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Developing a taste for coffee: Bangladesh, Nescafe, and Australian student photographers'

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Abstract

Introduction

This article is about the transformation of coffee, from having no place in the everyday lives of the people of Bangladesh, to a new position as a harbinger of liberal values and Western culture. The context is a group of Australian photojournalism students who embarked on a month-long residency in Bangladesh; the content is a Nescafé advertisement encouraging the young, middle-class Bangladeshi audience to consume coffee, in a marketing campaign that promotes "my first cup." For the Australian students, the marketing positioning of this advertising campaign transformed instant coffee into a strange and unfamiliar commodity. At the same time, the historic association between Bangladesh and tea prompted one of the photographers to undertake her own journey to explore the hidden side of that other Western staple. This paper explores the tradition of tea culture in Bangladesh and the marketing campaign for instant coffee within this culture, combining the authors' experiences and perspectives. The outline of the Photomedia unit in the Bachelor of Creative Industries degree that the students were working towards at Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Australia states that:

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With such a strong culture of tea production and consumption and a coffee culture just existing on the fringe, a campaign by Nescafé to encourage Bangladeshi consumers to have "my first cup" of Nescafé instant coffee at the time of this study captured the imagination of the students. How effective can the marketing of Nescafé instant coffee be in a society that is historically a producer and consumer of tea, and which also still embraces the generations-old use of the betel nut as an everyday stimulant?

Although it only employs some 150,000 (Islam et al.) in a nation of 150 million people, tea makes an important contribution to the Bangladesh economy. Shortly after the 1971 civil war, in which East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) became independent from West Pakistan (now Pakistan), the then-Chairman of the Bangladesh Tea

Coffee World is an example of a Western-style café chain that, as the name suggests, serves coffee beverages. It has trouble making a quality flat white. The baristas coffee for example. I recently completed a month-long visit to Bangladesh, which, like India, is a nation of tea drinkers. Getting any kind of good coffee requires that upon arrival in Dhaka, you find yourself deliciously overwhelmed by the heavy traffic, the crowded markets, the spicy foods and the milky lassie drinks. It only takes treks to Marrakesh and Afghanistan, people have journeyed overland to the Indian sub-continent, both from Europe and from Australia, yearning for a cultural portrayed as paradise in films, books and photographs. "The West" has long been fascinated with "The East" (Said) and for the past half century, since the hippie nexus to Maranhão, and Afghanistan, people have journeyed overland to the Indian sub-continent, both from Europe and from Australia, yearning for a cultural experience they cannot find at home. Living in Perth, Western Australia, sometimes called the most isolated capital city in the world, that pull to something "different" is like a magnet. When we travel to countries that are vastly different to our own it is often to seek out that difference; to go in search of the romanticised ideals that have been portrayed as paradise in films, books and photographs. "The West" has long been fascinated with "The East" (Said) and for the past half century, since the hippie

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The sixteen students from Perth, living and working in Bangladesh between 5 January and 7 February 2012, exhibited a diverse range of cultures, contexts, and motivations. Young Australians, along with a number of ECU's international students, including some from Norway, China and Sweden, were required to learn first-hand about life in Bangladesh, one of the world's poorest and most densely populated countries.

Danielle Fusco and ECU lecturer Duncan Barnes collaborated with staff and students of Patshahala, South Asian Media Institute (Patshahala). Their recollections and observations about tea production and location are central to this article but it is the questions asked by the group about the marketing of instant coffee into this culture that provides its tensions. Fusco completed a week-long induction and then travelled in Bangladesh for a fortnight to research and photograph individual stories on rural and urban life. Barnes here sets the scene for the project, describing the expectations and what actually happened:

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It was the history of tea growing in Bangladesh, and a desire to know more about a commodity that people in the West take for granted, that most attracted Fusco's interests. She chose to focus on Bangladesh’s oldest commercial tea garden (plantation) Sylhet, which has been in production since 1857 (Tea Board). As is the case with many tea farms in the Indian sub-continent, the workers at Sylhet are part of Bangladesh's Hindu minority. Fusco left Dhaka and travelled into the rural areas to investigate tea production:

Venturing into these estates from the city is like entering an entirely different world. They are isolated places, and although they are close in distance, they are completely separate from the main city. Spending time in the Khadim tea estate amongst the plantations and the workers' compounds made me very aware of the strong relationship that exists between them. The Hindu teaching of Samsara refers to the continuous cyclic of repeated birth, life, death and re-birth (Hinduism), which became a metaphor for me, for this relationship I was experiencing. It is clear that neither farm [where the tea is grown] nor village [which houses the people] could live without each other. The success and maintenance of the tea farm relies on the workers just as much as the workers rely on the tea gardens for their livelihood and sustenance. Their life cycles are intertwined and in synch.

There are many problems in the compounds. The people are extremely poor. Their education opportunities are limited, and they work incredibly hard for very little money for their entire lives. They are bound to stay and work here and as those generations before them, were born, worked and died here, living their whole lives in the community of the tea farm.

By documenting the lives of the people, I realised I was documenting the process of the lives of the tea trees at the same time. This is how I met Lolita.

Figure 1. Bangladeshi tea worker, Lolita, stands in a small section of the Khadim tea plantation in the early morning. Sylhet, Bangladesh (Danielle Fusco, Jan. 2012). Figure I. Bangladesh tea worker, Lolita, stands in a small section of the Khadim tea plantation in the early morning. Sylhet, Bangladesh (Danielle Fusco, Jan. 2012).

This woman emulated everything I was seeing and feeling about the village and the garden. She spoke about the reliance on the trees, especially because of the money and, therefore, the food, they provide for her and her husband.

I became aware of the injustice of this system because the workers are paid so little while this industry is booming. It was obvious that life here is far from perfect, but as Lolita explains, they make do. She has worked on the tea estate for decades. As her husband is no longer working, she is the primary income earner. They are able, however, to live in relative comfort now their children have all married and left and it is just the two of them.

Lolita describes that money lies within these trees. Money for her means that she can eat that day. Money for the managers means industrial success. Either way, whether it is in the eyes of the individual or the industry, tea always comes down to Taka [the currency of Bangladesh].

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In Bangladesh, tea is a cash crop that, even in the 1970s following vicious conflicts, is more than capable of meeting local demand and producing an export dividend. Coffee is imported commodity that, historically, has had little place in Bangladeshi life or culture. However important tea is, it is not the traditional Bangladeshi stimulant. Instead, over the years, when people in the West would have had a cup of tea or coffee and/or a cigarette, most Bangladeshis have turned to the betel nut.

A 2005 study of 100 citizens from Araihazar, Bangladesh, conducted by researchers from Columbia University, found that coffee consumption is "very low in this population" (Hafeman et al. 567). The purpose of the study was to assess the impact of betel quids (the wad of masticated nut) and the chewing of betel nuts, upon tremor. For this reason, it was important to record the consumption of stimulants in the 98 participants who had progressed to the next stage of the study and took a freehand spiral-drawing test. While "26 (27%) participants had chewed betel quids, 23 (23%) had smoked one or more cigarettes, [and] 14 (14%) drank tea; on that day, only 1 (1%) drank caffeinated soda, and none (0%) drank coffee" (Hafeman et al. 568). Given its addictive and carcinogenic properties (Sharma), the people who chewed betel quids were more likely to exhibit tremor in their spiral drawings than the people who did not. As this (albeit small) study suggests, the preferred Bangladeshi stimulant is more likely to be tobacco or tea rather than a beverage. Insofar as hot drinks are concerned, the primary markets for drink to be seen are in the fast food. It poses a significant challenge for multinational advertisers who seek to promote the consumption of instant coffee as a means of growing the global market for Nescafé.

Marketing Nescafé to Bangladesh

In Dhaka, in January 2012, the television campaign slogan for Nescafé is "My first cup," with the tagline, "Time you started." This Nescafé television commercial (NTC) imports the familiar Australian lifestyle, in terms of its frequency of broadcast and in its referencing of Western culture and values. (The advertisement can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2E8mFX43oAM). The NTC's three stars, Vir Das, Purab Kohli, and leading Bollywood actress Deepika Padukone, are highly-recognisable to young Bangladeshi audiences and the storyline is part of a developing series of advertisements which together form a mini-soap opera, like that used so successfully to advertise the Nescafé Gold Blend brand of instant coffee in the West in the 1980s to 1990s (O'Donohue 242; Beale).

The action takes place in Kohli's affluent, Western-style apartment. The drama starts with Das challenging Kohli regarding whether he has successfully developed a relationship with his attractive neighbour, Padukone. Using a combination of local language with English words and sub-titles, the first sequence is captioned: "Any progress with Deepika, or are you still mixing coffee?" Suggesting incredulity, and that he could do better, Das asks Kohli, according to the next subtitle, "What are you doing dude?" The use of the word "duude" clearly refers to American youth culture, familiar in such movies as Dade, where's my car? This is underlined by the immediate transition to the English words of "bikes ... biceps ... chest ... explosion." Of these four words only "chest" is pronounced in the local tongue, although all four words are included as captions in English.

Kohli appears less and less impressed as Das becomes increasingly insistent, with Das going on to express frustration with Kohli through the exclamation "u don't even have a plan. the use of the text-speak English "u" here can be constructed as another way of persuading young Bangladeshi viewers that this advertisement is directed at them: the "u" in place of "you" is likely to appeal to English-speaking elders. Das continues speaking in his mother tongue, with the subtitle "Deepika padukone [sic] is your neighbour and you are only drinking coffee," with the subsequent subtitle emphasising: "Deepika and only coffee." At this point, Padukone enters the apartment through the open door without knocking and confidently says "Hi." Kohli explains the situation by responding (in English, and subtitled) "my school friend, Das". Padukone, in turn, responds in a friendly way to both men (in English, and subtitled) "You guys want to have coffee?"

Instead of responding directly to this invitation, Das models to Kohli what it is to take the initiative in this situation: what it is to have a plan. "Hello" (he says, in English and subtitled) "I don't have coffee but I have a plan. You and me, my bike, right now, hit the town, party!" Kohli looks down at the floor, embarrassed, while Padukone looks quizzically at him over Das's shoulder. Kohli smiles, and points to himself and Padukone, clearly excluding Das: "I will have coffee" (in English, and subtitled). "Better plan," exclaims Padukone, "You and me, my place, right now, coffee." She looks challengingly at Das: "Right?", a statement rather than a request, and exits, with Kohli following and Das left behind in the apartment. Cue voice-over (not a subtitle, but in-screen speech bubble) "[It's] time you started" (spoken) "the new Nescafé" (shot change) "My first cup" (with an in-screen price promotion).

This commercial associates coffee drinking with Western values of social and personal autonomy. For young women in the traditional Muslim culture of Bangladesh, it is not the norm to have a conversation with an unknown male unless accompanied by a female. Having an initiative of this nature is anathema to the traditional Muslim values of modesty and modest behaviour. Theatre that takes place in Kohli's apartment is not just "another" example of the United States postwar liberalism, but it is a reiteration of the values of the United States postwar liberalism that are familiar to Western audiences. The advertising aligns itself with the Western values portrayed in the Western media consumed in Bangladesh, and the implication is that—even if Western liberal values are not currently a possible choice for all—it is at least feasible to start on the journey towards these values through drinking that first cup of coffee.

Unbeknownst to the Western audience, this Nescafé marketing strategy echoes, in almost all material particulars, the same approach that was so successful in persuading Australians to embrace instant coffee. Khamis, in her essay on Australia and the convenience of instant coffee, argues that, while in 1928 Australia had the highest per capita consumption of tea in the world, this had begun to change by the 1950s. The transformation in the market positioning of coffee was partly achieved through an association between tea and old-fashioned 'Britishness' and coffee and the United States:

"This discovery [of coffee] spoke to changes in Australia's lifestyle options: the tea habit was tied to Australia's development as a far-flung colonial outpost, a daily reminder that many still looked to London as the nation's cultural capital: the growing appeal of instant coffee reflected a widening and more nuanced cultural palate. This was not just 'another' example of the United States postwar pagurnimming the transitional pluck in Australia's local story, as its cultural identity was informed less by the staid conservatism of Britishness than the steady flux of New World glamour (219)."

Coffee was associated with the USA not simply through advertising but also through cultural exposure. By 1943, notes Khamis, there were 120,000 American service personnel stationed in Australia and she quotes Symons (168) as saying that "when an American got on a friendly footing with an Australian family he was usually found in the kitchen, teaching the Mrs how to make coffee, or washing the dishes" (168, cited in Khamis 220). The chances were that "the Mrs"—the Australian housewife—felt she needed the tuition: an Australian survey conducted by Gallup in March 1950 indicated that 55 per cent of respondents at that time had never tried coffee, while a further 24 per cent said they "seldom" consumed it (Walker and Roberts 131, cited in Khamis 222).

In a newspaper article titled, "Overpaid, Oversexed and Over Here", Munro describes the impact of exposure to the first American troops based in Australia during this time, with a then seven year old recalling: "They were foreign, quite a different culture from us. They spoke more loudly than us. They had strange accents, cute expressions, they were really very exotic." The American troops caused consternation for Australian fathers and boyfriends. Dulcie Wood was 18 when she was dating an American serviceman:
They had more money to spend (than Australian troops). They seemed to have plenty of supplies, they were always bringing you presents—stockings and cartons of cigarettes [...] Their uniforms were better. They took you to more places. They were quite good dancers, some of them. They always brought you flowers. They were more polite to women. They charmed the mums because they were very polite. Some dads were a bit more sceptical of them. They weren't sure if all that charm was genuine (quoted in Munro).

Darian-Smith argues that, at that time, Australian understanding of Americans was based on Hollywood films, which led to an impression of American technological superiority and cultural sophistication (215-16, 232). "Against the American-style combination of smart advertising, consumerism, self-expression and popular democracy, the British class system and its buttoned-up royals appeared dull and dour" writes Khamis (226, citing Grant 15)—almost as dull and dour as 1950s tea compared with the postwar sophistication of Nescafé instant coffee.

**Conclusion**

The approach Nestlé is using in Bangladesh to market instant coffee is tried and tested: coffee is associated with the new, radical cultural influence while tea and other traditional stimulants are relegated to the choice of an older, more staid generation. Younger consumers are targeted with a romantic story about the love of coffee, reflected in a mini-soap opera about two people becoming a couple over a cup of Nescafé. Hopefully, the Pathshala-Edith Cowan University collaboration is at least as strong. Some of the overseas visitors return to Bangladesh on a regular basis—the student presentations in 2012 were, for instance, attended by two visiting graduates from the 2008 program who were working in Bangladesh. For the Australian participants, the association with Pathshala, South Asian Media Institute, and Drik Photo Agency brings recognition, credibility and opportunity. It also offers a totally new perspective on what to order in the coffee queue once they are home again in Australia.

**Postscript**


**References**


