# DYLAN IN YEMEN

*They'll stone you when you're trying to be so good*
*They'll stone you just like they said they would*
*They'll stone you when you're trying to go home*
*They'll stone you when you're there all alone*
*But I would not feel so all alone*
*Everybody must get stoned*

Bob Dylan wasn't thinking of Yemen when he wrote *Rainy Day Woman #12 and #35* for his *Blonde on Blonde* album in 1966 - but might be now. "Everybody must get stoned" is the motto of the country.

I'm in Sanaa, the capital of Yemen, where all those anti-government demonstrations are taking place according to the media, where the next Arab Dictatorship is going to fall as the Great Arab Revolt sweeps ineluctably across the Middle East.

Except there are no demonstrations here. No tension. No palpable anger. There is peace and

calm instead. Everywhere I go, I'm asked where I'm from, and when I say "America," everyone smiles, nods, and says "Welcome."

Every man carries a large knife called a *jambiya* that could kill you. But its prominent display worn on the center of a large belt, is symbolic. To even grasp the handle in anger brings great shame - and to pull it out of its sheath and threaten to use it (much less actually use it) against someone brings a lengthy jail sentence.

Every woman, with the exception of young daughters of the upper class, wears a black *burqa* so you can only see her eyes. Yet Yemenis are not *Wahhabis* and are contemptuous of the Saudi version of Islam.

Most Yemenis are not even Sunnis, and are Shias instead who despise the Shia radicalism of the Mullahs in Iran. They ascribe to a Shia sect called *Zaidi Islam*. Most Shias are "twelvers" believing in the "Twelfth Imam" who disappeared in 874 as a young child and remains the "Hidden Imam" who will return someday to establish an Islamic Kingdom on earth as Islam's Messiah.

Zaidis, by contrast, are "fivers" who recognize Zaid ibn Ali (695-740) as the legitimate Fifth Imam, not his brother as do the twelvers. Thus there is for them no hidden imam and his apocalyptic return. Their imams are the descendants of Zaid to this day. Zaidis no longer preach *jihad* against infidels. Theirs has become a devout yet moderate form of Islam. Violence in Yemeni culture is tribal, not religious.

That culture is one of the world's oldest, going back 4,000 years. Yet it is tragically nearing extinction - because everybody must get stoned. Yemen is killing itself with addiction to a drug called *qat*.

*They'll stone you when you're walking on the street*
*They'll stone you when you're trying to keep your seat*
*They'll stone you when your walking on the floor*
*They'll stone you when your walking to the door*
*But I would not feel so all alone*
*Everybody must get stoned*

Let's quickly recap those 4000 years. A Qahtani culture arose in what is now Yemen around 2000 BC, based on trade along the Red Sea coast all the way to Egypt, primarily with aromatic gums from trees and bushes that flourished in the Yemeni highlands.

There is a mural in the palace of Egypt's Queen Hatshepsut, who died in 1458 BC, depicting sacks of the most famous of these aromatic gums. We call it frankincense, as it was brought to Europe 2,700 years later by Frankish (French) knights during the Crusades. It's the milky sap of the *Boswellia sacra* tree.

Another of the gums, myrrh from the *Commiphora myrrha* tree, was a principal ingredient used in embalming Egyptian mummies.

Around 1200 BC, the Qahtani culture was supplanted by that of Saba with its capital at Marib east of present-day Sanaa. The Sabaeans constructed one of the great engineering marvels of the ancient world, an enormous earthen dam - the Marib Dam - and an advanced irrigation system enabling them to grow lots of food plus *boswellia* and *commiphora* trees, and so became legendarily wealthy.

So wealthy that the Old Testament tells of their queen - another name for Saba is Sheba - visiting King Solomon (1011-931 BC) in Jerusalem. Yes, the Queen of Sheba was from Yemen.

For the Greeks, Sheba or Sabaean Yemen was known as *Eudaimon Arabia*; for the Romans, it was *Arabia Felix* - Greek and Latin for fortunate or successful Arabia. Frankincense and myrrh was prized as perfume, incense, and medicine worth their weight in gold throughout the Roman Empire, Persia, and India.

By the AD 200's, Sheba was a Christian kingdom. A rival kingdom arose, that of Himyar. Strengthened by a large influx of Jews from throughout the Middle East, Himyar absorbed Sheba and declared Judaism to be the state religion. The Himyarites fell to the Persians in the 500s who adopted Islam in the 600s, and Yemen subsequently became a squabble of contested small regions ruled by local Zaidi imams.

The tribal imams maintained their rule, collectively known as the Zaidi Imamate, for twelve centuries, while various Islamic colonists, from the Fatamids in Egypt to the Ottoman Turks, annexed certain coastal areas. Then came the British, who captured the port of Aden for a coaling station enroute to India in 1832 and went on to colonize southern Yemen as the Aden Protectorate.

The Ottomans finally managed to seize Sanaa and northern Yemen in the 1860s, and made a deal with the Brits to divide Yemen in half. British Aden assumed critical strategic importance with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869.

World War I saw the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, with the Zaidi Imamate reestablished in northern Yemen as the Kingdom of Yemen ruled by Imam Yahya. Southern Yemen became the British Crown Colony of Aden.

In 1925, a nomad chieftain from the remote oasis of Najd in central Arabia raised an army of Bedouin nomads and invaded the Kingdom of Hejaz along the Red Sea coast directly to Yemen's north. Seizing the cities of Mecca, Medina, and Jeddah, the chieftain, Ibn Saud, declared himself King of Hejaz-Najd.

The next year, 1926, he invaded Yemen. British forces from Aden kept him from conquering all of

Yemen, but not from seizing Yemen's three northern provinces of Asir, Najran, and Jizan. In 1932, Ibn Saud announced his personal country was to be known as Saudi Arabia. In 1934, he forced Yemen to sign the Treaty of Taïf formally incorporating the three stolen Yemeni provinces into the Saudi state.

After World War II, Yemen became a member state of the United Nations, ruled by Imam Yayah's son Ahmad bin Yahya, who in the 1950s found his country once again under attack by a colonial power, that of Egyptian military dictator Gamal Abdul Nasser (1918-1970, led military coup of King Farouk in 1952).

In 1962, Nasser invaded Yemen with several thousand Egyptian troops to "aid" the "revolutionary forces" his agents had created, replacing the Kingdom of Yemen with a socialist Yemen Arab Republic puppet-government of Nasser and his imperialist partner, the Soviet Union.

A North Yemen Civil War erupted between Egyptian forces and royalist guerrillas. The Soviets riposted by sponsoring Marxist guerrillas calling themselves the National Liberation Front of South Yemen. The British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, surrendered to them at the end of 1967. The Crown Colony of Aden became a colony of the Soviet Union known as the People's Republic of South Yemen.

Meanwhile, North Yemen had become a complete disaster for Nasser. The Saudis were paying and supplying the guerrillas who were shooting Soviet-piloted MiGs out of the sky and costing Nasser $1 million a day to pay for 70,000 occupying Egyptian troops.

Then came Nasser's total humiliation and defeat in the June 1967 Six Day War with Israel. He had to pull out of Yemen entirely, the Saudis paid off all the Yemeni tribes to reconcile, and an independent North Yemen was again established. In 1978, the governor of Taiz, Yemen's second largest city, Ali Abdullah Saleh, became president.

South Yemen became a full-on Marxist tyranny which disintegrated with the rest of the Soviet Empire after the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. By May 1990, Saleh became president of both the North and South in a unified Republic of Yemen. He remains president to this day.

*They'll stone you when you're at the breakfast table*
*They'll stone you when you are young and able*
*They'll stone you when you're trying to make a buck*
*They'll stone you and then they'll say good luck*
*But I would not feel so all alone*
*Everybody must get stoned*

That's the history. Let's talk about *qat*. It's the fresh leaves of the *Catha edulis* tree, which contain the amphetamine *cathionine*. When chewed, it gives the user a sense of heightened alertness and

mild euphoria. Qat chewing has been a Yemeni tradition for centuries, but until recently, was confined to members of the upper class as a once-weekly-only ceremony.

But as the economy under Saleh improved in the 1980s, and Yemenis working throughout the Middle East sent remittances back home, qat became something more and more Yemenis could afford. As qat consumption increased, more and more land was diverted from growing food to growing qat. Yemeni farmers can make five times more money growing qat than grains.

A destructive spiral developed so that today, qat has taken over Yemeni society. Qat use is no longer weekly, it's daily for some 80% of Yemeni men. The average Yemeni household income is $900 a year or less than $3 a day - 20% of which on average in spent on qat. Since qat-chewing is a primarily male activity, and men control the family's income, lots of men make their daily purchase of qat before they buy food for their family.

Everywhere you go in Yemen, you'll see men with golf ball-size bulges of qat in their cheek. Here's a fellow at the spice market in Sanaa - note his *jambiya* knife as well as the qat-bulge and his stoned eyes.

The Saleh government depends on qat taxes for revenue, and has no plans to curtail its cultivation or use. Yemen is more a collection of powerful tribes than a country, functioning as well-armed

mini-states most of which are dependent upon qat income. Any attempt at qat prohibition would cause the economy to collapse and the country to implode in all-out tribal rebellions.

*Well they'll stone you and say that it's the end*
*They'll stone you and then they'll come back again*
*They'll stone you when you're riding in your car*
*They'll stone you when you're playing your guitar*
*Yes but I would not feel so all alone*
*Everybody must get stoned*

Sanaa may be the first capital city in the world to die of thirst. Between 30 to 50% of Yemen's available water is now being used for the irrigation of qat trees which suck water out of the ground like giant straws. The Sanaa aquifer in particular is drying up as its extraction rate is currently 400% over the replenishment rate. Estimates are that Sanaa will run dry by 2017.

The cost of water has tripled in Sanaa just in the last year, with thousands of families buying water from trucks as their taps are dry. And it's not just Sanaa. All but 2 of Yemen's 21 main aquifers are rapidly being depleted. The water basin in Taiz has already collapsed.

Yemen is the poorest country in the entire Arab world. With its once vibrant farming economy replaced by qat, Yemen imports 80% of its food - and one out of every three Yemenis (7 million people) suffers chronic hunger.

The situation is so bizarre that a billion liters of diesel fuel were used last year for pumping water to irrigate qat trees - and the cost of diesel is heavily subsidized by the government. Thus the state spent $700 million last year making the water shortage worse.

Research on qat shows an effect on users that often causes them to be unrealistic and emotionally unstable, manic and hyperactive. Withdrawal can induce depression, nightmares, lethargy, and irritability. Chronic use often causes a dramatic loss of self-control and the ability to inhibit destructive behavior.

Virtually the entire country is stoned on qat. Yemen, it is now observed, is a country that is literally chewing itself to death.

*Well they'll stone you when you are all alone*
*They'll stone you when you are walking home*
*They'll stone you and then say they're all brave*
*They'll stone you when you're set down in your grave*
*But I would not feel so all alone*
*Everybody must get stoned*

There are failed states and then there are hopeless states. An effort to rescue the former may succeed, but not with the latter. That may be the case with Yemen. It doesn't have long to survive intact.

A secessionist movement has once more arisen in Aden. Tribal wars have made the northernmost region bordering Saudi anarchic. Al Qaeda has established a presence among Sunni Yemenis, radicalizing them to launch terrorist attacks on US targets and declare *jihad* against Yemen's majority Zaidi Shia Moslems whom they consider heretics.

40% of Yemenis are unemployed, 80% are chronically stoned, already desperately poor they're getting poorer by the day. Yemen is a beautifully dramatic country with an extraordinary history and a friendly hospitable people. It could make a fortune on tourism alone. But it may be too late.

We all know individuals who destroyed their lives. Countries can do the same. I would really like for there to be hope for Yemen. After all, a place that's been around for 4,000 years may yet have the will to survive. I'm afraid there isn't for a country with *Everybody Must Get Stoned* as its national anthem.

I want to be wrong on this. I want there to be a future for kids like this:

I want the Old City of Sanaa to continue existing:

I want Yemeni families to continue enjoying picnics like this:

I want visitors the world over to come to Yemen to see, in peace and safety, the amazing wonders of Yemen's history like the Rock Palace of al-Dahr:

But it doesn't matter what I want.  What matters is whether an entire country can overcome a suicidal drug addiction.  Yemen is what happens when you think everybody must get stoned.