

Food for Thought: Grounds for Misery --- Asia's Brief History As a Coffee Grower Is Probably a Blessing

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Late in the last century, a disease of coffee bushes known as leaf rust struck in Sri Lanka. Within a few years, it had spread to two-thirds of the island's plantations. By 1880 it had moved on to Indonesia, spreading slowly down the chain of highland coffee farms along Java. By 1900, Sri Lanka and Java, once the two largest producers of coffee in the world, were exporting just a few thousand sacks a year. In the wake of leaf rust, Asia abandoned its role providing what one Arab poet called "the drink of the friends of God."

The brief, blighted history of coffee growing in Asia should probably be a cause of no regret, as there are few crops that have brought such misery to their producers. Asia was spared the fate of Latin American producers, who have endured wild price swings, social unrest and political turmoil all linked to their growing of the beans. Eduardo Galeano, the Uruguayan writer, wrote of his continent being "quickly ruined by a plant whose destructive form of cultivation left forests razed, natural reserves exhausted and general decadence in its wake."

FULL TEXT

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Coffee's complex history has been well told in a new book by Mark Pendergrast, a U.S. journalist who has also written a history of that other favorite source of caffeine, Coca-Cola. "Uncommon Grounds: The History of Coffee and How It Transformed Our World" (Basic Books, 1999) is a sprawling tale of how coffee went from a delicacy spread slowly by Muslim pilgrims to an international commodity whose price varied massively due to speculation, weather, wars and politics. In those wild swings, vast fortunes were made and lost, lives wrecked, democratic rulers undermined and dictators shored up.

Politics has long swirled around coffee in its production and consumption. As far back as the early 16th century, coffee houses were banned in Mecca because they were the source of satirical verses written about the city's governor. In 1605, Pope Clement VIII was asked by his priests to outlaw the drink. After tasting it, he agreed that coffee was indeed Satan's drink. But he also decided it was too delicious to be left to the Devil, that it must be made into a "truly Christian beverage." Fortunately for Starbucks, there was no papal injunction against caffeine, and

coffee was able to grow into the \$10 billion a year business it is today and become the most widely consumed psychoactive drug on earth.

In each generation, a new group of entrepreneurs changed the way coffee was farmed, processed, marketed or sold, each time altering its social role. The last century was dominated by the spread of coffee growers, while this century, processors and marketers have played the key roles in the industry. Advertising has been critical in creating demand for a liquid with no nutritional value and a taste that drinkers must learn to appreciate. Even the coffee break, a phrase and concept that one imagines would date back to the earliest days of coffee drinking, is a recent product of Madison Avenue, introduced in 1952 in an ad campaign for the Pan American Coffee Bureau.

Asia has played a greater part as consumer than producer. Coffee has been around in Japan since the 17th century but it was only in the 19th century that the first kissaten, or coffeehouse, opened. Since 1950, Japan has emerged as a major buyer, accounting for 11% of world sales by value. Japanese are particularly fond of the most expensive coffees; indeed, it buys most of the output of Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee, one of the world's priciest beans. Blue Mountain is not much prized by coffee experts, who generally say Guatemalan coffee is of higher quality. Nevertheless, demand from Japan keeps the Caribbean bean at around \$90 a kilogram.

The reach of coffee into the history of the last few hundred years is extraordinary in Latin America, but even in tea-drinking Asia, it has played its roles. Java was at the peak of coffee production when a Dutch civil servant, Eduard Douwes Dekker, arrived there. He left his post in the colonial administration in disgust at the way Javanese workers were treated on plantations and went on to write the novel "Max Havelaar" under the pen name Multatuli. The Indonesian novelist and historian Pramoedya Ananta Toer has described the novel, with its graphic descriptions of famines caused by coffee-growing in Java, as the most important literary work in that country's history, for it crystalized the feelings of resentment against the Dutch that nurtured Indonesian nationalism. Indonesia may owe its very existence as a nation to the coffee bean.

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