad. The day before a camel is to be slaughtered, it is marched around Zabid with a long necklace of jasmine flowers around its neck. The butchers ring bells and announce the forthcoming slaughter loudly. The cynical amongst my friends swore that the butchers would march a nice, young, plump camel around the town, and then slaughter a stringy old beast the next day!

Elsewhere in the Middle East (see Limbert 2010 on Oman), or even elsewhere in Yemen (see Maclagan 2000 for highland Yemen), women's parties tend to be occasions where food is served, but Zabidi women's parties, held in the evening, center around *qat*. *Qat* is a leaf that contains a mild amphetamine-like substance that tastes roughly like what one would imagine chewing a hedge might taste like. Guests bring their own *qat*. The hostess' hospitality focuses on an initial glass of tea or *gishr*—thought to be appropriate for countering the dehydrating effects of *qat*—and the *mada'a*, which is a tall water pipe in which uncured tobacco is smoked. While I recognize that the consumption of strange, preferably mind-altering substances may be part of an anthropological desire for exotica, I loved *qat* chewing, which I found much less difficult than mealtimes. And a little mild amphetamine after a long, hot day in Zabid was welcome. In Yemen, *qat* chewing is a practice that people are attached to affectively and which represents positive sociality among human beings; it is said to define “Yemeniness” in a distinct way. Talk, food, and *qat* all occupy the mouth, but there is a complex relationship among them. The verb *khazzan* (to chew) is used to refer to the activity whereby one consumes *qat*, but instead of chewing and swallowing as one does with food, one stores the chewed leaves in one's right cheek. One obviously cannot chew and eat at the same time, but chewing *qat* without eating a proper, hearty meal beforehand was thought to be dangerous for one's health. *Qat* is also an appetite suppressant, so people eat very lightly afterward, if at all. Its other effect on the digestive tract is to cause constipation, which I actually found to be a useful antidote for the consequences of my parasite-ridden intestinal tract.

In the capital, we mainly chewed with Ibrahim's friends, male university professors, and the more mature Peace Corp volunteers who were ready to accept the local stimulant and the sociality associated with it, as opposed to those who were trying, probably futilely, to get high by smoking nutmeg or banana peels. As I began chewing *qat* on a regular basis in Zabidi women's circles, people would say to me, “You chew *qat*, you smoke the *mada'a*, you dress modestly, *khalas* (it's over), you're a Yemeni now.” For an anthropologist, *qat* chewing is a godsend: Amongst women, *qat* is exchanged fast and furiously and observing and participating in these exchanges revealed much about local alliances and hierarchies.<sup>5</sup> When people chew *qat*, they are also just sitting around chewing the fat of their daily existence, which is what we as anthropologists want to hear. Along with eating Yemeni food, chewing *qat* indicates that you are not a sanctimonious Westerner, as every Yemeni is aware that foreign aid donors routinely describe *qat* chewing as the source of the myriad Yemeni problems.

Women did not chew as much *qat* as men, approximately one-third to one-quarter of what their male counterparts chewed. Despite the fact that *qat* is an appetite suppressant, they felt it was important to have something in one's stomach after chewing, sometimes only a glass of milk and cookies, or sometimes a teenage boy would be sent out to fetch *mudarbash* (deep fried spiced sorghum

balls). The women and girls would squat around this beloved local fast food and break off bits of the steaming dough and dunk them in the accompanying thin, but spicy, tomato sauce.

Despite ambivalence about *qat* chewing—several times I heard people, happily chewing away, say that *qat* was responsible for Yemen being *ta'ban* (tired)—they still claimed that *qat* was superior to our leisure drug, alcohol. Although several of my field note entries began with “Vaidila is talking about cold beer again,” neither my husband nor I drank publicly in Zabid. We did admit to doing so in our home country. The use of ingestion practices—the use of food, alcohol, tobacco, or drugs of various ilks—to define and differentiate one group or people from another is well documented in anthropology. So, too, is the use of consumption practices to make moral evaluations of people. To say someone was a bad person in Zabid, one would say, “He drinks.” Although some Zabidi men did drink alcohol, especially after chewing a great deal of *qat* (which can cause sleeplessness), it was generally considered to be a grave moral flaw.

After the Christmas we spent in Yemen in 1989, my father sent me a photo of the familial Christmas dinner table in Alberta, replete with roasted turkey and full wine glasses. When they saw the picture of the twenty-five-pound turkey, the Zabidis exclaimed, “What on earth do you feed your chickens?” I tried to deflect questions about the content of the wine glasses, knowing that the consumption of alcohol was not approved of by pious Zabidi Muslims. But I noticed that the mere mention of Christmas was enough to evoke shocked glances from Zabidi women, followed by averted eyes and a quick change of subject. I was quite mystified by this reaction, thinking that surely they must know that we celebrated different religious occasions, and after all, Jesus plays an important role in Islamic theology, although he is described as a prophet, not the son of God. Eventually, a Zabidi man told my husband that he knew all about Christmas: the excess food and drink that would drive people to turn off the lights and have sex with anyone, their mother or their brother, anyone. This apocryphal story had gained a foothold amongst Zabidi women, although I eventually managed to convince them that Christmas was actually a much tamer affair where I grew up!

Videos of Bollywood movies were a common backdrop to women’s socializing; the movies, even though no one understood Hindi, were popular for their music, dancing, and fashion. Also popular, for reasons still not entirely clear to me, were videos of the World Wrestling Federation (WWF), which one would not have thought would appeal to pious and proper Zabidi Muslim women. These shows were considered the epitome of vulgarity by my Irish Catholic mother, so I was mystified as to why similarly pious folk would enjoy them. When I pointed out that these wrestling competitions were all staged, I elicited an indignant response. An elderly woman sharply contradicted me: These wrestlers were made wild and violent, she said, by the vast quantities of *lahm al khinzeer* (pig meat) that they consumed. The consumption of pork, which is forbidden to Muslims and

a meat that is virtually impossible to purchase in Yemen, had a reputation for causing uncontrolled and irrational violence. While they recognized that not all of us were WWF stars, this was an implicit critique, or explanation of, Western intervention in the Middle East, which did seem to them irrational and violent. The first *intifada* in Palestine was going on at the time and daily we would see news reports of armed Israeli soldiers shooting small children for throwing stones. I was routinely asked how the U.S. and Canadian governments could support such irrational, brutal violence toward children. I had no good answer then, and I still do not.

Ramadan presented particular problems for us as everyone knew we were not Muslims, yet for more than a month before Ramadan, they all kept asking us if we would be fasting alongside them. We did not know what to say: We wanted to fit in as much as we could, and we honestly thought that the questioning meant that they thought we should fast. On the first day of Ramadan we tried to fast. We made it until about noon—not so much because of hunger but because of thirst, which we could not tolerate in Zabid’s sweltering heat. As a compromise, we decided that we would not cook anything in the middle of the day. Our kitchen, as in many houses in Zabid, had high walls surrounding it but no ceilings, and we did not want the cooking smells to torment our fasting neighbors. We subsisted quietly on tuna fish sandwiches and boiled water furtively drunk. We were invited to a neighbor’s house to break the fast on the first day of Ramadan: When I was asked if I had fasted, I confessed that I had not and the woman replied, “That’s good, because if you had fasted without converting to Islam, we would have thought you were a *himaar* (donkey)!” I would have appreciated knowing that before I spent a month worrying about it! I was also told that Westerners were too morally *da’if* (weak) to fast as the Muslims did. Nonetheless, Ramadan turned out to be one of my favorite times of the year. I took to going over to my friends’ house in the late afternoon to help them prepare food for *iftar* (the special meal to break the fast). As we prepared the food and waited for sundown to break the fast, we also lit coals in preparation for those older women who wanted to *yishrub* (“drink”) the water pipe, after having a quick glass of water and a date. For many of them, the prohibition on smoking demanded more of a sacrifice than giving up food for the day.

Even though I was not fasting, I still got a sense of the community generated by this collective ritual. After the *iftar* meal, groups of women from the same neighborhood or family would go to make short visits to all the families in Zabid with whom they had connections. Generally, one would stay only for a quick glass of the dreaded Vimto with added sugar. I could not abide it, and my best friend, Magda, whom I often went out visiting with, told the hostesses that I was prone to a condition known as *barud* (“cold”), where one’s extremities would suddenly become cold and clammy despite the heat. According to Magda, this condition is brought on by having too many sugary drinks, so with her

intervention, I was allowed to drink incensed water instead of Vimto.<sup>6</sup> (Another time when I had been diagnosed with *barud* by Magda, she and her mother burned the soles of my feet with hot coals to warm up my limbs. Once was enough for that treatment!)<sup>7</sup>

Shortly before I left Yemen in 1990, Magda's sister showed me an Egyptian magazine with a picture of George Bush Sr., who was then U.S. president, holding a bunch of broccoli, a vegetable which was unknown in Yemen at the time. She asked me, "Why doesn't he like this *shijara* (tree)?" The irony of this question struck me forcefully: The vast majority of Americans (and Canadians, for that matter) would not even know the name of the Yemeni president, let alone his food preferences or dislikes. This small, seemingly insignificant anecdote seemed to me to capture the inequities of global political economies, where the everyday food habits of a U.S. president become global news, while the news from Yemen would suggest that Yemenis "eat" only *qat* and bullets, giving no sense of how everyday social reproduction through food is accomplished. Yet, for the Zabidis I worked with, how one interacted with food was a central way in which one constituted oneself as a Muslim and as a properly respectful gendered social being, as well as being a powerful medium for commenting on, and making moral evaluations about, power inequities between the West and the Middle East.

**Acknowledgments.** My first thanks go to the friends in Zabid, who fed me and taught me about food and much else. Thanks to our American friends who fed us in the capital, to the American doctor, who cured me of parasites and much more, and to my parents-in-law and my parents, who thought it was their duty to feed us as much as possible when we unexpectedly had to return home for a month, sick and emaciated. Thanks to Vaidila Banelis, Bruce Grant, Paul Manning, and Donna Young for their comments on this paper. Thanks to Leo Coleman for inviting me to join this volume. Writing this paper sparked a memory: The two beautiful frying pans in which we cooked our meals in Zabid were given to us by Cynthia Myntti, who had been charged with closing down Selma al-Radi's house in Sana'a and disbursing her belongings. I did not meet the indomitable, unforgettable al-Radi until I went back to Yemen in 1999. It was with great sadness that I heard of her recent death. This paper is dedicated to my mother-in-law, Nijole Banelis, who finally taught me how to cook. My Zabidi friends would appreciate her gracious hosting.

## Notes

1. My husband's Lithuanian name, Vaidila, seemed less confusing in Arabic than in English. People simply substituted an "f" for the "v," which doesn't exist in Arabic.

2. Honey is also valued for its curative properties, especially in curing stomach ailments.
3. I would also bring perfume from the capital, where there was a much wider selection than in Zabid. This would be tucked away and eventually used as an element of hospitality, as it was sprayed on guests' hands after they had washed from the meal, and any female guest arriving for a visit would be offered perfume.
4. Political posters of the president of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Salih, also featured Canada Dry Cola, "blending domestic kitsch with global capitalism" (Wedeen 2008: 73).
5. For greater detail about *qat* exchanges, see Meneley 1996.
6. After one particularly bad bout with giardia, we went to Sana'a, where I was given the awful Flagyl to treat it. This drug is very harsh, making one feel as if one had had one's stomach cleaned out with a toilet brush. When we returned to Zabid, I was determined not to get infected again, but after a twelve-hour wedding party where I refused anything to drink, I was so dehydrated that I could hardly think straight. We boiled water in our own home, but drank water in the homes of our Zabidi hosts, as we did not want to reject what we were offered, and in any event, dehydration was more of an immediate threat than parasites. We finally got cured after we returned to Canada.
7. A further analysis of this treatment, as well as the use of food avoidances in the case of illness, can be found in Meneley 1998.

