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*The Etymology of "Coffee": the Dark Brew**

The usual etymology of the word 'coffee' in the standard dictionaries traces the root ultimately to Arabic *qahwah* 'coffee' (perhaps with the reinforcement of Turkish *qahveh* < Arabic *qahwah*). A few etymological dictionaries (e.g., *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* [1966:188]) mention the above as well adding a note regarding a possible source through Dutch *koffie*. The *Oxford* source comments: "Supposed to be ultimately from *Kaffa*, name of a part of Abyssinia, the native home of the coffee plant."[1] Some dictionaries state that the word derives from Italian *caffè*, but that, in turn, derives from Turkish, which derives from Arabic, citing the gloss 'wine" rather than 'coffee'. *The Oxford English Dictionary* further notes that Arabic *qahwah* is said by certain Arabic lexicographers to have originally meant 'wine' or 'some kind of wine', and to derive from a verbal root *qahiya* 'to have no appetite'.[2] It further elaborates the conjecture that it may be a foreign (African?) word, phonetically disguised, somehow connected with *Kaffa* in the highlands of southern Ethiopia, but it is quite skeptical of this connection: "But of this there is no evidence, and the name *qahwah* is not given to the berry or plant, which is called *bunn*, the native name in Shoa being *būn*."[3]

The purpose of this paper is to reject the connection with *Kaffa*, an opinion shared with the famous Russian Arabist and specialist in Hamito-Semitic linguistics, N. V. Yushmanov (see his *The Structure of the Arabic Language*, translated by

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* I wish to thank Professor Robert Hetzron, University of California, Santa Barbara, who first pointed out to me the connection of Arabic *qahwah* 'coffee' to Hebrew *qehɛ(h)* 'dark' and for supplying the reference to the Agaw language (see fn. 3).

[1] In all Ethiopic languages, the provincial name *Kaffa* is pronounced *kafa* without gemination. The geminated spelling is parallel to the English rendering 'Hassan', which derives from Arabic *ħasan*, although the reason here is certainly related to the fact that the orthographic geminated "s" definitely yields /s/ whereas "s" may produce /z/.

Of course, the etymology *kafa* > Arabic *qahwah* is most difficult to explain phonologically, since Arabic has an /f/ and /k/ (although it has no /v/).

[2] It is interesting to note that *qahiya* as well as *ʾaqhâ* (= Form IV) with the same meaning is listed in Hans Wehr, *Arabic-English Dictionary* (ed. by J. Milton Cowan, Ithaca: Cornell University Press [1961: 795]). From the same root is also the derivative *qâhin* 'supplied with provisions' (loc. cit.). After all, it is often stated that an Arabic root may (1) mean what it means or (2) may often have an opposite meaning to the primary one.

[3] In Arabic *bunn* means both 'coffee' and 'coffee beans', with a color adjective derivative (with *nisbah* ending) *bunnî* 'coffee-colored, brown'. For a parallel development in Semitic Ethiopic, see Amharic *bunnamma* 'brown' (see Wolf Leslau, *Concise Amharic Dictionary*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press [1976: 286]) and in some Cushitic languages (another branch of the Afro-Asiatic phylum) *bunn* means 'brown' (e.g., Agaw).

The situation in the Gurage dialect cluster (12 Ethiopic dialects spoken south of the Addis Ababa area) is most interesting. 'Coffee' is *qawa* in most of them with some predictable phonetic variations, but in Muher *qawa* is in free variation with *buno*, and in Gogot *qawa* varies freely with *ʾawa* (*q* > *ʾ* is very widespread in Arabic dialects as well), but in Soddo it is *bunna* while in Zway it is *buna*. 'Coffee bean', on the other hand, is *buno* or *bun(n)ä* in all the dialects, while the word 'coffee house' in Soddo is *(yä)ṭaǧǧ ge*. *ṭaǧǧ* in Amharic is 'wine', which is understandable due to the dark color. See Wolf Leslau, *Etymological Dictionary of Gurage* (*Ethiopic*), Vol. II, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz (1979: 128–31). Leslau's *Concise Amharic Dictionary* (op. cit.: 530) for 'wine' gives *wäyn ṭaǧǧ*.

The fact that the medieval Arab lexicographers thought *qahwah* meant 'wine' can certainly be attributed to the fact that 'wine' can be very dark (in color) like 'coffee'. In fact I have seen stale coffee which looks almost identical to certain wines. It is no secret that the Arabs like their coffee (i.e., Turkish coffee, so-called, or in Arabic, *qahwah turkî*), 'very strong', viz., 'very dark (dark brown or black)'.

It should be kept in mind that coffee was introduced into Yemen, e.g., especially in Yemenite Sufi circles, in approximately the fourteenth century A.D. Although the meanings of 'dark' and 'dull' are surely related ones, it is conceivable that 'dull' is the primary sememic designation (i.e., 'dulling the teeth = sour, dry'), which, of course, "dulls" the appetite as well. Ibn Manẓūr (in his *Lisān al-ʿArab*) states: *al-qahwatu l-khamru summiyat bi-dhālika li-ʾannahā tuqhī šāribahā ʿan-i ṭ-ṭaʿāmi ʾay tadhhabu bi-šahawatihī* "wine is named (called) *qahwah* because by drinking it, it kills the appetite for food, i.e., it takes away (your) appetite." Undoubtedly, since coffee first became popular in Sufi circles with their long tradition of wine symbolism, this surrogate for wine (which looked like it due to its "dark" color, and which, in my opinion, is the more

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Moshe Perlmann, Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics of the Modern Language Association of America [1961: 8]). I also wish to propose a good solid internal Semitic etymology, viz., from Proto-Central Semitic √qhh 'dark', which still occurs in Hebrew *qehɛ(h)* 'dark' as in *kɔħol qehɛ(h)* 'dark blue'.

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key or central sememe) was soon honored by the same designation (since *khamr* 'wine' is feminine, *qahwah* [feminine] was chosen over a hypothetical masculine counterpart *qahw*, most probably originally a substantive [adjective] meaning 'dark in color, dull(ing), dry, sour'). As the Sufis transferred the meaning 'wine' to 'coffee', the compound *qahwat al-bunn* 'the "wine" (i.e., dark stuff) made from coffee beans' became a facilitator of this semantic transition (cf. ᶜAbd al-Qādir [Ibn] al-ᶜAydarūs in discussing ᶜAlī b. ᶜUmar, the saint of al-Makhā as *muḥdiθ al-qahwah* 'the originator of coffee' in "Ḳahwa," in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edition, Leiden: E. J. Brill, [1978: 449, 452–53]).

There is also the matter of local tradition with which one must reckon, which explains why coffee is known as *šādhiliyye* in Algerian Arabic, named after ᶜAlī b. ᶜUmar al-Šādhilī. It is also important to realize that Yemenite Sufis probably did not make it as far west as Algeria, but they did manage to travel to, e.g., Cairo, where coffee was first introduced by them (as *qahwah*) in the sixteenth century A.D. in al-Azhar (keep in mind that coffee was passed around by them similar to the way in which wine would have been). As the Sufis further spread coffee to Turkey (it helped keep them awake for the nightly devotional ritualistic exercises), there are manuscripts where the spelling of *qahwah* has changed to *qaḥwah*.

I also wish to reiterate a lexicographical point not generally known (cf. *Encyclopaedia of Islam* [1978: 452]) to the dictionary authors, viz., *qahwah* can also mean 'coffee house' (= *maqhan* or *maqhāt*, pl. *maqāhin*) as well as 'tip, present'. Hans Wehr's *Arabisches Wörterbuch für die Schriftsprache der Gegenwart*, Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, [1958: 708], mentions the first but not the second.

I wish to thank Professor Wolfhart Heinrichs (Harvard University) who made many useful suggestions.

The Biblical Hebrew evidence is available in Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*, Leiden: E. J. Brill (1958: 828–29). The root √qhh in the *qal* (= Arabic Form I) means 'be blunt dull (teeth)', and in the *piᶜᶜel* (= Arabic Form II) 'be blunt (iron)'. One may keep in mind that a bitter brew may make the teeth blunt or dull. For Mishnaic Hebrew, Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli, Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature*, London: Shapiro, Vallentine (1926: 1321–22) lists *qehɛ(h)* with a meaning (his #4) as 'fainting, having a morbid appetite.' There is no question that 'coffee' dulls the appetite. And too long without food may cause fainting. This meaning is obviously cognate with Arabic *qahiya* and *ʾaqhâ* already cited (fn. 2). However, the (Aramaic) *paᶜᶜel* (= Arabic Form II) *qahey* 'give an acrid taste to' informs us that this dark brew ('coffee' or 'wine') is bitter. The related (doublet) root *kehɛ(h)* 'dim, dull, faint' (with plain /k/ rather than /q/) as well as the occurring *piᶜᶜel* (Jastrow [1926: 615]) 'grow duller, be shaded', and the *hifᶜîl* (= Arabic Form IV) *hixhɔ(h)* 'make dim' can easily be related to the meanings of *qehɛ(h)* 'sour' as *yayin qehɛ(h)* 'sour wine', and *qehôθ* (f. pl.) as in *šinnɔ(y)w qehôθ* 'his teeth were blunt/he has no food to eat' listed in Reuben Alcalay, *Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary*, Ramat Gan-Jerusalem, Massada Publishing Co. (1970: 2242) as well as *kihɔ(h)* 'become dark' (op. cit.: 996). Modern Hebrew also has a derivative *kehayón* (= *kehɔyôn*) 'fainter color' in addition to the verb, *kaha*, impf. *yixhe* 'grow dark' and *kehe* 'dark'.

Unquestionably, then, Semitic had a root √qhh 'dark color', which, since 'coffee' is dark in color, became a natural designation for the 'brew'. Metaphorically, coffee (like wine) 'blunted the teeth and appetite' just as *bunn* 'the name of a plant' (originally) in Arabic, which, due to its dark color, came to designate the color 'brown'. There is little doubt, therefore, that Arabic *qahwah* does not derive from *Kaffa* in Ethiopic, but rather originally means 'the dark one', i.e., 'bean' or 'brew'.

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