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COFFEE AND THE FINE ART OF SOOTHSAYING

Isaac Wurmman

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By the time I had reached the bottom of my diminutive cup, the coffee was long cold. I didn't mind. I was in a smoky *taverna*¹ listening to a communist and an insurance broker talk Greek politics, and the drone of a *bouzouki*³ had carried me into a trance. The coffee grounds painted assuming tableaus on the inside of my cup.

My grandfather and I were blown into Chania's old *agora*³ by northerly winds on a damp day in late February. The haphazard streets of the old city, which twist like broken spokes off the harbour, lend themselves well to wandering, and so we found ourselves shivering inside the stone market. The sound of shifting voices bouncing off the grey walls compelled us to stay.

We traced the source of the music to a *taverna* tucked in the corner of the market, and in true Greek fashion the musicians soon beckoned for us to join them. They were crowded around a small table piled high with bloated ashtrays and empty bottles. Upon recognizing my grandfather, one of the men offered to buy us a round of *tsikoudia*⁴. The offer was

tempting, we needed something to warm us from the inside, but we opted for coffee instead.

Since my arrival in Greece I had been told about the wonders of Greek coffee. In an idiosyncrasy that now seems representative of the current state of the country, until that day, I had only been offered Nescafé by my hosts. What they were able to offer didn't quite match what they knew they could deliver.

But here in this *taverna*, I was told by my grandfather, was where we could get some real Greek coffee.

In faltering syllables that sounded unfamiliar on his Germanic tongue, my grandfather asked the *taverna* owner for two cups of *ellinikos kafes*⁵. My grandfather had been in Greece for many months before I had arrived, and most people we encountered in Chania already seemed charmed by his persistent efforts to learn their language at age 75.

The tired looking woman behind the counter smiled politely, and passed us two strong

cups of coffee sweetened with mounds of sugar.

With the bittersweet drink in our bellies, the insurance broker translated for us the animated debates that bubbled like steamed milk around the edges of the *taverna*. They were analyzing the meetings in Brussels, and wringing their hands over the possible return of the *drachma*⁶.

Most things in Greek sound like they are being said with great passion, but in this case it seemed like the meaning matched the intonation.

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One month later, in a Greek café in Ottawa, a young man whom I had recently met told me, between mouthfuls of piping hot *loukoumades*⁷, that the person I would fall in love with would have the letters R and T in their name. He had just finished staring into the dredges left at the bottom of my cup, perhaps in an attempt to determine how much longer our winter tryst would last.

Greek coffee is made from coarsely ground beans that are boiled in *briki*⁸, which produces a particularly strong brew. Without being strained, the coffee is then poured into small cups, leaving the drinker's

teeth to act as a sieve. At the end of drinking, a thick film of sludgy residue is left on the bottom of each cup.

"Coffee, which comes into contact with the mouth, contains most of the signals transmitted by the body," writes Sara Zed in *The Complete Guide to Coffee Grounds and Tea Leaf Reading*. "We know that doctors always examine the tongue first when checking for an illness, for precisely the same reason that makes prophecy through coffee grounds so unique," she adds.

My companion asked me to read his own fortune, and showed me how to spin the small cup in my fingers. I turned the empty vessel in my hand, before turning it upside down and pressing the lip of the demitasse against a napkin. Brown stains began to radiate across the white paper.

This was my first introduction to the art of *tasseomancy*⁹, which has been performed by those in search of personal or spiritual guidance across the globe for thousands of years. At the heart of this practice is the belief that to drink coffee is an intimate experience. The prophetic powers of coffee lie not in the drink or the drinker themselves, but in the intermediary powers of the cup that allows coffee to pass from hands to lips.



Greek coffee is particularly proficient for soothsaying, because of the forms made by the coarse grounds after drinking. In 2014, a café opened in Athens that capitalized on the country's economic crisis by selling a glimpse into the future with each cup. Superstitious Greeks flocked to the café on unsteady feet and even less steady bank accounts in an effort to quell the rising sense of uncertainty brewing within them.

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I had arrived in Greece less than one month after SYRIZA, the coalition of the radical left, was elected in what many called a swift declaration of support for the party's anti-austerity platform. The election was still on everyone's minds, and people were losing patience as they waited for Alexis Tsipiras to make his first move in negotiations with European creditors.

Even in Chania, a small city on Crete that seemed like a far-flung outpost compared to the hustle of downtown Athens, the economy inevitably remained at the top of everybody's minds. Small *tavernas* heated by wood burning stoves broadcast 24-

hour news cycles. Political banter floated over bowls of soup and cups of coffee.

At first glance, you would never know the country was in such dire straits. Earlier in my visit, my grandfather and I drove along Crete's steep coastline to Heraklion. Although a city of only 200,000 people, I soon saw that it had nightlife unlike many larger cities in Canada. Even in the depths of February, sweated Cretans roamed the streets illuminated by lanterns. Buttery voices rang from the Orthodox cathedrals they passed. They ate lavish meals and smoked cigarettes and played soccer.

But maybe I don't know what a country in economic crisis looks like.

On my first night in Chania, after recommending a meal a cuttlefish pilaf paired with locally fermented red wine, our waiter told us that he was working a second job to care for his two children. On top of his shifts at the restaurant, he worked in a prison that clung to the outskirts of the city.

While enjoying coffee and *apfelkuchen*¹⁰ in a suburb of Heraklion, a family friend

complained that it was the Western perception of Greece that needed to change, not the Greek people. She looked out the window of her mother's second floor apartment at the olive groves kept by her family in the shallow valley below. Greeks are not lazy people, she insisted.

Over dinner that evening, people whom I had just met turned to me and pleaded that it was the responsibility of journalists to tell the truth about what was happening in Greece. What is happening in Greece is a crisis on soil that has been tilled by countless empires. It is the sum total of centuries of give-and-take in values that lack the concrete finality of a debt repayment. How is it possible, it struck me then, to explain this in a simple newscast, and how to explain what lies ahead?

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Between sips of coffee and *tsikoudia*, I watched as the insurance broker rolled a cigarette and the communist swayed to the thrum of the bouzouki. The smell of fresh fish wafted through the *taverna* as the morning's catch was unloaded in another corner of the agora.

I was drawn from my trance by a chorus of male voices. The older men in the *taverna* had, without warning, erupted into song. They joined a popular

rebetiko song being performed by the musicians, which featured the throaty warbles and lilting melodies characteristic of the genre.

Rebetiko was brought to the country by Ottoman Greek refugees, and grew from hashish dens and coffeehouses in the early twentieth century. The music was performed as a form of rebellion, and unsurprisingly it was soon banned by the country's military dictatorship. In recent decades, *rebetiko*¹¹ has gained newfound popularity, perhaps because the lyrics speak of the everyday struggles of Greek men and women.

That's why, on a cold day in February, over tables stacked high with bloated ashtrays and empty bottles, a *taverna* in western Crete had begun to sing in unison a song inspired by the national angst of decades past.

*Kaigomai, kaigomai
rikse ki allo ladi sit fotia
Pnigomai, pnigomai
peta me se thalassa vathia*

I'm burning, I'm burning
throw more oil on the fire
I'm drowning, I'm drowning
throw me into a deep sea

I asked my grandfather why they all sang along so fervently to this song in particular. He told me he believed it was because of how difficult the song was for only one person to sing, because the enormous range would put



such stress on a solo voice.
But with many people singing
together, it could be easier to
carry a tune.

It was not lost on me in
that moment how that same
explanation could extend to
the resiliency of Greeks during
the current crisis. I gave
thanks to my cup of coffee. I
gave my thanks to this prophet
that rested in my palm, which
bypassed political posturing
and media narratives to allow me
access to the most intimate and
obscure of places.

One month later, the breath of
two young men fogged up a café
window in Ottawa, and snow began
to dress the parking lot across
the street. It was a scene
that had played out many times
before, between many different
people in many different places.
As I sat there, staring into the
cup resting in my palm, I saw
nothing but the coarse contours
formed by leftover grounds.

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NOTES:

1. Taverna: a small café or restaurant
2. Bouzouki: a Greek stringed instrument, similar to a mandolin
3. Agora: a Greek market
4. Tsikoudia: a strong spirit made from the distilled remains of the winemaking process
5. Ellinikos kafes: Greek coffee
6. Drachma: the former currency of Greece, before they adopted the Euro
7. Loukoumades: a sweet pastry made from deep fried balls of dough soaked in a syrup mixture
8. Briki: a long-handled steel pot used to make Greek coffee
9. Tasseomancy: the art of coffee ground or tealeaf reading
10. Apfelkuchen: German apple cake
11. Rebetiko: a style of Greek music popularized in the 20th century played most often with bouzoukis, guitars, accordions, lyras, and other Ottoman influenced instruments.

Isaac Wurmman is a journalism and human rights student in Ottawa, Canada. His writing can be found at isaacwurmman.wordpress.com and he can be reached on Twitter at [@isaac_wurmman](https://twitter.com/isaac_wurmman).

Pradeep Kambathalli is an artist living and working in Bengaluru, India. He is a Contributing Art Editor with *The Forager*.

[1] By Pradeep Kambathalli, *Scrutiny through the shadows of a brown cloud*, 8.2" X 11.5", Water colour, Coffee, and pen on paper, 2015