



THE DEVIL'S CUP

COFFEE, THE DRIVING FORCE IN HISTORY

STEWART LEE ALLEN

'Absolutely riveting, informative and hilarious'

ANTHONY BOURDAIN

AUTHOR OF KITCHEN CONFIDENTIAL



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CANONGATE

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To my Mother

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Introduction

The First Cup

As with art 'tis prepared so you should drink it with art.

Abd el Kader (sixteenth century)

Nairobi, Kenya

1988

“ETHIOPIA IS THE BEST.” BILL’S EYES BRIGHTENED. “FINEST GRUB in Africa, mate. And those Ethiopian girls...”

“No girls,” I said. Bill, a Cockney plumber/Buddhist monk, was obsessed with finding me a girl but lacked discretion; his last bit of matchmaking had ended with me fending off a Kenyan hooker, twice my size, who’d kept shouting, “I am just ready for love!”

“No girls,” I repeated, shuddering at the memory. “Don’t even think about it.”

“You don’t have to bonk them.” He gave me his most charming leer. “But you’ll want to.”

“I sincerely doubt it.”

“And the buna, ahhh! Best buna in the world.”

“Buna? What’s that?”

“Coffee,” he said. “Ethiopia’s where it came from.”

So it was settled. We were off to Ethiopia for lunch. Buses are rare here in northern Kenya, so we hitched a ride in the back of a rickety “Tata” truck loaded with soda pop. It was a desolate trip, twenty hours of sun-blackened rock and pale weeds. The main indication of human habitation was the machine-gun-riddled buses abandoned on the roadside. We were not particularly worried about bandits (there were two armed guards on our vehicle), but about seven hours into the trip we passed a truck whose offer of a ride we had earlier declined. Its axle had been snapped in two by the unpaved road, flipping the vehicle over and killing the driver and half the passengers. Those who had survived, all seven-foot-tall Masai warriors, with traditional red robes and elongated earlobes, were standing about weeping, and shaking their spears at the sky. One of the Masai lay crushed to death under a pile of shattered Pepsi bottles.

When we arrived at Ethiopia, the border was closed. The sole guard was friendly but adamant—no foreigners allowed into Ethiopia. Bill clarified our position. We didn’t want to go into Ethiopia, he explained. We only wanted to visit the village of Moyale, half of which just happened to be in Ethiopia. Surely, Bill reasoned, that was allowed?

The guard considered. It was true, he said, foreigners were allowed to visit Moyale for the day. Then he wagged his head: but not on Sunday. Ethiopia, he reminded us, is a Christian nation.

Bill tried another approach. Was there an Ethiopian Tourist Guesthouse in Moyale? he asked. Of course, said the soldier. Did we wish to visit it?

“Owww,” said Bill, giving the Ethiopian language’s breathy affirmative.

“No problem,” said the guard. “Go straight ahead and just left.”

The government hotels are always overpriced, so we located a local restaurant—a shack, to be exact, with dirt floors and a dry grass roof. The food was excellent: *doro wat* (spicy chicken stew with rancid butter), *injera* (fermented crepes), and *tej* (honey mead). Then came coffee.

Ethiopians were drinking coffee while Europeans were still taking beer for breakfast, and over the centuries a ceremony has developed around sharing the brew. First, green beans are roasted at the table. The hostess then passes the still-smoking beans around so each guest may fully enjoy the aroma. A quasi-blessing or ode to friendship is offered, and the beans are ground in a stone mortar, then brewed.

That was how the restaurant owner prepared our coffee that day and, while I’ve had it performed many times since, never has it seemed so lovely. She was a typical Ethiopian country woman, tall, elegant, and stunningly beautiful, wearing orange and violet wraps that glowed in the darkened hut. And the coffee, served in handleless demitasses with a fresh sprig of ginger-like herb, was excellent.

In the full-fledged ceremony, which can last up to an hour, you must take three cups: *Abole-Berke-Sostga*, one-two-three, for friendship. Unfortunately, our hostess had only enough beans for one cup each. Come back tomorrow, she said, there will be more. Evening curfew was approaching, so we hurried back to the Kenyan side of the border. The next day, however, the guards refused to let us back into Ethiopia. We stood arguing at the border for hours, but nothing, neither reasoning nor bribes, convinced them to let us back in for that promised second cup.

During the next ten years Ethiopia fell to pieces. Millions died in famines, civil war broke out, and eventually the country split in two. My life was hardly better run. I lived on four continents and in eleven cities, sometimes moving five times in a single year. The only thing that made it bearable was the knowledge that at the age of thirty-five I would drop everything and return to the road—“go for a walk,” as I was fond of saying, never to return. Consider it a passive-aggressive death wish. If I were a wannabe Buddhist, I could have claimed it was a desire for “Loss of Self.” Whatever. Instead, I accidentally fell in love (another type of death wish) and headed to Australia to get married, an ill-fated scheme that, by means too complicated to explain, ended with me working at Mother Theresa’s Calcutta hospice for the dying.

Calcutta is the world’s greatest city, and I’ll tell you why: unendurable suffering, arrogance, benevolence, intelligence, and greed thrive side-by-side, face-to-face, twenty-four hours a day, with no apology. On one bus ride I watched a woman fall dead of starvation, while across the street children in immaculate white school uniforms shrieked with pleasure over a game of croquet; two blocks earlier I’d seen a woman immersed up to her neck in a muddy pond, intently praying to the sun.

It’s also a bibliophile’s delight, and it was here, while prowling the city’s innumerable bookstalls, that I discovered a curious manuscript. The print was almost

illegible, and the prose the quaintly archaic, singsong English of the subcontinent. I have no idea what it was called, since the cover had long ago rotted off. I suppose it was typical stuff, just another half-crazed Hindi rant about how dietary imbalances in the West were creating a race of hyperactive sociopaths hell-bent on destroying Mother Earth. Most of the tract kvetched about meat eaters (Hindus are vegetarians) and cow killers (Holy Beast, that). But the section that caught my eye was the one lamenting the evils of “that dark and evil bean from Africa.” I paraphrase:

Is it any wonder, I ask the reader, that it is told how the black-skinned savages of that continent eat the coffee bean before sacri ficing living victims to their gods? One need only compare the violent coffee-drinking societies of the West to the peace-loving tea drinkers of the Orient to realize the pernicious and malignant effect that bitter brew has upon the human soul.

You-are-what-you-eat fruitcakes are as common in India as in California. But what struck me was the contrast to an eighteenth-century French book I’d happened upon in Hanoi, Vietnam. The book, *Mon Journal*, was written by social critic and historian Jules Michelet, and in it he essentially attributes the birth of an enlightened Western civilization to Europe’s transformation into a coffee-drinking society: “For this sparkling outburst of creative thought there is no doubt that the honor should be ascribed in part to the great event which created new customs and even changed the human temperament—the advent of coffee.”

How French, I’d thought at the time, to attribute the birth of Western civilization to an espresso. But Michelet’s notion is curiously similar to modern research indicating that certain foods have affected history in previously unsuspected ways. Specialists in the field, called ethnobotany, have recently theorized that eating certain mushrooms can alter brain function. Others have reported that the sacred jaguars depicted by the Mayans are actually frogs that the priests consumed en masse for their hallucinogenic properties. Recent research has indicated that the sacred violet of the pharaohs was considered holy because of its intoxicating powers. These foods are all drugs, of course. But so is coffee—as an addict, I should know. Perhaps Michelet had been on to something. When had Europeans started drinking coffee, and what had it replaced? I was clueless. I Certainly had no idea that finding the answer would take me three quarters of the way around the world, roughly twenty thousand miles, by train, dhow, rickshaw, cargo freighter, and, finally, a donkey. Even now, penning this page, I don’t know what to make of what I’ve written. At times, it seems like the ramblings of a hypercaffeinated hophead; at others, a completely credible study. All I knew in Calcutta was that the logical place to start looking for confirmation of Michelet’s proposition was in the land where coffee had first been discovered over two thousand years ago, the country I’d been waiting to revisit for a decade.

It was time to head to Ethiopia and get that second cup.

A Season in Hell

Abole, Berke, Sostga—one, two, three cups, and we are friends forever.

Con artist in Addis Ababa

Harrar, Ethiopia

“**Y**OU LIKE RAM-BO?”

My questioner was a wiry Arab-African squatting in the shade of a white clay wall. Sharp eyes, wispy mustache, white turban. Not your typical Sylvester Stallone fan.

“Rambo?” I repeated uncertainly.

He nodded. “Ram-bo.” He adjusted his filthy wraparound so the hem didn’t drag in the dirt. “Ram-bo,” he repeated with infinite disinterest. “*Farangi.*”

“Are you really a Rambo fan?” I was surprised—Charles Bronson had been more popular in Calcutta. I flexed my biceps to clarify. “You like?”

The man looked at me in disgust. “Ram-bo,” he insisted. “Ram-*boo*, Ram-*boooo*. You go? You like?”

“No go,” I said, walking off. “No like.”

I’d just arrived in Harrar, a remote village in the Ethiopian highlands, after a grueling twenty-four hour train journey from the capital, Addis Ababa. I already preferred Harrar. Its winding alleys were free of both cars and thieves, a big improvement over Addis, where pickpockets followed me like flies and my one night out had ended in an attempted robbery after a “friendship coffee ceremony.” I also liked Harrar’s Arabic flavor, the whitewashed mud buildings, and the colorful gypsy-African clothes worn by the girls. Rambo Man had been the only hustler so far, and he seemed reasonable enough.

I found a suitable café and grabbed a table in the shade. The coffee, brewed on an old handpulled espresso machine, was a thick black liquor served in a shot glass. The taste was shocking in the intensity of its “coffeeness,” a trait I attributed to minor burns incurred in the pan-roasting technique common in Ethiopia. Harrarian coffee beans are among the world’s finest, second only to Jamaican and Yemeni, but this... I suspected local beans had been mixed with smuggled Zairean Robusta, which would account for the fine head of *crema* (called *wesh* here), as well as the fact that after one cup I felt like crawling out of my skin.

I ordered a second. Rambo Man had come to stare at me from across the road. Our eyes met. He shrugged his shoulders and raised his hands suggestively. I scowled.

Harrar is one of the legendary cities of African antiquity. It was closed to foreigners for centuries because an Islamic saint had prophesied its fall the day a non-Muslim entered the walls. Christians who attempted to enter were beheaded; African

merchants were merely locked outside and left to the tender mercies of local lion packs. Not that inside was much better. Hyenas roamed the streets, noshing on the homeless. Witchcraft and slavery flourished, particularly the notorious selling of black eunuchs to Turkish harems. By the 1800s, the walled city had become so isolated that a separate language had developed. It is still spoken today.

This reputation drew Europe's most intrepid adventurers to Harrar. Many tried, many died, until Sir Richard Burton, the Englishman who "discovered" the source of the Nile, managed to enter the city in 1855 disguised as an Arab. It fell soon afterward.

The most intriguing of Harrar's early Western visitors, however, was the French Symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud. Rimbaud had come to Paris when he was seventeen. After a year of pursuing his famous "derangement of the senses" lifestyle, he'd established a reputation as the most depraved man in the city. By nineteen, he'd finished his masterpiece, *A Season in Hell*. Having reached his twentieth year, he renounced all poetry and disappeared off the face of the earth. Rimbaud...

"*Rambo!*" I shouted, jumping out of my chair. That's what the fellow had been going on about—Rimbaud, pronounced "Rambo." He'd wanted to take me to Rimbaud's mansion. The poet had not "disappeared off the face of the earth" when he'd abandoned poetry in 1870. He'd merely come to his senses and become a coffee merchant in Harrar.

Rambo Man, however, had vanished.

Rimbaud's reason for coming to Ethiopia was more complicated than a desire to enter the coffee trade. He was actually fulfilling a passage from *A Season in Hell*, in which he predicted going to a land "of lost climates" from which he would return "with limbs of iron, bronzed skin, and fierce eyes." He wanted action, danger, and money. He got at least the first two in Harrar. The emir had been deposed only twenty years earlier, and tensions were still high. The French coffee merchants needed someone crazy enough to risk his life for a bean (albeit one going for one hundred dollars a pound). Rimbaud was their man.

The importance of the Harrar Longberry, however, goes beyond the fragrant cup it produces. Many believe it is here that the lowly Robusta bean evolved into the civilized Arabica, potentially making the Harrar Longberry the missing link of the genus *Coffea*. To understand the importance of this you must first know that there are two basic species of coffee beans: the luscious Arabica from East Africa, which prefers higher elevations, and the reviled Robusta from Zaire, which grows just about anywhere.

That being understood, we must now go back to that mysterious time before the dawn of civilization, the Precaffeinated Era.

Back then, fifteen hundred to three thousand years ago, the world's first coffee lovers, the nomadic Oromos, lived in the kingdom of Kefa.¹ The Oromos didn't actually drink coffee; they ate it, crushed, mixed with fat, and shaped into golf-ball-size treats. They were especially fond of munching on these coffee-balls before going into battle against the people of Bonga, who generally beat the pants off the Oromos. The Bongas also happened to be first-rate slave traders, and sent about seven thousand slaves each year to the Arabic markets in Harrar. A fair number of these unfortunates were Oromos coffee chewers who had been captured in battle. It was these people who accidentally first brought the bean to Harrar. Ethiopian rangers say the old slave trails

are still shaded by the coffee trees that have grown from their discarded meals.

But the important thing is the difference between the regions' plants. Beans from relatively low-lying Kefa grow in huge coffee jungles and are generally more akin to the squat, harsh Robustas that probably came out of the jungles of Zaire thousands of years before. Harrar's beans, by contrast, are long-bodied and possess delicious personalities like the Arabicas. In adapting to Harrar's higher altitude, something wonderful seems to have happened to them. No one knows what, but we should all be grateful that it was the evolved Arabica beans of Harrar that were later brought to Yemen, and then to the world at large.

So Rimbaud's risking his life for the bean (in fact, it killed him) is perhaps not so unreasonable. It's worth noting, however, that the poet/merchant did not seem to hold Harrar's coffee in high regard. "Horrible" is how he describes it in one letter; "awful stuff" and "disgusting." Oh well. Perhaps all those years of absinthe had dulled his taste buds. The fact that the locals were fond of selling him beans laced with goat shit probably didn't help matters.

After a few more cups, I checked into a hotel and set out in search of Rimbaud's home. Harrar is a small place of about twenty thousand inhabitants; a maze of alleys lined with lopsided mosques, mudhuts. It is noticeably lacking in street names. Rimbaud's house is probably the easiest thing to find in the city, since any foreigner who approaches is mobbed by wannabe tour guides. I had no intention of paying anybody for guiding me to a house, and eventually, by taking the most obscure route imaginable, I managed to reach what I knew was Rimbaud's neighborhood undetected, only to find myself in a dead-end alley.

There was nobody in sight, so I yelled a cautious hello.

"Here," came a familiar voice.

I crawled through a jagged crack in one of the walls, and there, squatting on a pile of rubble, was Rambo Man.

"Aha!" he shouted. "You have come at last."

He was sitting in front of one of the oddest houses I'd ever seen. At least it seemed so in the context of Harrar's one-story mud huts. It was three stories high with twin peaked gables, all covered in elaborate carvings. The shingled roof was fringed with fleur-de-lis decorations and the windows were stained red. Straight out of a Grimm's fairy tale, I thought. The oddest thing, though, was how the mansion was surrounded by a twelve-foot-high mud wall with no opening other than the crack that I'd just crawled through.

The man was looking at me in surprise. "You have no guide?"

"Guide? What for?"

"No problem." He waved a yellow piece of paper at me and demanded ten birra.

"What are these?" I asked.

"Tickets."

"Tickets? Are they real?"

"See them." He seemed vaguely offended. *Ticket—Rimbaud*, said the piece of paper. 10 Br. "You see—real house. Government. Not like the others."

"You mean there are other Rimbaud houses?"

"No. Only one."

I paid him, and he led me up a narrow interior stairway into a huge chamber,

perhaps three thousand square feet, with a fifty-foot-high ceiling ringed by an old-fashioned oval balcony. The walls were covered in handpainted canvas “wallpaper,” now so filthy and tattered that I could barely make out the quaint Parisian garden scenes and heraldic devices. Huge dust particles floated about. There was no furniture of any kind.

The great French poet spent the last days of his life in this surreal château, alone except for his beloved manservant. He wrote no poetry, and his letters were filled with complaints of loneliness, disease, and his financial problems, including a disastrous attempt to sell slaves and guns to the Ethiopian emperor. His prophecy of coming home with “limbs of iron... and fierce eyes” proved false. He returned to France delirious and destitute. His left leg had been amputated. A mysterious infection soon killed him.

I wandered about for a while, peering over the balcony, touching the walls. The place seemed uninhabited. A boy in rags trailed after me only to flee as soon as I spoke. Pigeons cooed from nests among the tattered wall hangings.

As I left, the man asked me if I wanted to meet Rimbaud’s descendants.

“There were daughters,” he said. “Rimbaud’s daughters...”

“Rimbaud had children?” I asked.

“Many daughters. Very beautiful girls... so young...” he stopped, suggestively. “You want Rambo girl?”

To sleep with the bastard offspring of Arthur Rimbaud, I thought; that would be a story. She would be beautiful, as all the women here were, and perfectly arrogant, as behooved one of Ethiopian-French descent. It was tempting. But hadn’t it been a case of Harrarian clap that killed Rimbaud? I declined.

Don’t roast your coffee beans in the marketplace.

(Don’t tell secrets to strangers.)

Oromo nomad saying

I MET ABERA TESHONE WHILE LOOKING FOR THE HYENA MEN, a caste that feeds Harrar’s trash to the packs of hyenas that gather nightly outside the city walls. The caste started as a way of keeping the animals from entering the city and attacking humans. Today it’s largely a tourist attraction, although the sight of hideous animals accepting garbage from men in rags is not likely to topple the Disney empire.

Abera, a young man with a withered left leg, had been my guide for the event, and afterward we’d gone for a beer. He wanted to know why I had come to Harrar.

“Not many tourists come here,” he explained.

“I noticed. I came here to learn about coffee.” A thought struck me. “Hey, didn’t you say you were an agriculture student? What do you know about its origin?”

“Do you know the story about Kaldi and the dancing goats?” “Of course,” I said. It’s one of coffee’s mythological chestnuts. It goes like this:

An Ethiopian goatherd named Kaldi one day noticed his best goat dancing about and baaing like a maniac. It seemed to happen after the old billy goat had been nibbling the berries off a certain plant. The goatherd tried a few himself and soon was dancing about, too.

A holy man wandered by and asked the boy why he was dancing with a goat. The goatherd explained. The monk took some berries home and found that after eating them he could not sleep. It so happened that this holy man was famous for his rather tedious all-night sermons and was having trouble keeping his disciples awake. So he immediately ordered all his disciples, called dervishes, to chew the bean before he preached. The dervishes' sleepiness vanished, and word spread about the great prophet whose electrifying wisdom kept you awake until dawn.

Being a city boy, I mentioned to Abera that it seemed strange that the goats would eat berries. Didn't they normally prefer leafy stuff?

"Yes, well, perhaps it was so," he said. "That is how the country folk still make it."

"They make coffee out of leaves?"

"Yes. They call it *kati*."

"Really? I would like to try it. Maybe in a café..."

"Oh no," he laughed. "This is only drunk in the home. Hardly anyone in Harrar drinks it today. You must visit the Ogaden. They still drink it."

"Where do they live?"

"The Ogaden? They live now in Jiga-Jiga." He made the place sound like a disease. "But you can't go there. It's very, very dangerous. And those Somalis, those Ogaden, are very arrogant. So rude!"

"Why? What is the problem?"

"They are rude people!" Abera shook his head angrily at the Ogaden's poor manners. "Why, just not long ago they did a bad thing to a bus going there. To all the men."

"Bad? How bad?"

"Why, very bad. They killed them."

"That's pretty bad," I agreed.

According to Abera, Ogaden bandits had pulled all the men off a bus heading to Jiga-Jiga and demanded they each recite a verse from the Koran. Those who failed were shot in the head. Thousands of the Ogaden, a desert nomad tribe, had recently been forced into refugee settlements as a result of the collapse of the Somali government. The largest camp was near Jiga-Jiga on the Ethiopian/Somali border, and as a consequence the whole area was buzzing with guerrilla activity. The recent turmoil in Mogadishu, where dead American soldiers had been dragged through the streets, had made the Ogaden especially hostile toward Yanks. The situation had grown so difficult that the relief agencies no longer sent white workers to Jiga-Jiga for fear they'd be shot.

"It is very bad for foreigners to go there," he said. "But why do you want to go?"

"I just want a cup of coffee," I said. "Have you actually been there?"

"It's Hell." Abera looked down his nose. "I urge you not to go."

IT WAS A PLEASANT TWO-HOUR DRIVE FROM HARRAR TO Jiga-Jiga, through the so-called Valley of Wonders, although what makes this valley so wondrous I couldn't say. I had set out at five in the morning, Abera having warned me that drivers refused to return from Jiga-Jiga after two in the afternoon for fear of bandits. He'd recommended I get an early start and head back to Harrar before noon unless I intended to stay overnight,

in which case I'd most likely find my hotel robbed at gunpoint. That was assuming, of course, that anyone would be stupid enough to let me stay at their lodge. Was he being a tad paranoid? Perhaps. At any rate, it was a refreshingly cool way to start the day. By the time we'd reached the desert's edge, however, it had grown so warm that some of my fellow passengers removed the pistols cached beneath their shirts.

"The human head, once struck off, does not regrow like the rose." This observation was made by a British officer when Sir Richard Burton proposed visiting here in 1854, and it kept running through my head. The parallels between Burton's and my quests were starting to seem spooky. We were both seeking mysterious "bodies of water" in Central Africa; my mysterious liquid contained a few coffee beans, but other than that, we were looking for the same thing. Burton wanted to see how the Nile started out; I wanted to see how some of it ended up. Burton wound up with a Somali spear stuck through both cheeks, which is about where I hoped the parallels would cease.

Jiga-Jiga proved to be a dusty place specializing in huts constructed from flattened Shell oil drums. I popped my head into the first doorway that showed a tray of chipped glasses.

"*Kati*?" I inquired in Amharic and Arabic. "Do you have *kati*?"

The lady pointed at my tattered straw fedora and burst into giggles. I tried another café. The proprietor shooed me out, as did the next and the next after that. Every time I stepped out onto the street I found yet another six-foot-tall skeleton eyeing me with an ominous disinterest. Men had rifles. Women wore wildly colorful head scarfs. Ogadens, I presumed.

Suddenly, a wizened old woman, with a string of Christian crosses tattooed about her neck, beckoned me into her hut. She started babbling. She seemed frightened. I pantomimed sipping and asked about *kati*.

"*Kati*?" she asked and gestured to a sack full of dirty leaves. She repeated my drinking pantomime. "*Kati*?"

"Yes!" I pulled one of the leaves from the sack and sniffed—was this it? The legendary *kati*, *qat shia*, Abyssinian Tea, and perhaps the great-grandmother of all coffee drinks? She gestured for me to sit in a corner of the hut and then turned away. Only there was nothing in the corner to sit on. In fact, there was nothing in the hut but the bag of leaves. Was this really a café? No cups, no seats... and where was she going to cook the *kati*? How did I even know those were coffee leaves?

The old lady stopped and looked at me suspiciously.

"*Kati*?" I repeated.

"Owwwwww," she sighed in a breathy voice.

Oh well. She looked honest enough. I crouched on the dirt floor. But what if she drugged me? There was a knock on the door, and a man in a military uniform stuck his head in. He wanted my passport. He wanted to know what the hell I was doing in Jiga-Jiga.

"Coffee," I explained lamely. "I was told to come here to drink it."

The soldier asked the old lady a question. She shook the bag of leaves.

"You are a very stupid white man," he said angrily. "This is a restricted area—very dangerous! Please come with me."

"But...she's going to make some..." I could tell this plea was falling on deaf ears. "Of course, officer," I said coyly. "May I buy you a cup of tea first?"

“Tea?” he asked.

“No, no. I mean *kati*.”

“What is that?”

I started to explain. “No. You must leave. This area is under military control.”

As he loaded me onto the next van leaving for Harrar, I flashed back to the time some Irish friends were thrown out of East Harlem by two New York cops, despite their protests that they were meeting friends.

“Don’t be stupid,” one of the cops said after they’d escorted my friends to the nearest subway station. “You’ll never have no friends here.”

“THE GERMAN PRESIDENT IS COMING TO VISIT JIGA-JIGA,” Abera said when I told him what had happened. “So they made you leave.”

But he had good news. He’d mentioned my quest to his girlfriend. It turned out her housemate knew how to brew *kati*, and she’d invited me over for a cup.

There are actually two types of coffee-leaf beverage. The first, and more common, is *kati* or *kotea*, a concoction made of roasted coffee leaves. The other is called *amertassa*, an earlier version of the drink made from fresh-picked green leaves that are left to dry in the shade for a few days and then brewed without roasting. The market lady from whom we bought our supplies could remember her grandmother drinking *amertassa*. Now it was almost extinct. She did, however, have a burlap bag full of *kati*, broad leaves with orange and green highlights.

Kati and *amertassa* are strong candidates for being the first cup of coffee, for while Ethiopians have been eating the beans since time immemorial, the first mention of a coffee beverage suggests it was brewed from the plants’ leaves. *Kafta* was its Arabic name. Some scholars claim it was brewed with leaves from the narcotic plant *qat*, yet in the early 1400s Arab mystic al-Dhabhani saw Ethiopians “using” *qahwa*, a clear reference to coffee in a liquid form. So what were the Ethiopians drinking? Quite likely a brew made from coffee leaves: the semimythical Abyssinian Tea. Raw beans were added later in southern Yemen by the Sufi mystic al-Shadhili of Mocha or one of his disciples.²

Whatever the case, *kati* is a lovely cuppa. Preparation is simple: dried leaves are roasted on a flat pan until they acquire a dark, tarry texture, then crumbled and brewed over low heat with water, sugar, and a pinch of salt. Cooking time is about ten minutes. The resultant amber-colored liquor has a delicately caramelized, smoky flavor comparable to lapsang souchong (Chinese smoked tea) but more complex, both sweet and salty, with a sensuously gelatinous texture.

It proved an especially sympathetic combination with the *qat* leaves Abera had bought for us to chew. *Qat* is the evil sister to coffee and has addicted much of southern Arabia and East Africa (it has also recently developed a following in the West). The two drugs’ histories are so intertwined that one nickname for the patron saint of coffee drinkers, al-shadhili of Mocha, is “the Father of Two Plants,” *qat* coffee. *Qat* is taken by chewing raw leaves and holding the pulp in the cheek until the juices are extracted. I’d first tried it years ago in Kenya and been unimpressed, but the stuff Abera brought that day was electrifying, comparable to low-key Ecstasy. Ecstasy, however, produces a physical and emotional high, whereas quality *qat*—and Harrar is said to grow the finest—gives a more cerebral euphoria, plunging the chewer into a

trance-like state that makes conversation a hypnotically sensual experience.³

We spent the rest of the day lounging on the raised platform in Abera's traditional Harrari home. Friends came to visit. More *qat* was chewed, more *kati* was brewed, and the afternoon soon lost itself in a *qat* haze, earnest but idle, where nothing matters so much as expression and understanding. The day was hot, but Abera's clay house was cool and made comfortable with cushions. We talked about Rod Stewart, for whose haircut Abera confessed a great admiration. Later, during the more serious part of a *qat* session called Solomon's Hour, the talk turned to witchcraft. I mentioned the Ethiopian Christian deacon who had claimed Muslims used coffee to lay curses on people. Abera had never heard of this. But here in Harrar, he said, some used it for magical healing.⁴

"People come from many miles to Harrar to be healed by these people," he said.

"Have you ever seen it done?" I asked.

"Once." He shook his head. "I do not approve of these people."

"What happened?" I asked. "Did you see the Zar?"

"You know about the Zar?"

"The priest in Addis told me. It's a devil, right?"

"No, not exactly. It is the one that comes to the *sheykah*." He asked his friend, who worked for a UN agency but spoke no English, a question. "Yes, my friend says the Zar comes to the *sheykah*. He knows all these people."

It turned out that a celebrated *sheykah* had just returned to Harrar after finishing four years of special training at Ethiopia's holy Lake Wolla. He was now holding sessions in Harrar every Tuesday and Thursday. Today was Tuesday.

"Your friend knows these holy men?" I asked.

"Yes. Some."

I hesitated. "Is it possible for a foreigner to go to a healing?"

"You wish to go?" Abera seemed surprised. "I don't know..." He asked his friend another question. "He says he does not know. No foreigners go to these things. But he can ask."

It took us the rest of the afternoon to locate the *sheykah*, only to be told that he was still asleep. It's a holiday, said his groupies; best to come back later. With presents.

"Presents?" I asked.

"Yes, that is normal. It is a sign of respect."

The plan became that Abera should go alone to buy the "respect" while I went back to the hotel. We'd meet again in the evening. But in the meantime I had to give him some money to buy the presents. I wondered if it was all a scam but produced the money anyhow.

"What are you going to get them?" I asked before handing it over.

"Green coffee beans," he said. "That is what you always give. Two kilos should be enough. Don't give them anything else! You're only going to watch, not get healed."

¹ *Kefa*, some say, is the root for the word *coffee*. More contend that coffee derives from the Arabic *qahwa*, from the root *q-h-w-y*, "to "make something repugnant." *Qahwa* originally referred to wine, which made food repugnant, and was applied to coffee because it made sleep repugnant. It's interesting to note that Ethiopia is the only country in the world that does not use a word similar to *coffee* for the brew; there, it's called *buna*, which means bean.

The Kefans also gave us the world's first baristas, a caste called the Tofaco, who not only brewed the king's coffee but also poured it down his throat.

- 2 One theory is that coffee was created as a result of Chinese Admiral Cheng Ho's supposed introduction of tea to the Arabs in the early 1400s. When China cut off contact with the outside world, the Arabs replaced tea leaves, unobtainable in Arabia, with *qat* or coffee.
- 3 Tea's equivalent would be *leppet-so*, a pickled tea leaf chewed in parts of Burma.
- 4 Ethiopia is a traditionally Christian nation, whereas coffee is associated with Islam, a relationship that in the past has led to the banning of coffee for Ethiopian Christians.

Ethiopian Prayer

*Eele buna nagay nuuklen eele buna iijolen haagudatu hoormati haagudatu waan
haamtu nuura dow bokai magr nuken.*

Garri/Oromo prayer

THE COFFEE BEAN HAS LONG been a symbol of power in Harrar. The caste of growers, the Harash, not only bore the city's name but were forbidden to go beyond its walls lest the art of cultivation be lost. The head of the emir's bodyguard was allowed a small private coffee garden as a sign of his rank.

And of course, natives worshiped their coffeepots, as in the prayer above, which translates

*Coffeepot give us peace
coffeepot let children grow
let our wealth swell
please protect us horn evils
give us rain and grass.*

I think we all pray to the first cup of the day. It's a silent prayer, sung while the mind is still foggy and blue. "O Magic Cup," it might go, "carry me above the traffic jam. Keep me civil in the subway.

And forgive my employer, as you forgive me. Amen."

But the prayer from the Garri/Oromo tribe is more serious, part of a ritual called *bun-qalle* that celebrates sex and death, and in which the coffee bean replaces the fatted ox in a sacrifice to the gods. Among the Garri the husking of the coffee fruit symbolizes slaughter, with the priests biting the heads off the sacrificial creatures. After this, the beans are cooked in butter and chewed by the elders. Their spiritual power thus enhanced, they pronounce a blessing on the proceedings and smear the holy coffee-scented butter on the participants' foreheads. The beans are then mixed with sweet milk, and everybody drinks the liquid while reciting the prayer.

If the whole affair seems vaguely familiar, it should. Who has gone to a business meeting where coffee is *not* offered? Its use as an intellectual lubricant, along with its ability to "swell our wealth" per the Garri prayer, has made having a pot ready for consumption an international business norm. Looked at this way, a modern business office is nothing more than a "tribe" camped out about its own sacred pot, and the *bun-qalle* is nothing less than man's first coffee klatch, archetype of the world's most common social ritual.

Two things about the *bun-qalle* mark alle it as probably the earliest use of coffee as

a mind-altering or magical drug. The first is that the beans are fried and then eaten, a practice clearly derived from the coffee-balls chewed by Oromo warriors near Kefa. The Garri, who live a few hundred miles south of Harrar, are related to the Oromo and share their language. The second part of the ceremony, where the roasted beans are added to milk and imbibed, indicates it predates Islam (A.D. 600) because Islamic alchemists believed that mixing coffee and milk caused leprosy (a belief that lies at the root of the disdain many Europeans have for coffee with milk).

Further indication of the ceremony's extreme antiquity is the fact that the Garri associate *bun-qalle* with the sky god Waaq. His name may sound uncouth to us, but the worship of this sky god is thought to be among the world's first religions. Whether the eating of coffee beans was performed in the original Waaq ceremonies is beyond knowing. One can say, I think, that since the Garri were doubtless among the first to taste our favorite bean, and since primitive people who discover psychoactive drugs tend to worship them (a penchant today denigrated as mere substance abuse), it seems likely that consuming the beans was added to the Waaq ceremonies at a relatively early date.

In the Oromo culture of western Ethiopia, the coffee bean's resemblance to a woman's sexual organs has given birth to another *bun-qalle* ceremony with such heavy sexual significance that it is preceded by a night of abstinence, according to the work of anthropologist Lambert Bartel. Oromo elder Gam-machu Magarsa told Bartel that "we compare this biting open of the coffee fruits with the first sexual intercourse on the wedding day, when the man has to force the girl to open her thighs in order to get access to her vagina."

After the beans are husked, they are stirred in the butter with a stick called *dannaba*, the word for penis. Some people replace the stick with bundles of living grass because a dead piece of wood cannot "impart life" or impregnate the beans. As the beans are stirred, another prayer is recited until finally the coffee fruits burst open from the heat, making the sound Tass! This bursting of the fruit is likened to both childbirth and the last cry of the dying man. The person stirring the beans now recites:

*Ashama, my coffee, burst open to bring peace
there you opened your mouth
please wish me peace
keep far from me all evil tongues.*

In being eaten the coffee bean "dies," blessing new thought and life, a tradition the Oromo say goes back as far as anyone can remember. After the bean has spoken, the assembly moves on to the matter at hand, such as a circumcision, marriage, land dispute, or the undertaking of a dangerous journey.

One important point about the *bun-qalle*. The beans are simply added whole to the milk, not pulverized. True infusion, where crushed beans are added to a neutral liquid like water, thus completely releasing the bean's power, is reserved for the darker acts such as laying a curse or, as in tonight's ceremony, the exorcism of an evil spirit.

"SOUNDS LIKE YOU'VE BEEN RIPPED OFF," SAID AARON.

Aaron was an American health-care expert I met while waiting for Abera to take

me to the Zar ceremony.

“Forty birra,” he said, referring to what I’d given Abera for the present. “Lot of money. I hope I’m wrong.”

Aaron had a particularly low opinion of Ethiopians and, like any good bureaucrat, had found some studies to back up his point of view. According to these, the massive influx of international aid during the famines had made begging from foreigners the social norm. It was as natural as breathing, according to Aaron. True or not, there was no denying that urban Ethiopia was filled with a type of begging I’d only previously encountered in America—that is, people obviously in no real need striking up mock friendships merely to cadge a few birra.

“No, you’ll never see your friend again,” Aaron assured me. “Why don’t you come up to my room and check out these baskets I bought? They were only seventy dollars each.”

Abera appeared, right on time. Everything was arranged. I could attend.

“But don’t give them any more presents!” he instructed again. “It is enough. And don’t drink anything they give you at the ceremony.”

The only disappointment was that he would not be going. He had a test to cram for. Instead his friend, a devout Catholic, had agreed to take me.

“Catholic? Will he show up?” I asked.

“He promised.” Abera sounded uncertain. “Stewart, I have to ask you something. Will you be wearing your hat?”

Abera was referring to my old straw hat, the one that the first kati lady in Jiga-Jiga had found so amusing. You know how it is when you get so attached to a particular article of clothing that you just can’t bear to throw it away? Well, I’d become very fond of this hat, a K-mart Australian-style number, and over the last year of travel it had suffered considerable trauma. By the time I arrived in Ethiopia, it was little more than a crumpled piece of straw held together with half a dozen black patches. And dirty— I didn’t dare wash it lest it dissolve. I loved it all the same. People in every nation reacted in a different but characteristic way. Nepalese facetiously offered large sums of money for it. Indians laughed and praised its “unique quality.” The Ethiopians merely thought it unhygienic.

“You cannot wear that hat,” said Abera. “Not tonight. It would be disrespectful.” He pulled out an Islamic-style scarf. “Wear this. I will tie it on for you.”

“Okay.” I knew he was right. Besides, the scarf, white with blue and red fleur-de-lis patterns, was rather stylish. Abera tied it on, turban style.

“It looks good,” he said. “You look like a Muslim.”

“So I’m in disguise?”

“Maybe. Not a bad idea when you walk in Harrar late at night.”

We chatted for a while. He refused my offer of dinner and, after a final exhortation to send him copies of *Cosmopolitan* Magazine (he rewrote the articles for the university paper), he departed. I sat down to wait in the hotel lobby.

Eight o’clock came and went. Then nine. Ten too. The hotel guard was spreading out his sleeping roll when there came a knock on the front door. It was Abera’s friend. I thanked him for coming but asked if he thought the ceremony might be over, since we were running two hours late. No problem, he said. Nonetheless, we hurried through Harrar’s darkened alleys. Squatting men called out greetings. The women, more

diffident, smiled hello.

“They think you are Muslim,” my friend commented, pointing to my headpiece.

As we moved out of the town’s center it grew quiet. My companion fell silent. Harrar’s streets are said to be haunted by spirits from all the tribes that have been enslaved here. Its hyenas, traditionally believed to be hermaphroditic, are said by some to be spirits of the poor boys castrated and sold as eunuchs. According to the eighteenth-century French traveler Antoine d’Abladie, hyenas were thought to be a type of werewolf called *buda* that attacked and ate Zar spirits.

As we approached the house where the Zar ceremony was to be held, I heard singing. The exorcism was already in progress. My companion indicated silence, and we slipped into a long, narrow room lit by a single lamp. A crowd of perhaps twenty people squatted near the door. Halfway down the room hung a dirty white sheet through which we could see the silhouette of the *sheykah* reclining on a huge brass bed. Before the sheet stood the first patient. Since we had arrived late, I was never quite clear as to the nature of this man’s ailment. But the *sheykah* had already identified the possessing spirit and convinced it to leave the man in peace if he sacrificed three cocks with certain colored feathers about their necks.

A glass of pale liquor was passed around the room. People chatted in low voices. I was pleasantly surprised to be ignored. Apparently my “disguise” was working and I was being taken for some sort of foreign Muslim. Some of the people crouching by the wall began to rock slowly back and forth and sing a curious syncopated melody over and over. Incense was thrown on a brazier.

The traditional way to begin these exorcisms may include sacrificing a pair of doves or the taking of ganja or alcohol. All involve the roasting of green coffee beans, which are then chewed and brewed, thus “opening the box” and releasing the power of the *sheykah* so he can communicate with the Zar spirits, described as being toeless and having holes in their hands that, if you look through them, reveal another world. They are also said to be beautiful and come in a range of racial archetypes like Arab, white, and Chinese. The word Zar is thought by some to be a corruption of *Jar*, which in the Cushitic language of the Agaw tribe is the name for Waaq, the sky god.¹ Ethiopian Zar priests traditionally come from a tribe called Wato or Wallo, the name of the lake where tonight’s priest was trained and Ethiopia’s most ancient holy spot. The Wallo tribe claims to be the descendants of the original Oromo coffee chewers and at one point were so feared for their magical powers that other tribes dared not molest them. Until recently it was customary to plant a coffee tree on the graves of particularly powerful sorcerers, and the Oromo say that the first coffee tree grew from the tears of the sky god as they fell on the body of a dead wizard.

I’ve called this ceremony an exorcism, but it’s really a negotiation between the Zar and the *sheykah*, who alone can communicate with the Zar and, if necessary, bargain them down to more reasonable requests. The role of coffee is perhaps comparable to the peyote “allies” popularized in Carlos Castaneda’s *Way of Knowledge* trilogy, inasmuch as the “spirits” within the bean can only function according to the abilities of the person who has taken them into his or her body.

A girl came forward and placed more gifts on the ground before the *sheykah*’s silhouette. She suffered from headaches, it seemed, terrible, horrible headaches that would last for days. As she talked, the *sheykah*’s silhouette could be seen shivering.