



## MEI Kaleidoscope | The Story of Coffee in the Middle East

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Coffee, for many of us, is inextricably linked with the European penchant for outdoor cafes and strong brews. But the real roots of the coffee culture lie in the Middle East, where it epitomizes Arab culture. Coffee drinking dates back to the Sufi lodges of 15th century Yemen.<sup>1</sup> The mocha coffee bean itself is named after Yemen's port of Mocha<sup>2</sup>, from which coffee was spread to the world. The first coffeehouses in the Middle east were built in the 16th century<sup>3</sup>, from Istanbul to Mecca to Aleppo, introducing a coffee culture that found its place in the rich social fabric of the region.

The roots of the humble coffee bean are mired in contention. Did it come from Africa or from the Arabian peninsula? Myths abound but the most popular narrative tells the story of coffee's discovery in Kaffa<sup>4</sup>, Ethiopia, where the coffee plant was first known to blossom. As the story goes, a legendary goat herder, Kaldi, had, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, noticed how energetic his goats became after eating wild berries

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<sup>1</sup> Zaimche, Salah, "The Coffee Route from Yemen to London," Muslim Heritage. Accessed Feb 2018. <http://www.muslimheritage.com/article/coffee-route>

<sup>2</sup> Gilbert, David, "The History of Mocha Coffee & Yemeni Coffee," *Perfect Daily Grind*, September 2017, <https://www.perfectdailygrind.com/2017/09/history-mocha-coffee-yemeni-coffee-culture/>

<sup>3</sup> al-Labbad, Mustafa, "Arab coffee culture," *Al-Monitor*, March 2014, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/culture/2014/03/arab-coffee-culture-politics-society.html>

<sup>4</sup> The History of Coffee, *National Coffee Association USA*. Accessed January 2018. <http://www.ncausa.org/About-Coffee/History-of-Coffee>

from a specific tree. Kaldi brought the sweet-smelling, cherry-like fruit to a local monastery where the monks discovered its energizing properties and spread word of the magical brew.



Coffee plantations in the village of Haraaz, Yemen.

(Source: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-06-27/the-best-coffee-in-the-world-now-comes-from-yemen>)

Ethiopian records indicate that local travelers would chew berries of the coffee plant on the way to Yemen to get through the arduous journey there.<sup>5</sup> Similar narratives emerge out of the Arabian region, where pilgrims would depend on coffee for energy during the long pilgrimage to Mecca. It was also stated that in 1454, the Mufti of Aden found his own countrymen drinking coffee in Ethiopia and was taken by its healing properties.<sup>6</sup> This brought coffee to Yemen, where Sufi mystics would drink coffee during the nights they spent awake in rigorous worship.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Nzegwu, Nkiru, "The History of Coffee," *Africa Resource*. Accessed January 208.  
<https://www.africaresource.com/house/news/our-announcements/21-the-history-of-coffee>

<sup>6</sup> Nzegwu, Nkiru, "The History of Coffee," *Africa Resource*. Accessed January 208.  
<https://www.africaresource.com/house/news/our-announcements/21-the-history-of-coffee>

<sup>7</sup> Seidel, Kathleen, "Coffee - The Wine of Islam." *Serving the Guest: A Sufi Cookbook*, 1999,  
[http://www.superluminal.com/cookbook/essay\\_coffee.html](http://www.superluminal.com/cookbook/essay_coffee.html)

The favorable environmental conditions in Yemen also made it the perfect place to cultivate coffee for mass consumption. Thus, the commercial growing of coffee began in Yemen.<sup>8</sup> The monopoly of coffee production was maintained by exporting only beans that had already been boiled.<sup>9</sup> By the 16th century, the coffee trade in the Arabian peninsula was in full swing. The pilgrimage to Mecca popularized coffee drinking among Muslims, becoming the beverage of choice in the holy city, and eventually spreading to Egypt, Syria and Turkey.

The English word for coffee was derived from the Arabic word *qahwah*, which appears to have several meanings. Some say *qahwah* was the term used in Yemen to refer to “a drink from berries.” *Qahwah* in Arabic poetry was also used to refer to wine, bringing coffee into conflict with religious scholars in Mecca, Cairo and Istanbul. Its rapid rise among the populations and favor by those seeking spiritual intoxication led to objections from sheikhs who deemed that it was forbidden by Islam.

Coffee fell out of favour in the Middle East and in major cities, fatwas were issued against coffee. One of the most extreme acts was in 1543 Constantinople, where loads of imported beans arriving by ship were cast out into the sea.<sup>10</sup> The last ban on coffee – by the Ottoman Empire – lasted until 1839. Coffeeshouses nonetheless stubbornly sprang up, the first one in Istanbul in 1475.<sup>11</sup>

Coffee’s arrival in Europe was, ironically, met with suspicion that this was a “Muslim” drink. But after Pope Clement VIII took a liking to coffee and exclaimed that the Christians could not allow Muslims to monopolize the production of coffee, the art of coffee drinking took off in Europe.<sup>12</sup> In *Tastes of*

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<sup>8</sup> Radeska, Tijana, “The necessity of coffee.” *The Vintage News*, December 2017, <https://www.thevintagenews.com/2017/12/15/coffee-16th-century-constantinople/>

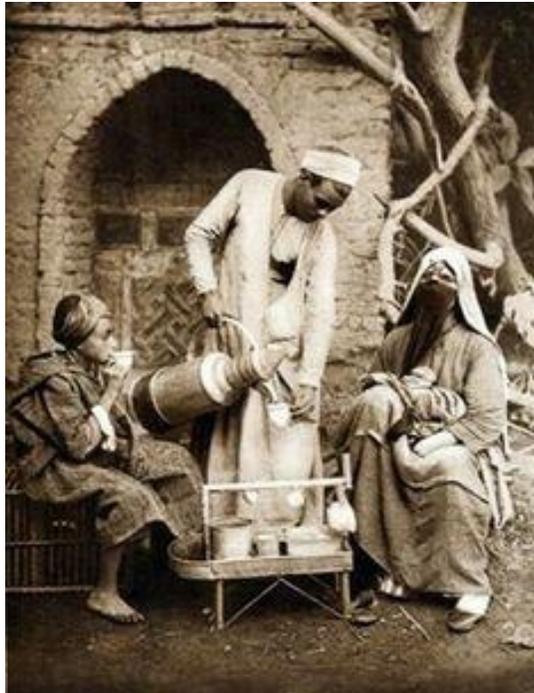
<sup>9</sup> Gilbert, David, “The History of Mocha Coffee & Yemeni Coffee,” *Perfect Daily Grind*, September 2017, <https://www.perfectdailygrind.com/2017/09/history-mocha-coffee-yemeni-coffee-culture/>

<sup>10</sup> Gamm, Niki, “Coffee and coffeeshouses among the Ottomans,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, December 2014, <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/coffee-and-coffeeshouses-among-the-ottomans-76123>

<sup>11</sup> Paajanen, Sean, “The Evolution of the Coffee House,” *The Spruce*, February 2017. <https://www.thespruce.com/evolution-of-the-coffee-house-765825>

<sup>12</sup> McHugo, John, “Coffee and qahwa: How a drink for Arab mystics went global,” *BBC Magazine*, April 2013. <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-22190802>

*Paradise*, Wolfgang Schivelbusch observed that, “The logic of coffee drinking for Arabic-Islamic civilization is incontestable. As a



Coffee stand in Cairo, Egypt. 1933.  
(Source: Pinterest)

non-alcoholic, non-intoxicating, indeed even sobering and mentally stimulating drink, it seemed to be tailor-made for a culture that forbade alcohol consumption and gave birth to modern mathematics.”<sup>13</sup>

In its day, the public coffee houses called *qahveh khaneh* that dotted streets across the cities of the Near and Middle East could rival the mosque as a place of social gathering. In the coffee house, men from all classes of society gathered over cups of coffee and engaged in the exchange of news, debate, poetry, storytelling and gossip. As coffee houses often served as a meeting place for society’s intellectuals, they became known as “Schools of the Wise.”<sup>14</sup> Not surprising then that the authorities viewed coffee houses

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<sup>13</sup> Schivelbusch, Wolfgang “Coffee and the Protestant Ethic,” *Tastes of Paradise*, p.17, 1992.  
<https://2010worldciv300.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/coffee-and-the-protestant-ethic.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Coffee Culture and History in the Middle East, Kopi Luwak Direct. Accessed January 2018.  
<https://kopiluwakdirect.com/middle-east-history-culture/>

with suspicion. Indeed, political sentiments expressed in coffee houses across the Middle East and Europe at that time were perceived by the ruling elite as a threat to their power.

The 17th century Ottoman chronicler, Ibrahim Peçevi, observed that “[Coffee houses] became the meeting places of a circle of pleasure seekers and idlers, and also of the wits from among the men of letters and literati, and they used to meet in groups of about 20 or 30. Some read books and fine writings, some were busy with backgammon and chess; some brought new poems and talked of



literature.”<sup>15</sup>

An Ottoman coffeehouse in Tophane, Mıgırdıç Civanyan, late 19th century.

(Source: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/coffee-and-coffeehouses-among-the-ottomans-76123>)

In Arab societies, therefore, the act of “getting a cup of coffee” is associated with lively discussions and debate on matters of state and society. This engagement over coffee also occurs in the home, in palaces and ceremonies where coffee is traditionally served to every guest. In more traditional homes, coffee is always served to the head of the house so he can make sure its quality is good enough for his visitors. If not, his reputation could be tainted by just a poor cup of coffee. This aspect of Arabic culture is called

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<sup>15</sup> Gamm, Niki, “Coffee and coffeehouses among the Ottomans,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, December 2014, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/coffee-and-coffeehouses-among-the-ottomans-76123>

“finjan al hail.”<sup>16</sup> Coffee can be thus seen as a potent symbol of Arabic hospitality and the social lubricant that helps to settle business, marriage contracts and even blood feuds.

In the Middle East, coffee is brewed with regional spices such as cardamom, cinnamon, saffron, ginger and oud.<sup>17</sup> To balance out the slightly bitter taste of coffee, dates and fruits are also customarily served along with the drink. It is also poured in small servings from a coffee pot called *dallah*, covering just the bottom of the cup. This ensures that the drink cools quickly and indicates that the host wants the guest to prolong his visit and enjoy more cups of coffee.<sup>18</sup>

A cultural relic<sup>19</sup> still cherished in the Middle East, the experience of drinking coffee in the region carries much meaning in the way it is prepared, served, appreciated and used in social settings. It represents respect and trust between families, friends and even foes. Coffee houses are still a regular part of the social fabric of the Middle East and a traditional cup of coffee still greets every guest that visits an Arab home. Coffee is more than just coffee here - it is a part of life.

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<sup>16</sup> Arabic Coffee Culture: An Introduction, Arabic Coffees. Accessed January 2018.  
<https://www.arabiancoffees.co.uk/pages/arabic-coffee-culture-an-introduction>

<sup>17</sup> Coffee Culture and History in the Middle East, Kopi Luwak Direct. Accessed January 2018.  
<https://kopiluwakdirect.com/middle-east-history-culture/>

<sup>18</sup> Coffee Culture and History in the Middle East, Kopi Luwak Direct. Accessed January 2018.  
<https://kopiluwakdirect.com/middle-east-history-culture/>

<sup>19</sup> Weir, Tommy, “Middle East leadership tip: stop for coffee and enjoy the moment,” *The National*, May 2014.  
<https://www.thenational.ae/business/middle-east-leadership-tip-stop-for-coffee-and-enjoy-the-moment-1.243380>



Locals in Yemen share a pot of traditionally brewed coffee.

(Source: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-06-27/the-best-coffee-in-the-world-now-comes-from-yemen>)



A traditional Arabic coffee set.

(Source: <http://blog.raynatours.com/5-interesting-facts-arabic-coffee/>)