

For Moroccans, mint tea

is the national drink. As a child, it was usually my mother who prepared it, unless we had guests. On those occasions, my father would make it. Sometimes, he would put the tea tray in front of his favourite guest, as a way of honouring him. During important celebrations like marriages, the "Master of the Tea Ceremony" is chosen by the group. To be elected gives one great prestige. In my home town, I know someone who will leave if *he* is not put in charge of the tea ceremony. Prepared at all hours of the day and late into the night, a good mint tea can be served at breakfast, or as a digestive after a meal. It often offers a good pretext to pause for chatting and gossiping.

Tea is traditionally prepared in front of guests following a certain ritual. The person in charge of its preparation sits on a carpet, on the floor. Surrounded by two tea trays, he or she becomes the centre of the gathering. The big tray contains two teapots and glasses (usually more than the number needed). On the smaller one, are metal or silver boxes for tea, mint, sugar (preferably a sugar loaf broken in big pieces) and a small silver goblet with a spoon. Sometimes, a samovar instead of a kettle is used.

The "Master of the Tea Tray", *Bu-ttabla*, rinses the teapots with boiling water. Then, he puts in each teapot two or three spoonfuls of green tea. After rinsing the tea to remove its bitterness, he adds fresh mint (previously washed), and sugar on top and fills the teapot with boiling water. It is necessary to let it infuse for a few minutes. The teapot is sometimes covered with an embroidered cloth. Meanwhile, *Bu-ttabla*'s role is to entertain and enliven the sitting. When tea is ready, he pours a bit of it in a glass for tasting, adding

sugar, if necessary. This operation of pouring tea into glasses and replacing it into the teapot is repeated several times (until he gets the desired taste). With fast and skilful gestures, the "Master of the Tea Tray" serves the guests, raising the teapot(s) high into the air to produce plenty of froth on the surface of each glass.

The guest should make a slight noise when he tastes the very hot and already sweetened beverage. He is then expected to congratulate the tea master, if he likes his tea. Silence after the first sip means disapproval. For *Bu-ttabla*, it is a serious defeat. But, if he hears *b-saht-k* (to your health) he is saved and, with a smile, goes on to prepare the second teapot. Tradition demands that one honours the "Master of Tea" by accepting more than one glass, but less than four. To refuse to drink one is like a stab in the back.

This tea ceremony has become deeply ingrained in the fabric of people's lives in Morocco. Ask anyone in the street when Moroccans started drinking tea, and he will say naively and without hesitation "from time immemorial". In fact, tea became known to most people only at the end of the last century. Before that, tea was only available to the royal court and its entourage.

As a child, I used to listen to Berber music in the market place. Songs which link tea and love are commonplace. I can still recall some of them, like:

"A mad righ atay igh ur yujad

Ameddakwl a yili gh-tama n wafud"

(What is tea for, unless / A friend is sitting next to me!).

Or:

"Ifulki bdda watay igh sers nga sin

Imma krad ula smmus ur sul igi atay"

(Tea, for two of us, is always sweet / But if we're three or four, it's no longer tea), which reminds me of the famous American song of the 1920's: "Tea for two, and two for tea, and me for you and you for me...".

Like in Europe, the appearance of tea in Morocco was immediately followed by medical treatises praising its virtues. Do you know that the first advertisement to praise the benefits of tea was dated 30 September 1658? It appeared in England, approved by medical doctors. The myth concerning the origin of tea in Morocco also refers to its curing virtues. The first person to drink tea, so goes the legend, was Mulay Zaydan, son of the Moroccan emperor Mulay Isma'il. He was a drunkard, and in order to cure him of alcoholism, an English physician progressively led him to drink tea instead of wine.

More curious, however, is the association between tea and sexual potency. Early medical studies attribute aphrodisiac qualities to tea. Later on, this virtue becomes associated with ingredients like

amber when added to tea. There is a famous joke about the Moroccan male and the teapot. Someone once suggested replacing the green five pointed star on the Moroccan flag by a teapot. When the man who came up with this idea was asked to explain the reason, he is supposed to have said, "Look at the tea pot; it is short, it has a small head and a big belly; moreover, its spout is in a permanent state of readiness... Isn't that the typical Moroccan male?" If that is the case, it's probably due to too much amber-flavoured tea.

The first reference to this beverage in Morocco is an Englishman, Thomas Pellow of Penryn. Pellow spent 23 years in Morocco as a captive, a prisoner and then a soldier. In his *Adventures* (published in London in 1740), we read that the captain of his ship had reserved for the Emperor Mulay Isma'il (1675-1727) "two bottles of supreme English [Gun] Powder". Until recently, a pound of English gunpowder tea was one of the most desirable gifts which a Moroccan might receive. We call it *atay lwindriz*, "London Tea". British authorities and diplomats knew very well how appreciated "London Tea" was to the Moroccan palate. Queen Anne (1665-1714) herself thought that "two large copper tea kitchens and little fine tea" would be just the thing to soften up the Emperor of Morocco. At that time, Mulay Isma'il was rejecting the idea of liberating 69 English prisoners-of-war.

That was the beginning of green tea in Morocco. It was a rare commodity reserved for the Imperial Court and diplomatic circles. By the XIXth century, the rich from urban centres could afford it thanks to the British tea trade conquest of Morocco. The Crimean War of 1854, followed by the blockade of the Baltic (that forbade access for British merchants to the Slavic countries), forced Britain to find new consumers for its tea commerce. Probably via Gibraltar, the shops of Tangier and Mogador were flooded with Chinese green tea coming from London.

British merchants were then active entrepreneurs in Southern coastal cities like Tassurt (Essaouira). After concluding a trade agreement with tribal chiefs in the Sûs (South of Agadir), they formed a business company, registered in London as the "Sûs and North African Trading Co., Limited". In February 1883, the new company dispatched a steamer, the "Garrawalt", which unloaded its cargo of grains, sugar and tea on the coastal area controlled by the tribe of Ayt Ba'mran. These goods were exchanged for spices, jewellery, goat skins, wax, wool and ostrich feathers. Immediately afterwards, the Sultan Hassan 1 organised an expedition to the area. This historical event probably inspired one of the most interesting texts we have on the beverage: "The Story of Tea", a poem composed in Berber in 1895 by Brahim N'Ayt Ikhelf, a clerk of the Ayt Ba'mran. This poem initially

stimulated Prof. Abdelahad Sebti and I to write a book on tea which is dedicated to the memory of the very same N'Ayt Ikhef.

By the beginning of this century, tea had reached all of the Moroccan countryside and even the mountains. During our fieldwork in the Atlas mountains, we met old people who still remember the first time tea was drunk in their village. Around the country, nobles and dignitaries, "princes and high grandees" spent fortunes acquiring the expensive "London Tea" and other products such as amber, as well as luxurious tea utensils—silver tea trays, teapots, kettles, samovars, tea and sugar boxes. The most famous and prestigious silver was made in Manchester by Richard Wright.

Commercial relations between Morocco and Great Britain were at their peak in the nineteenth century. Some families from Fez had even gone to settle in Manchester. Tea and tea utensils were essential to these trade connections. When I was a student in Manchester in 1980, a Moroccan friend came there with his business associates to buy a grain processing mill. I acted as his English translator. Outside of business, the only thing which interested him in Manchester was a Richard Wright tea set. After a series of phone calls, I was informed that the factory had closed down a long time ago. When we returned to London, a friend of mine, Janet Saint-John-Austen, wanted to show them some of the famous places of the nineteenth century's capital of the world. My friend from Morocco was simply not interested, unless a Richard Wright factory by miracle could be found in London. His obsession with a Wright silver for serving tea unnerved all of us. We didn't tell him about the existence of the London flea market.

It was a great disappointment for the rich businessman to return home from Manchester without a Richard Wright tea set. Now, he has to be content with reading, at the bottom of his friends' tea pots or in a Moroccan museum, Richard Wright's seal in Maghribi Arabic script: *hadha 'amal al-tâjir ritchar al-rite* ("this is the work of the merchant Richard Wright"). I suspect that his disappointment was one of the reasons he didn't buy the British mill, but chose an Italian one instead. Had Richard Wright's factory still been open, we would probably see today, at the entrance of Tiznit in South Morocco, on the left side of the road coming from Agadir, an enormous building equipped with British high tech. The whole of the south, including the Sahara, would be supplied and fed by flour produced with Manchester know-how, not Italian technology.

Two years ago, I met the businessman again on the beach in Agadir. He seemed much shorter than 16 years ago; he had gone bald, and he had grown a big belly. Just like a Richard Wright teapot. As for the rest, one has to ask his wife. Of course, he was still describing

his adventure in Manchester as a major disaster, a tragedy.

In his *Curiosities of Literature* (1790), Isaac D'Israeli wrote about the spread of tea in Britain: "The progress of this famous plant has been something like the progress of truth; suspected at first, though very palatable to those who had courage to taste it; resisted as it encroached; abused as its popularity seemed to spread; and establishing its triumph at last, in cheering the whole land from the palace to the cottage, only by the slow and resistless efforts of time and its own virtues."

This long march of tea also has taken place in Morocco. Since the nineteenth century, green tea has been spreading throughout the country. Today, it has found its way into the halls of most of the luxurious hotels in Morocco. I was astonished last summer at the Sheraton Hotel in Marrakech to be served mint tea immediately upon my arrival. I always thought of tea as a family ceremony. To move such a domestic custom to the tourists'sphere is probably an attempt to save a dying cultural element that has come full circle. Tea, like life, is a circle.

Casablanca, May 1998.

