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Arabic Qahwa and Its Serving as an Element of Cultural Heritage

Bir Kültürel Miras Unsuru Olarak Arap Kahvesi ve Sunumu

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Abstract

Agricultural products principally makes the area where they grow prosper. The coffee tree, which is abundant in the mountains of Yemen, paved the way for the early discovery of coffee by Arabs. Staying green throughout every season of the year (evergreen) and being the centre of interest with its red fruit resembling cherry, this plant was too precious and important to leave unattended. Its benefits to the human body were discovered in ancient times, although by trial or error, and people began to consume coffee in numerous different forms. It is not known whether the history of the coffee bean, the existence of which dates back to pre-Islamic times according to unverified archaeological data, is really as old as thought; however, it can be easily said that its use in the field of health further goes back, as it is mentioned in the records from the Islamic period, which were copyrighted at least in the third century AH.

This produce, which was initially consumed as paste or medicine, has become very popular since the 15th century when it was first turned into a beverage. However, this transformation brought some controversy too. The beverage hovered between “ḥalāl” and “ḥarām” for a long time in numerous regions and cities, such as Egypt, Damascus, Mecca, and Medina, until Arabs living in deserts and rural areas embraced it and deemed it legitimate. Contrary to what Sufis do to their bodies at night for more worshipping, bitter coffee boiled at the first light of the day and served before or after breakfast promotes staying energetic throughout the day. Arabs partly left behind the legitimacy debates by attributing meanings of generosity, honour and hospitality, which they have boasted of having for centuries, to this new drink. As the common perception changed, the honour of a person started to be measured by the courtesy he shows when serving coffee. After a certain time, it became the national drink and got decorated with rituals reflecting Arab customs in the best manner. Cultural rules and rituals have formed over time, such as the utilization of various kinds of tools in its production, the choice of elegant cooking or serving vessels, the coffee prepared in the gentlest way, and the coffee drinker respecting coffee as much as the coffee maker. Moreover, the addition of herbal products such as cardamom, saffron and cinnamon into it gave way to new formulas beneficial to human health. Besides, the character of the beverage, which held the ability to gather people to itself with all its charm, was particularly suitable to address the needs of leaders who desired to gather the scattered clan members together every day. Maybe it was these leaders who were the most interested in coffee. As a result, the tribes embraced and engaged in drinking coffee, which they believed would contribute to them in various ways.

Being as precious for the Arab people as the air that they breathe, coffee entered every single household and has become the main drink in the regions where they live. Unique and strict rules and recipes for making and drinking coffee emerged. Despite the developments in the world conditions causing radical changes in the food culture, traditional Arabic coffee remained a social image that was passed down from generation to generation, as the Arabs were quite determined about this matter. Thus, coffee gained a considerable place in the lives of Arabs, as well as throughout the world. Many were attracted to its bitter taste, while it became a subject of complaint among others. This experience that is passed down to the next generations can be typically observed in all the regions populated by Arabs today. Moreover, it is always desired that there are experts who have mastered this commodity in every community, and opinion leaders who patiently cook it only get respect in return for the service they provide and have absolutely no motivation for

material gains. This study addresses the origination of Arabic coffee, its uniqueness, its place in daily life, its serving, the tools used in preparing and serving coffee, and its transformation into an element of cultural heritage. To elaborate on the subject, classical sources were examined first, and the data in the existing studies were consulted. However, this was not enough, and personal impressions obtained from the visits we made to the coffee houses in the region under the leadership of the al-'Ubaydī tribe in Şanlıurfa were reflected in the text.

Keywords: History of Islam, Culture, Beverage, Coffee, Arabic Clans

Öz

Tarım ürünleri öncelikle buldukları bölgeleri ihya eder prensibi gereği Yemen dağlarında bol miktarda bulunan kahve ağacı, dünyanın pek çok bölgesine kıyasla Arapların kahveyle önceden tanışmalarını sağladı. Dağlarda yılın her mevsimi yeşil kalan ve vişneye benzer kırmızı meyvesiyle ilgileri üzerine toplayan bu bitki başıboş bırakılacak kadar önemsiz ve gereksiz değildi. İnsan bünyesine kattığı faydalar, belki deneme yanılma yöntemiyle de olsa, eski çağlarda tespit edilip tüketimi geciktirilmeden çeşitli formlara dönüştürüldü. Doğrulukları henüz tam olarak teyit edilmeyen arkeolojik verilerde varlığı İslâm öncesine kadar götürülen kahve çekirdeğinin geçmişi bu kadar eski midir bilinmez; fakat en azından hicri üçüncü asırda telif edilen İslâmî dönem kayıtlarında bahse konu olmasıyla sağlık alanında kullanımının çok eskiye dayandığı rahatlıkla söylenebilir.

İlk zamanlar macun veya ilaç formunda tüketilen bu ürün 15. yüzyıldan itibaren artık içecek haline dönüştürülerek oldukça yaygınlaştırıldı. Ancak bu dönüşüm birtakım tartışmaları da beraberinde getirdi. Mısır, Dımaşk, Mekke, Medine vb. şehirlerde uzun süre haram ile caiz arasında gidip gelen içecek, nihayetinde çöllerde ve kırsal alanda yaşayan Arapların sahiplenmesiyle meşruiyet kazandı. Mutasavvıfların daha fazla ibadet için geceleri bedenlerine yaptıkları müdahalenin aksine, günün ilk ışıklarıyla kaynatılmaya başlanıp kahvaltıdan önce ya da sonra ikram amacıyla sunulan acı kahve gün boyu zinde kalmayı önermekteydi. Üstelik bileşenleri arasına kakule, zaferan ve tarçın gibi bitkisel ürünlerin de dâhil edilmesi insan sağlığı açısından yeni bir formülün kapısını aralamaktaydı. Diğer taraftan tüm albenisiyle insanları etrafında toplama kudretini de barındıran içecek, dağınık haldeki kabile mensuplarını her gün bir araya getirmeyi arzulayan liderlerin ihtiyacına cevap verecek nitelikteydi ve belki de en çok onların ilgisini çekmekteydi. Neticede kabileler kendilerine farklı açılardan katkı sağlayacağına inandıkları kahveye yönelerek ona dört elle sarıldılar. İhtiyaçları temin etmenin yanında asırlardır sahip olmakla övündükleri cömertlik, şeref ve misafirperverlik duygularını bu yeni içeceğe izafe ederek meşruiyet tartışmaları kısmen geride bıraktılar. Değişen algıyla birlikte artık kişinin onuru kahve sunarken sergilediği hürmetle ölçülür hale geldi. Bir süre sonra da millî içecek haline dönüşüp örf ve adetleri en iyi şekilde yansıtan ritüellerle süslendi. Yapımında envâî türden aletlerin seferber edilmesi, zarif pişirme veya sunum kaplarının tercihi, en nazik şekilde hazırlanan kahveye; yapanlar kadar içenlerin de saygı göstermesi vb. kültürel hassasiyetler gelişti.

Arabın soluduğu hava kadar kıymetli olan kahvenin girmediği mekân kalmadı ve onların yaşadıkları bölgelerde başlıca içecek oldu. Kendine has kuralları ve esnetilmesi mümkün olmayan tarifleri belirdi. Öyle ki gelişen dünya şartları yemek kültüründe köklü değişikliklere sebebiyet vermesine rağmen, geleneksel Arap kahvesinin nesilden nesle aktarılan bir sosyal imge olarak kalmasına müsaade etti. Çünkü Araplar bu konuda çok kararlı durmaktaydı. Böylece Araplar arasında ve dünya genelinde hatırı sayılır bir yer edindi ve acı tadıyla içenleri kendisine bağladı ya da

acıyla kimilerince şikâyet konusu oldu. Nesilden nesle aktarılan bu tecrübe günümüzde Arapların yoğun olduğu bölgelerin tamamında kendisini göstermektedir. Üstelik her toplulukta mutlaka bu işten anlayan uzmanların olması arzu edilmekte ve onu sabırla pişiren kanaat önderleri hiçbir maddi karşılık beklemeden verdikleri hizmetin karşılığı olarak manevi bir saygı beklemektedir. İşte bu çalışmada Arap kahvesinin ortaya çıkışı, özgünlüğü, günlük yaşantıdaki yeri, kahvenin yapımı, sunumu ve bu işte kullanılan aletler ile kahvenin kültürel mirasa dönüşmesi gibi kahvenin sosyal serüveni üzerinde durulacaktır. Konuyu izahta ilk başta klasik kaynaklara bakılacak ve var olan çalışmalarda verilenlere müracaat edilecek; fakat bunlarla yetinilmeyip Şanlıurfa'daki Ubeydî aşireti öncülüğünde yöredeki kahvehanelere yaptığımız ziyaretlerden elde edilen kişisel izlenimler de metne yansıtılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İslam Tarihi, Kültür, İçecek, Kahve, Arap Kabileleri

Introduction

The powder obtained by grinding the beans of the coffee tree, which is a member of the rubiaceae family, becomes a delicate beverage when heated in water. This beverage which is called "qahwa" or "coffee" throughout the world, is a very important commodity for people desiring to meet their everyday caffeine needs. Its main component is the coffee bean, and it can be prepared with different recipes for the reason that it is a flexible drink appealing to the palates of various communities. The Arabic coffee that is predominant in major parts of the Middle East is the culmination of one of these unique recipes as well. However, some aspects of Arabic coffee are still shrouded in mystery, and certain questions are yet to be answered.

It is interesting that mysteries are present about the history of coffee, given that it is a relatively new subject compared to the ones in the prehistoric and Middle Ages. What is even more interesting is that this beverage, having a history of 500 years in the Arabic communities, has rapidly become a national drink and formed a considerable coffee culture at the tribe level; when coffee was discovered, Arabs had broken out of the confines of the Arabian Peninsula and spread across the regions of Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, Iraq and Southeastern Anatolia. It is strange that these scattered communities, which had lost their interconnections due to distance and lack of interaction, embraced coffee and turned it into a kind of culture. Aside from minor differences, the meanings attributed to coffee, its preparation, the tools and equipment used, the substances added to it and the ways of drinking are largely analogous; such that the information provided by studies discussing the coffee cultures in Yemen and Jordan coincide significantly with what Arab clans living in Şanlıurfa have to say about coffee and the meanings they ascribe to it.¹

The Arabs, having internalized the Arabic coffee (*Coffea Arabica* L.) among several different kinds of coffee, have acted with national feelings and formed a common culture of coffee within each other. However, the fact that the presence of coffee is strongly felt in a wide area suggests that it has a long history, and it seems as if it is an institutionalized social ritual with thousands of years of history, and it still remains so. Since this claim,

¹ I would like to express my sincere thanks to opinion leader Mr. İsmail Mızrak for hosting us during our visit in 2020, and assisting us in providing all manner of information regarding coffee culture.

which cannot be proven, is a judgment given at the table without going to the field, it is necessary to look at the feelings of generosity and hospitality in Arab culture for a correct determination. Therefore, in this article, information about the history, place in daily life, production and presentation of this drink, which has a unique place in Arab culture, will be presented.

Coffee, which had first come to the fore in the Arab world in the 15th century, had been elaborated on primarily by scribes and sufis back then.² Following this two to three century-long process, studies began on the place of coffee in daily life, its synergy with cigarettes and finally the sociological aspects of its use.³ The growth of Arab coffee into a culture among the world civilizations have triggered studies focusing on its standing in the Arab world. Beside the information gathered from the diaries of itinerants, treatises such as Mahmud Muflih al Bakr's "al-Qahwatul-Arabiyya",⁴ "Coffee and Coffeeshouses" from R. S. Hattox⁵ and "Coffee" from Jonathan Morris,⁶ contain information on coffee. It is also briefly mentioned in a study investigating the cultural life in Harran in the last period.⁷ In addition to these studies, some research has also been done concerning Arabic coffee as a cultural heritage object. These will be mentioned later in this text.

1. The Meaning of Coffee

The roots of the word "coffee" are diverse, given the unclarity of the origin of coffee and its long intercontinental journey.⁸ Three main hypotheses are considered in academic sources regarding its etymology. The first one states that the word is Arabic in origin and has been derived from several different roots present in the Arabic language. The second one suggests that it has derived from the Turkish word "kahve", invented by Turks who have worked considerably in the processing and cooking of coffee beans. According to the theory, the word has passed on to the European languages later on and paved the way for the presently used word "coffee". The third and final theory claims that "coffee" has derived from "Kaffa" or "Kefa" (كفا) the given name of a place located in Southeastern Ethiopia that is regarded as the homeland of coffee.⁹

Coffee, which has also been widely used in daily life and especially in medicine before the discovery of its use as a beverage, and has come to the fore, especially from the 14th century, has been attributed numerous meanings varying throughout centuries. It is commonly thought that the word has derived from "kaha" (قه),¹⁰ which means "wine" in Arabic poetry¹¹ and also has the meaning of "to prevent", "to stay one's

² Randy Deguilem, "al-Qahwa fî Al-Dimashq va rishale shaik Jamal Al-Din Al-Qasimi", Arabic trans. Mohammad Valid Khafiz, *Journal of Turashil al-Arabî*, 17/67 (30 Nisan 1997), 38-50.

³ Nasîba Abdal Azîz al-Hâc al-Alavî, "Mushkilatu'l-Qahwa va taskhin fî davlati'Osmânî", *Journal of Tikrit University for the Humanities*, 11/18 (2011), 552-580.

⁴ Mahmûd Müflih al-Bakr, *al-Qahvetü'l-'Arabiyye fî'l-mevrûs ve'l-edebi's-şa'bî*, (Beirut: 1995).

⁵ Ralph S. Hattox, *Coffee and Coffeeshouses*, (London: University of Washington, 1996).

⁶ Jonathan Morris, *Coffee*, (Chicago: Reaktion Books, 2018).

⁷ Abdulhakim Önel, *Harran Bölgesinde Konuşulan Arap Diyalektinin Dil Bilimsel Özellikleri ve Sözlü Edebiyat Malzemeleri* (Malatya: İnönü Üniversitesi, 2022), 24-27.

⁸ C. Van Arendonk, "Kahwa", *The Encyclopaedia of Islam 2 (New Edition)* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 4/29.

⁹ 'Abd al-Hayy bin Ahmad bin Muhammad ibn al-'Imâd al-'Akarî al-Hanbalî, *Şazarât az-Zahab fî Ahbâr men Zahab*, thk. Mahmud Arnavut, (Beyrût: Dâr Ibn Kathir, 1986/1496), 10/57

¹⁰ 'Abd al-Qâdir bin Muhammad al-Djazîrî, *'Umdat al-safwah fî hill al-qahwah*, thk. Abdullah b. Muhammad al-Khabeşî (Abu Dhabi: al-Majma' al-Sakâfî, 1996), 39.

¹¹ Abû Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarîr Tabarî, *Ta'rîkh al-rusûl wa al-mulûk* (Beirut: Dâr al-Turâsh, 1387), 3/417.

hunger". "Kaha", which comes to mean someone staying away from hunger and lust, or in other words, one's refusing their desire by their own will without any effect caused by disease, implies unwillingness and keeping away from something.¹² One of the most distinctive effects of coffee, which has derived from the same root, is that it takes sloth, keeps the person vigorous and replaces the feeling of hunger with that of fullness.¹³ Coffee turns one aside from eating what they have previously decided to eat, makes them loath it and draws them away from food. Al-Azhari decreed that coffee is a kind of wine and is called coffee because it satiates the person.¹⁴ Again it is said that the word comes from "ka'a" which means "to dislike" or "to sit".¹⁵

The beverage which is made by simmering the fruit of the Coffee Arabica plant is produced from the bean, which is called *al-bunn* in Arabic, and the tree on which the bean grows is called "shajarat al-bunn".¹⁶ Even though it is argued that the word "bunn" came from Africa as a word indicating both the plant and the fruit, it has been added to Arabic in that era, standing for the coffee bean. Indeed, this word for the fruit that the Arabs had known for a long time has been used in medicine books from the 3/10th centuries with its usual meaning.¹⁷ From time to time, the word *bunn* was used instead of coffee for the reason that it is the main ingredient in the making of coffee. However, the consumable that is heated in a pan grinded in a mortar and then cooked at a low heat identifies with the word coffee as of today.¹⁸

2. The Originality of The Arabic Coffee

The food preparation, cooking and serving habits of countries vary according to the local climate, geography and availability of ingredients, such that sometimes different and original cuisine cultures show up from every region of the same country and different types of palatal delight are developed with local recipes. Coffee is one of the beverages affected by the different palates of different civilizations, tens of different recipes have been developed of which. Turks cook and drink it by blending and mixing it with water, Americans prepare and consume it by simmering with or without sugar, the French have it by adding it to boiling water, and Italians make it in special steam pressure machines.¹⁹ The coffee produced in these countries is generally made by means of factories and machines, and the only difference between them is their recipes. The Arabic coffee, on the other hand, differs from all these in numerous aspects. The grains of coffee obtained

¹² al-Khalīl ibn Ahmad ibn 'Amr ibn Tammām al-Farāhīdī, *Kitāb al-'ain*, thk. Maḥdī al-Maḥzūmī - Ibrāhīm al-Sāmīrā'ī (Beirut: Dār Maktabatu al-Hilāl, ts.), 4/64.

¹³ 'Alī ibn İsmā'īl ibn Sīdah, *Kitāb Mukhassas*, thk. Hālil İbrāhīm Jafāl (Beirut: Dār Ihyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1417/1996), 3/193.

¹⁴ Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad Murtaḍā Zabīdī, *Tāj al-'Ārūs min jawāhir al-qāmūs* (Egypt: Dār al-Khidāyah, ts.), 39/371.

¹⁵ 'Abd al-Qādir al-Djazīrī, *'Umdat al-safwah fī hill al-qahwah*, 40.

¹⁶ Bunn is the fruit of a little tree that grows on the hotter areas of the Arab countries, especially near the coasts of the Red Sea in Yemen. The coffee tree, especially the Arabic coffee tree is a beautiful plant that is 4 to 9 meters (some going up to 12) and stays green throughout the year. Bk. Hishām Udrah, "at-Taḳālid al-ijtimāiyyah lil qahwa ladā Arab al-bādiyah", *Shu'un Al-Ijtimāiyyah* 56 (1997), 172.

¹⁷ Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Zakariyyā Rāzī (Rhazes), *Kitāb al-hāwī fī-l-tibb* (Beirut: Dāru Ihyā' al-Turās al-'Arabī, 1422), 6/220.

¹⁸ 'Abd al-Qādir al-Djazīrī, *'Umdat al-safwah fī hill al-qahwah*, 39; Jamal al-Din b. Muhammad Saeed b. Qasim al-Hallaq al-Qāsīmī, *Risāla fī shay al-qahwa wa duḥān* (Dimashk, 1322), 14.

¹⁹ Udrah, "at-Taḳālid al-ijtimāiyyah lil qahwa ladā Arab al-bādiyah", 173.

through their rigorous labour on the bean are mixed with various substances and assume a bitter taste by simmering several times.

When the originality of the Arabic coffee is to be discussed, four factors can be considered in short: The mastery of processing the bean, the recipe formed with delicate balance, meticulousness in presentation and addressing a certain group in special gatherings. The mountains of Yemen are one of the homelands of the coffee tree, and coffee has grown there since ancient times.²⁰ When coffee was first discovered, the Arabs, having awakened to these riches early, focused on mastering every aspect of coffee, from the tree to the bean. Prospecting the crust of the bean (*bunn*) that gives coffee the taste and flavour, they sought to develop recipes for making more tasteful coffee.

In order to prepare Arabic coffee, the recipe of which was completed after long periods of trial; firstly, the coffee bean has to get charred in a natural environment. Despite the advancing technology, coffee has been cooked over barbecue fire for centuries. The fire, which is thought to add a genuine taste to coffee, chars the beans slowly, and this practice of cooking has continued in the desert, unchanged to this day. However, it can also be observed that in settlements where more developed heating technologies are available, the use of fire has been abandoned, and stove systems have started to be utilized instead. Although it is possible to see both methods used in the coffeehouses of Urfa, old fireplaces are still present in the coffeehouses using stoves as a touch of the old and an implication of the longing for the past.

In contrast to other numerous recipes around the world, sugar is not included in the ingredients of the Arabic coffee. The coffee that stands out with its bitter taste is traditionally prepared in front of the guests' eyes.²¹ The person preparing the coffee converses with the guests and simultaneously makes rhythmic sounds with the tools that they are using, drawing attention to themselves. The charring is made rigorously with the use of multiple instruments, and care is taken to ensure that one's hand does not contact the beans getting cooked. Also, attention is paid to the tools that are expensive and ornate. It is believed that the more the coffee beans are charred, the less the content of caffeine and water will be. For this reason, the colour of a sufficiently charred Arabic coffee is either brown or sometimes close to dark yellow.

When it was discovered that some imperfections were present in the first recipes made with beans cooked at low heat, it became necessary to improve the recipes, and additional substances were added in order to enhance the flavour of the bean. Cardamon, gillyflower, saffron or ginger were added to the recipe, and thus a richer flavour was achieved.²² The meeting of herbs with coffee was not coincidental, given that herbs are nourishing for the body and that they are components that give the coffee a tinge of bitterness. Cardamon, in particular, is a kind of herb useful when cooking meals. It is widely used in Indonesia and other Asian countries as a seasoning for foods. It is known to be an expensive spice along with saffron and vanilla. Coffee becomes tastier with these precious spices and becomes healthier as well as fulfilling the caffeine need of the drinker.

²⁰ al-Qāsımı, *Risāla fı shay al-qahwa wa duhān*, 15.

²¹ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Keyif Verici Maddelerin Tarihi (Cennet, Tat ve Mantık)*, çev. Zehra Aksu Yılmazzer (İstanbul: Dost Kitabevi, 2000), 23.

²² Darwish Mustafa al-Fār, "min Tārih al-Qahwa", *Majallatu al-Duhat Māris* 3 (1986), 82.

Bitter Arabic coffee is highly valuable, both materially and sentimentally, and the gatherings for bitter coffee are also unique. Only certain notables of clans qualified for opening coffeehouses (Coffee-houses/*buyut al-kahwa*) can open them. Not all who desire or have the money to open a coffeehouse can do so. Their ancestors must be people who are experienced in this matter and have done this job in the past. Only elder males (40-age limit) can attend these venues that will be passed on from grandfather to grandson. Women, young ones and children are not allowed. Women are not invited to gatherings, even for serving. Even though the coffeehouses in Urfa are located inside the proprietor's house, the family members stay inside their allocated rooms during gatherings in order not to dishonour the owner of the place.

Contrary to the monetary point of view, turning coffee into a commodity, the coffee gatherings are held absolutely free of charge; the primary expectation of the coffeehouse owner from the coffee drinkers is that they feel grateful for the labour. Coffeehouse owners who expect nothing but respect do so desiring to elevate their level of honour and prestige in their communities. Coffeehouses, opened in an allocated section of the house without the requirement of any license, are far from places of business and do not look like one either. People familiar with coffee and the communion it brings treat the served coffee as meticulous as the server, recognizing the generosity and authority of the coffee maker. They show regard to the service and labour that begins at the break of dawn and continues until evening. The togetherness triggered with the cup of coffee gets enriched and more sophisticated with poems, ghazels, proverbs (*darb al-mathal*) and historical anecdotes shared.²³

In Arabic communities, there are certain people who know about coffee, are tolerant of its rigorous preparation and present their painstakingly made coffee to those around them with great pride. These people know good coffee from bad the moment they taste it, and their skill in this matter earns them and their family the reputation of prominent coffee makers. Those who have the power of making coffee serve their coffee in small cups beautified with decorative patterns, in accordance with the local customs.

3. The Place of Arabic Coffee in Daily Life

Arabic coffee is the symbol of hospitality and generosity in essence.²⁴ Apart from that, it is the symbol of happiness and sorrow, the key to peace, the initiator of communion and a distinct characteristic of today's Arabs. It is a tool to improve acquaintanceship and comradery between the server and drinker, which enhances the honour of the host. Coffee holds great importance for the Arabs in general, but its value is especially high and clear for the Arabic clans. It is a means of sharing mourning and grief in the funeral houses. It is the only drink in the funeral house when the leader of the clan, the tribal *sheikh* or anybody else passes away. Coffeehouses are places where social, political, administrative or even legal issues are solved.²⁵

The Arab nation is one that takes great care that hosts their guests in the most respectful fashion. The roots of this ancient culture go back to the pre-Islamic age of

²³ al-Fār, "min Tārih al-Qahwa", 82.

²⁴ Udrah, "at-Taqālid al-ijtimāiyyah lil qahwa ladā Arab al-bādiyah", 171.

²⁵ al-Bakr, *al-Qahvetü'l-'Arabiyye fi'l-mevrûs ve'l-edebi's-ş'a'bî*.

ignorance.²⁶ Arabs would sit their guests down in the seat of honour and offer them precious beverages.²⁷ Because water was a naturally occurring drink which was consumed as is, the host would first serve a sophisticated beverage that they had made with their own hands in order to show how kind they were to his guests. For this reason, man-made beverages were especially preferred for serving the guests. Alcoholic drinks served together with dates formed the primary type of man-made, labouring beverages back then. When alcohol was decreed *haram* by Islam, wine was replaced by the sharbat called “nezb” and camel milk. Camel milk was a pleasant drink for the Arabs, being a nutritious and quality drink easily accessible for clans living in the middle of the desert. However, after coffee was turned into a beverage, the previous habits got left behind.

Coffee, the discovery of which is tried to be explained with half-mythical stories,²⁸ came into prominence in the Arab world as a drink²⁹ starting from the 8/14th century. Its legitimacy started to be questioned³⁰ when Sufis began consuming it to be able to stay awake at night and thus pray more.³¹ Nonetheless, it became an essential drink with its taste, flavour and aroma.³² It won the favour of Arab clan leaders who wanted their guests to have an enjoyable time with its high quality, taste and energy it provided. Its use in deeds that add value to human honour, instead of actions against human nature like the Sufis do, softened the previous negative impressions about it. Coffee started to be served in daytime gatherings and used for humane intents. Thus, the controversy of being *halal* or *haram* was put aside, and this new drink was integrated into the local culture. It became the principal drink for the Arab clans to exhibit their generosity and level of honour.

Coffee, which has become the common symbol of the Arabic people, is governed by unwritten rules. It is present in the houses of almost every Arabic family and has a great influence on the Arabs in general. But its making and drinking as a national beverage are specific to coffeehouses in the rural or the desert. The feeling of commitment to customs and manners is a lot denser in small towns, villages and the desert. For this reason, coffee has a different meaning in these places. It is possible to live without being gifted anything by anybody in major cities, where the needs for food, drink and shelter can all be provided with money. As visits between people are rare in major cities due to the sophisticated activities of the people, people seldom expect anything from neighbours or such. Conversely, the nonavailability of numerous services and the monotony of human relations in smaller settlements increase the value of offerings; the existence of a place to gather and discuss about life and death is a necessity for the people. For this reason, having people over is a very important task in the local clans. A certain section of the house is allocated for the guest, and hosting begins (and sometimes ends) with coffee.

²⁶ ‘Abd Allāh Ibn Muslim Ibn Qutaybah, *Kitāb Al-shi’r wa-al-shu’arā*, thk. Ahmad Muhammad Shakir (Cairo: Dār al-Maa’rif, 1996), 1/235.

²⁷ Hakan Temir, *Arap Yarımadası’nda Kabile Hayatı* (İstanbul: Siyer Yayınları, 2021), 229; Mustafa Necati Barış, “Cahiliye Döneminde Yargı Sistemi (Justice System in the Period of Jahiliyya)”, *İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 17 (2012), 157.

²⁸ Hattox, *Coffee and Coffeehouses*, 13.

²⁹ Udrah, “at-Taqālid al-ijtimāiyyah lil qahwa ladā Arab al-bādiyah”, 172.

³⁰ ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Djazîrî, *Umdat al-safwah fi hill al-qahwah*, 39; Hatim Mahamid - Chaim Nissim, “al-Qahwa mā bayna al-tāhrim wa al-ibāhah”, *al-Majma’* 13 (2018).

³¹ al-Fār, “min Tārih al-Qahwa”, 80.

³² Arendonk, “Kahwa”, 4/29.

Today, in the settlements of clans who have adopted settled life, a room is devoted to guest hosting; this room is always kept open, and coffee is served as a first step to the visitors who enter. The local architecture and lifestyle in Harran are exactly this way.

Even though coffee has become the main instrument for hosting guests, its role in daily life is not limited to this. It is considered a symbol for entertaining the guests on special occasions such as weddings, funerals, or other such special days. This tradition is continued in every settlement, regardless of size. At funerals, coffee is served to the attendees, and the mourning of the deceased is shared by saying, "May Allah rest his/her soul" when the coffee is finished. This beverage, appealing to the palates of the Arabs, is also the symbol of the Arabic marriage ceremonies. Coffee represents the honour of the host, and this tradition is sometimes abused when coffee is served before the girl's hand is asked for. The boy's side, who are determined to take the girl's hand, do not immediately drink the coffee they are served and wait for some time. This pause lasts until the girl's household gives their consent to give the girl, which does not take too long, as might be expected. Otherwise, the honour and reputation of the host are affected negatively. In the Al-Salt region and Syria, it can be observed that such traditions regarding marriage ceremonies are practised today. In Urfa, however, it is only done if the girl's family is a coffeehouse-owning family. Apart from special occasions, coffee is also a part of daily life. It is consumed every single day for breakfast, after lunch, as an afternoon beverage and throughout the night when family or friends meet.

Coffee is not just a symbol of peace but also a tool for war and vengeance. In the past, conflicts would occur between two rival clans and worry would arise when one side proved to be a strong enemy. In times like this, the clan leader would gather all the community and demand that the leader of the rival clan gets slain, saying, "Who will drink the coffee of him?"³³ The bravest one among the young men of the tribe would step forth and say, "I will have his cup!" and then he would be summoned to the front of the audience. He would give his word, with everybody witnessing, that he will kill that person. If he could not fulfil this duty, he would disgrace his tribe.

In summary, Arabic coffee is closely related to tribal life and represents a ritual associated with certain times in daily life. The drink prepared at the break of dawn is the result of work that continues relentlessly.³⁴ The gift of the generous, with its laborious and free offering, is the key to peace. It is of great importance in solving problems in social life. It was included in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in December 2015, given its heritage that extends deep into Arab memory and its relevance to the lives of Arab societies.

4. Preparation of Coffee and the Making Tools

As all drinks have their own recipes and tools, Arabic coffee also has its own unique recipe, method of preparation and tools. The secret of bitter coffee, which takes a lot of effort to prepare and requires utmost care, is hidden in its tools. A separate tool is used at every stage until it takes the form of a beverage. Since coffee is the badge of honour of the Arab, containers high in value are preferred and placed in front of the coffeehouse

³³ The word on this is: من يشرب فنجان فلان، ويشير بذلك للبطل الكف الذكر

³⁴ Ali Afifi, "Tukûs ve Âdâtü'l-Qahwa inde Bedvi'l-Cezireti'l-Arabiyye", *Turûs* 256 (2021), 14.

owner. Thus, not only the stomach but also the eyes and hearts of those who benefit from it are satisfied.

Arabic coffee undergoes several stages of preparation until cooked. The first step is the drying of the fresh fruit gathered from the tree. The fruits are laid on a wooden surface or such and covered for ripening. When they have sufficiently ripened, they are ready to be used to make coffee. The first pre-requisite for a delicious drink is thus satisfied. The next stage is charring, and special barbecues (المنقل أو المنكلة) or gas stoves are used to this end. When the coals become encindered, the charring process of the raw coffee beans starts. The beans placed on a concave metal pan called *mihmāsah* (المحماسة) are cooked at low heat and stirred inside until they are uniformly cooked, with two rods made of iron resembling a long spoon.³⁵ The rod is held from its handle and slowly moved on the *mihmāsah* to stir the beans.³⁶



Image 1: Mihmāsah, the Pan for Charring Coffee

The chemical transformation starts when the fire starts to feed into the beans. Its unique scent spreads, and its flavour gets more prominent as the heat increases. Little points resembling tiny droplets of water appear on the beans, and they disappear as the temperature rises. The bean loses about a fourth of its weight upon charring as expected. The beans must be charred until they are touched with a tinge of yellow. However, the beans start to lose their quality if the charring is carried too far, their colour changes, and the coffee starts to burn.³⁷ Coffee must be promptly charred, grinded, wetted and consumed while hot in order to preserve its features.³⁸

When the charring of the beans is complete, they are taken away from the fire and put in the cooler. One is not allowed to touch or blow on the beans to cool them at this stage. This rule is necessary for the protection of flavour as well as hygiene and is articulated thus: “Coffee is poured from iron to iron, but does not touch the hand of its

³⁵ Udrah, “at-Taqālid al-ijtimāiyyah lil qahwa ladā Arab al-bādiyah”, 173.

³⁶ al-Shahawi, “al-Qahwatu fi Sakafati’ -Arabiyyati wa’sha’biyyati”, *es-Sekāfetü’ş-Şa’biyye* 3/11 (2010), 79.

³⁷ al-Qāsimi, *Risāla fi shay al-qahwa wa duhān*, 16.

³⁸ al-Qāsimi, *Risāla fi shay al-qahwa wa duhān*, 16.

slave.”³⁹ The beans that are cooled inside a wooden pot are grinded in a mortar named *najr* or *mihbāsh* (النجر- المهباش), made from oak or a tree of similar character.⁴⁰ The pestle pounding the coffee is made from wood or iron. One cannot couple a random pestle and mortar to grind coffee: Both must have their own musical rhythmic sounds.⁴¹ The coffee pounded with rhythmic strikes has to have a coarse texture like fine cracked wheat. Otherwise, the dust of coffee turns to a pulp inside the heater. Spices like gillyflower, saffron and cardamom can be added to the coffee in the mortar or at a later stage.⁴² Some recipes mandate that cardamon is added after the coffee is charred. Coffeehouse owners in Urfa use both methods.



Image 2: The Mortar Used to Grind the Coffee Beans

The coffee to which the additional ingredients have been added is now ready to drink. The prepared ingredients are put in clean water and boiled in order to prevent the solid ingredients from burning over the fire and facilitate their formation of a drink. The coffee is firstly simmered in the tool called *qumqum* (القمقم) at low heat for ten minutes. The freshly cooked coffee must be fermented. So, the initially cooked coffee is placed in the *biqir* (البكر) in order to extract its grounds. It is transferred from the *biqir* to the *masab* (المصب) afterwards. The coffee, having travelled through at least three different vessels, is rested and properly decaffeinated and then left for fermentation.⁴³

³⁹ Udrah, “at-Taqālid al-ijtimāiyyah lil qahwa ladā Arab al-bādiyah”, 173.

⁴⁰ al-Shahawi, “al-Qahwatu fi Sakafati' -Arabiyyati wa'sha'biyyati”, 79.

⁴¹ Udrah, “at-Taqālid al-ijtimāiyyah lil qahwa ladā Arab al-bādiyah”, 174.

⁴² al-Fār, “min Tārih al-Qahwa”, 82.

⁴³ al-Shahawi, “al-Qahwatu fi Sakafati' -Arabiyyati wa'sha'biyyati”, 79.



Image 3: Coffee Cooking Pots Qumqum, Biqir and Masab

The beverage is heated after several days of fermentation and put in the *dallah* (دلة) for serving. This tool, having been used since ancient times to make and serve Arab coffee, used to be made from terra cotta early on. Nowadays, it is majestically produced from metals with laboured textures. This instrument which resembles a human shape, generally had a wide head and a tall foreground. It is made to be and look slender, elegant and delicate, just like the female body, so that it shows the generosity, honour and nobility of the owner. Just as the woman is the honour of the man, coffee is everything to its preparer.



Image 4: Dallah, the Tool for Serving Coffee

Dallah is the instrument that brings the coffee and the cup together. Coffeehouse owners import it from distant places for considerable money. A person attending the coffeehouse understands its cost and value, thus recognizing the power of the host. There are decorations and engravings present on the *dallah*. Such engravings are made widely in Damascus and Iraq. Imageries of birds are predominant on the *dallahs* made in Damascus, such that the bird looks at the lip of the *dallah*. At the Golden Horn, the ore is worked to become the *dallah* such that it has a slim middle section. The *dallah* is completely a serving tool, and it is very generous in serving the prepared coffee. However, not all of the coffee is consumed when serving. Some of the old coffee can be spared from being used ferment. Both its makers and drinkers believe that coffee does not harbour bacteria due to its bitterness.



Image 5: An authentic corner with all the coffee tools (House of the chief of Cumali Clan)

5. The Serving of Coffee

Coffee has a solid place in the daily life of Arabic society, and it has become a sophisticated custom today, together with the rules added to the ritual by the people. The Arabic coffee is prepared with intensive labour and cannot be served in a casual manner. The serving made by the coffee owner is subject to certain rituals.⁴⁴ Firstly, the guests are welcome at the door and take a seat in accordance with the order of seating of the gathering. The guests sit on floor cushions, and the opinion leaders, prominent people and elders are placed on seats of honour. A sitting arrangement is made according to age

⁴⁴ Udrah, "at-Taqālid al-ijtimāiyyah lil qahwa ladā Arab al-bādiyah", 175.

afterwards. Coffee serving is made following the completion of the greeting. Children, older people and guests are not allowed to serve coffee.

Coffee serving normally begins from the right end; however, the order can change if there is a visitor of special importance or very old age present among the attendees. The leader and notables of the clan have priority due to their standings; the coffee is served firstly to them and then to the other guests. If the clan leader or such are not present, serving order is arranged according to the guests' age, lineage and valour. If such special circumstances are not present, serving starts from the forefront and the rightmost corner. The coffeehouse owner serves the cup in a very respectful manner. He holds the *dallah* in his left hand and the cup in his right hand and leans when serving.⁴⁵ He pours the coffee into the cup with a very small but steady stream, like a piece of thread.⁴⁶

While the coffee is being served, the manner of sitting of the person served is considered, and it is expected from him to be ready to receive the coffee. A person slightly inclined to the left or right while sitting is not considered ready to drink coffee, and he is passed accordingly. A person in this position is interpreted to not expecting coffee as long as he does not align his sitting position. Of course, this rule does not apply to older people. Again, coffee is not served to the person indicating with his hand or tongue that he does not want coffee.

Serving starts when the guest sits in a respectful manner, out of respect for coffee. The coffee server takes the first sip, ensuring that danger of poisoning is not present for the guest, and serves the guest afterwards. He does not hold his desire for coffee above that of the guest and considers not doing so shameful. The guest takes the cup with his right hand, and the server fills the cup with coffee either until it is quarter-full or until the guest indicates that the poured coffee is enough, either verbally or by lightly shaking the cup.⁴⁷ The second and third cups are served upon the guest's request and are a sign of the coffeehouse owner's generosity. Every cup has a different name and holds different meanings. These are as follows:

1- Cup of Fear: It contains the first sip of the host. Coffee, as much as a means for honouring the guest, can be a potential means of malignity or assassination. In order to remove the fear of poisoning by drinking, the host pours coffee from the *dallah* to his own cup before serving the guest and drinks the coffee himself first. Thus, the guest knows that the coffee is free of danger and delightful and can sip his coffee easefully.

2- Cup of Guest: It is the cup offered to the guest. It is the first offering to the acceptor and marks the beginning of a new adventure for coffee.

3- Cup of Joy: The guest drinking the first cup, in fact, does so by necessity as it is actually offered by the host. The second cup, in contrast, is served upon the guest's request. This indicates that the guest is pleased with the first cup of coffee served to him, that he wants to have the second cup to enjoy it, and that he is comfortable.

4- Cup of Struggle: Also called the coffee of alliance, this cup indicates that a consolidated friendship exists between the sides, and a pact has been made such that the

⁴⁵ al-Fār, "min Tārih al-Qahwa", 82.

⁴⁶ Udrah, "at-Taqālid al-ijtimāiyyah lil qahwa ladā Arab al-bādiyah", 175.

⁴⁷ Udrah, "at-Taqālid al-ijtimāiyyah lil qahwa ladā Arab al-bādiyah", 175.

sides will stand together in case one side comes under attack. It is the third cup the guest has and means that the acceptor is very sympathetic towards the host, greatly pleased with the offering and that the sides are allies all along.

In the tradition of Arabic coffee, where every accepted cup of coffee has its own meaning, the common practice is to drink at least one cup. However, the amount usually does not go beyond three, and the cup does not get fully filled: As the coffee tastes quite bitter, its preparation is difficult, and it is rich in content, increased consumption would not be to the benefit of either side. The amount of coffee in the cup is indicative of the level of acceptance of the guest.⁴⁸ A cup filled with less than a half is a sign of gladness. Levels exceeding this means that the guest is not welcome. A fully filled cup is interpreted as a sign of hatred.⁴⁹

In order to cool the hot coffee, the guest can shake the coffee inside the cup, but he cannot add any cold substance. If the guest has a request from the host, he puts the coffee aside without drinking it. The host understands that a problem is present and tells the guest to drink the coffee if he intends to help him. It is an act of shame that the host does not respond to an untouched cup of coffee. The news of such an act immediately gets spread within the clan, and the perpetrator is verbally panned. Generally, the guest cannot make too demanding requests. If the cup is put on the floor after drinking, the guest has made a mistake; he has to give or do something that will reconcile the host.

The coffee is served with a single cup, and everybody in the gathering is asked to drink from the same cup. The cup travels from one's hand to that of another. A custom also exists such that the elder of the gathering breaks the cup after the serving of coffee is complete. He does not allow anybody to drink from the same cup after he does, thus enhancing his honour. In order to reciprocate the service and generosity of the coffee owner, the clan leader presents him with a gift of horses, camels, land or such. If he gives nothing, he is considered to be miserly and rude. Today, however, these kinds of demonstrations of generosity are about to be forgotten in the gatherings in Urfa.

The taste and flavour of the coffee are important, and a cup of coffee disliked by the guest may have catastrophic consequences for the host. The person claiming that the coffee has a bland taste is obliged to prove it. If the coffee is unsavoury, the host replaces it immediately. Usually, water can be consumed before coffee, and it is not inappropriate to ask for water at this stage, but water drunk after coffee implies that the coffee is tasteless. Coffee is so precious that it is undesirable that a single drop is wasted or spoiled. Unwillingly spilled coffee is interpreted favourably, though. The common belief is that spilled coffee heralds fertility and plenitude. They say, "Coffee has spilled; good things are about to happen."⁵⁰

Like in other societies, a close relation exists between coffee and tobacco in Arabic society. In regions such as Damascus, Maghreb, Nile, etc., tobacco is rolled along with coffee and the two are enjoyed together, combining the flavours. In Arabia, it is more commonly drunk together with dates, for dates lighten the bitterness of coffee.⁵¹ Apart

⁴⁸ al-Fār, "min Tārih al-Qahwa", 82.

⁴⁹ Udrah, "at-Taqālid al-ijtimāiyyah lil qahwa ladā Arab al-bādiyah", 175.

⁵⁰ The word on this is: كُتِبُوا الْقَهْوَةَ مِنْ عَمَاهُمْ وَقَالُوا الْخَيْرِ إِجَاهُمْ

⁵¹ Mehmet Usluer, *Basra*, (İstanbul: Siyer Yayınları, 2021), 234

from these, coffee can be consumed together with other foods specific to the subject and geographical area as well. After all, any combination may be practised during individual consumption, according to the palate. But it is not appropriate to go against the rituals when drinking coffee at gatherings.

Conclusion

With its history of nearly five hundred years, coffee is among the primary beverages of the Arabic people. It is a noble drink; the quality of preparation and the authenticity of its craftsmanship is very important. It is an important social catalyst which marks the first step of conversation in gatherings of notables and is the key to the establishment of trust between individuals. Coffee plays a significant role in the consolidation of the Arabic social life, and as a symbol of this social system, it is one of the main components of the overall social mechanism. It is an imagery of social character with its ability to reflect war, peace, sorrow and happiness. It is possible with a cup of coffee to solve disagreements, as well as overcome problems and hostilities, such that coffee filling just a quarter of a cup can cause wars to erupt or come to an end.

Coffee is an important element in the daily lives of Arabic communities. Bitter coffee is a beverage especially dear to the hearts of people living in clans or rural areas. These people do not feel content unless they can sip their coffee and drink it during their meals. The coffeehouse is not only a place for facilitating thinking but also an important environment symbolizing generosity and hospitality. It has the power of gathering people together for one common purpose. One of the values that coffee houses add to the communities is that it accelerates the social communication processes between individuals and groups, enabling them to play a vital and effective role. A conversation pioneered by coffee can carry on to topics of any level of depth, from history to literature, to poetry, to music, art and economy. Often, the wisdom of the coffeehouse owner and the sense of authority that the coffeehouse projects are taken into account, and therefore, the coffeehouse owner is referred to in judicial tasks.

The recently increasing individualism and consumption of instant drinks are two of the biggest setbacks in front of Arabic coffee. These factors complicating the inheritance of coffee to future generations seem to be about to become even more problematic in the coming centuries. People gravitating towards technological instruments instead of dialogue and communion leave coffee gatherings underattended. In addition, because those who find the labour needed for the preparation of coffee too demanding to opt for tea or instant coffee instead, this cultural heritage may be in danger of becoming lost in the long term.

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