

[Coffee and Tea As Cultural Metaphors](#)

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Coffee and Tea As Cultural Metaphors

They may be 99% water, but coffee and tea have compelled men to sail uncharted seas, conquer unwilling nations and reinvent the breakfast menu. Not only that, they have divided the world into two camps. That's right, it is through understanding coffee and tea that the avid student of human nature can ultimately understand the cultural and psychological, even philosophical, contradictions between the East and West. If you have a sense of humor and an appetite for sweeping generalities, I will explain.

Man, it turns out, is not what he eats. Man is what he drinks. And besides water what does he drink in the greatest quantities? Beer? Coca-Cola? No, tea. Over half of the world's peoples choose tea as their beverage of choice, and they drink it in prodigious quantities. It is the British who hold the record, ingesting ten pounds (2,000 cups) per person annually. India, Japan, the USSR and China are the other big users. Coffee comes next, with about five billion pounds consumed each year worldwide, that's one pound or 20 cups for every man, woman and child on earth. Have you guessed where the coffee drinkers live? The US of A, of course (using over 30% of the world's production), then West Germany, France, Italy and Japan.

Don't you see what that means? Culture is chemically ordained. The consistent drinking of tea produces a quiescent, introspective culture, prone to the meditative arts found in India, China and Japan. Coffee, on the other hand, impels its devotees toward action and accomplishment. The proof of this theory lies in Japan's presence on both lists. Japan has not made up its mind whether it will follow the Eastern way of self-denial and peaceful coexistence with nature or the Western path of self-assertion and mastery over the universe. Until a decision is forthcoming, the citizens of Nippon are doomed to kidney dysfunction.

Historically, East preceded West, and tea (from the Chinese word t'e) preceded coffee. We have the Chinese to thank for first civilizing the bitter tea bush. An ancient legend traces the discovery back over 4,000 years, to 2737 BCE when a

wise old emperor, Shen Nung, insisted on drinking only boiled water for reasons of health. One day some little leaves from a nearby tree (a tea tree, of course) blew into his boiling cauldron. The infusion that filled the air was delightful, and when the emperor tasted the aromatic brew, he pronounced it good. And that's how tea was born. Today's harvesters of cultivated tea don't wait for it to fall; they periodically hand-pick two leaves and a small leaf bud from each stem.

Coffee came late to the race, but by 1970 was the second largest international trading product, behind petroleum. Incipient chronicles of coffee are found around the year 850 CE when coffee trees were discovered in an area called Kaffe (hence the name) in modern-day Ethiopia. Legend tells the story of Kaldi, an Arabian goatherd, who noticed his flock's enhanced exuberance every time they nibbled on the red berries of a nondescript shrub. This was probably the hardier of the two species (*Coffea robusta*), since the milder *Coffea arabica* requires altitudes exceeding 2,000 feet to develop its superior-tasting fruit. Kaldi ate a few himself, discovered caffeine's now-famous rejuvenating (some would say nerve-shattering) effects on the heart and central nervous system and spread the word. At first the red coffee cherries (those who know never call them beans) were eaten, later boiled. One of its pioneer uses arose among the Muslims who consumed coffee to keep them awake during their long prayers. It wasn't until the late 1600s that they were first roasted in Persia. A decade later the brew was brought to Europe by the Italians. You may consider as vindication of my theory the fact that the industrial revolution began in 1760. Centuries of tea in Europe had not brought on the dramatic changes wrought by a few short decades of coffee. Q.E.D.

Ask yourself, "Could our editor, for once, be right? Does drinking tea or coffee really make that much of a difference? Does its impact exceed, perhaps, genetic and nurturing influences in the development of human potential?" Any thoughtful social scientist will answer yes to the three questions above. How else can we explain the reality which faces us? Look around. When a docile engineer moves from tea-drinking India to coffee-drinking America, his or her values are chemically altered. Where he once lived in space, he now lives in time. Where he once rested, now he must be on the move. Where he once accepted the world as it is, he now designs blueprints for change and improvement. Where he once looked to philosophy as his first love, his passion now is for technology. What, besides coffee, could have shifted the East/West poles so dramatically?

There are other signs. Tea turns the nature theologically gentle, creating a Lao-Tse or a Basho. I don't have proof, but I bet you anything Jean-Paul Sartre drank coffee by the burrow-load. Tea makes a man speak of the glories of austerity, but it urges

silence and shyness upon him in expressions of love. Coffee induces a man to commend the joys of acquisition, and it stirs him to voice the heart's affections openly and aloud.

Some eschew both tea and coffee. Muslim priests once tried to proscribe coffee as the wicked man's intoxicant, but later Muslim doctors prescribed it to "help digestion, gladden the spirit and overcome sleep." ISKCON members are enjoined against intoxication (defined as including all alcohol, nicotine and caffeine, even chocolate), which they deem weakens the devotee's spiritual discipline. Some herbal teas are permitted. The Brahma Kumaris, admired for strictness regarding food (no onions, no garlic and no nourishment which they don't themselves prepare), allow tea and coffee in moderation. Muktananda's guru, Nityananda, so loved coffee that in his dying hours he ordered it served to devotees at his bedside. At most gatherings SYDA serves "Siddha Coffee," a blend of the noble bean with cardamon and allspice.

Human need and aspiration are the same East and the West; the infinite soul in man knows no geopolitical barriers. Wherever we find ourselves on this whirling globe, we each sometimes need a delicate green tea or full-bodied Ceylon to solace our world-weary soul or sooth a seditious adversary. At other times we require a dark, high-mountain Colombian or a thick Turkish to banish languor and keep foggy faculties alert. Tea and the East are subtle, mysterious, elusive. Coffee and the West are bold, productive and honest. Tea is art and intuition; coffee is science and intellect. Whether you drink tea or coffee, savor. Whether you live in the East or the West, enjoy. Both are stimulating-in a different way.