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What is Coffee in Bangkok? **

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If the question were asked of coffee in Paris, the answer would seem all too apparent in the imagery of smoky cafés and brasseries, metallic espresso machines encased by small cups, saucers, spoons, sugar cubes, and the (recently added) chocolate morsel, a comptoir and tiny tables crowded and bound through intense conversation. If asked of the U.S., images of a cardboard cup-carrying workforce would come to mind. In either case, the question begs a cultural analysis – as the meaning of coffee, indeed the meaning of most things, is located in a tangled web of our own creation. And the answer is discerned through a decoding of the signs and symbols we might observe in the consumption of coffee – whether in Paris or Bangkok, in the selling of coffee (advertisements or retail environments) and implicit in the talk about coffee. So what of coffee in Bangkok? Coffee poured over ice in plastic bags? With condensed and evaporated milk? Bags tied for easy carrying and punctured with a straw? What *is* it, culturally speaking? Put otherwise, if you were making recommendations to Starbucks about how to market itself in Bangkok, what would you tell them?

These questions were posed to senior qualitative researchers – all participants of a training session we designed on semiotics and ethnographic analysis. We used the topic

of ‘what is coffee’ as a way to focus the training’s exercises and techniques and we additionally focused on the issue of coffee in Bangkok as a way to accomplish on-site, semiotic-based observations. (We were in Thailand, with participants from Great Britain, The Netherlands and nine Asian countries, though no one was Thai.)

Pre-seminar we had asked participants to collect coffee advertisements and to take photographs of ‘coffee places’ from their respective countries. During the seminar participants practiced decoding the coffee advertisements and coffee photographs, uncovering the signs, conventions, modalities, values and metaphors at play in the varied articulations of coffee meaning. The New Zealand participant’s set of ads, for a brand which uncompromisingly symbolized coffee as a drug, easily illustrated the kinds of things we were looking for while also entertaining us.



Image taken from roasted addiction website:
www.roastedaddiction.co.nz.
See this website for other telling examples.

After these practice exercises participants were sorted into teams and sent out to semiotically decode the meaning of coffee in Bangkok. We sent participants to arenas we had scouted out upon arrival in Bangkok and went along with them for further discovery. One of the hardest things to overcome in any cultural or semiotic analysis is the impact of one’s own in-going assumptions. Participants were encouraged to use their immediate feelings regarding what they were seeing as not ‘real’ or ‘good’ coffee as clues for examining their own assumptions about coffee and as catalysts for looking more carefully at what coffee *is* in Bangkok. A good way to acknowledge and make explicit

one's own ingoing assumptions is to focus initial analysis on what coffee "isn't". As seminar participants noted, in Bangkok:

- Coffee is not black and is not hot. What Americans and Europeans consider "coffee" (hot black essence sometimes "diluted" by other elements) is rarely seen. Coffee during the day is routinely poured into plastic bags of ice. Coffee's presence is indexically marked by the evaporated milk cans, often Carnation. That is to say, if one sees Carnation, coffee is likely nearby, just as smoke is a semiotic index of fire. Participants concluded that 'coffee is an ingredient.'



- Coffee does not have a 'place.' As a group, we set out looking for coffee places: cafés, special stores, boutique environments. Instead we found that coffee typically has no place; along with other drinks and food, it is routinely found with the street vendors. While instant Nescafé is found in any local grocery, coffee is not often found in freshly-ground or bean form, and we did not find any stores specifically dedicated to coffee. The assumption of a place focused around coffee was simply another assumption we had carried with us. Old storefronts in

Chinatown came closest to fitting with our imaginations (with their tiled floors and marble-topped tables), inhabited by local denizens (older men), but even here food was served. A Western import like Starbucks, truly a *place* for coffee, was inhabited by young, cell phone carrying professionals. Starbucks is about fashion and social currency. Coffee more generally, is not.



- Coffee, when served, is not ‘refined’ through a mechanical process. Unlike the Starbucks machine (or the individual pot below, which we were told was part of a trend in Japan), there is no homage to bean grinding machinery or dripping

process; there is an absence of mechanical spectacle. Vender coffee sits waiting in pitchers of warm/hot water, in its filter sock, poured out when someone orders. A seemingly ubiquitous use of old instant coffee jars as containers for other things also suggests that instant coffee has had an appeal.



This modality of coffee can be compared to the westernized versions of “coffee” in Bangkok – whether in Starbucks, UCC (where the single ‘Japanese’ drip pot was found), or the casually chic Coffee Corner, located in an air conditioned, upscale shopping center, replete with menu of individual, specially prepared coffees and canisters of ungrounded beans lining the counter.



Thus, traditionally at least, the ‘freshness’ of coffee is not fetishized, as coffee, in general, is not fetishized. Coffee is neither a visual or conceptual focal point in places where it can be purchased. The lack of differentiated status among beverages (at least as it is sold), its lack of focal point for social activity, its lack of physical place for consumption all seemed to indicate ‘unelaborated commodity.’ But this would be viewing coffee in Bangkok solely through a Western lens – as black, hot, espresso machines, aromas, beans and places for coffee (coffee shops or cafés) are signs (symbols and indexes) conventionalized in our own culture for carrying meaning about coffee (potency, performance, intensity, productivity, depth, etc.)

So, back in the seminar room, we asked participants to try to think about coffee in Thai cultural terms. Though truly an impossible task given that most of us had spent a total of two days in Thailand and no one spoke completely fluent Thai, it was important to try to examine coffee from a Thai point of view, as doing so is crucial to ethnographic inquiry. The provisional conclusions were provocative:

- Coffee is a deftly constructed concoction (akin to a good bartender's movements) that is like Thai dishes in its medley of ingredients, its place on the streets and its to-go form. Just as Thais seemed to evaluate food as better when there were more individually, thoughtfully added ingredients, a really good coffee we were told was achieved by first adding the condensed milk, then the coffee, then the evaporated milk ...
- Coffee is refreshment, more ubiquitous than soda, an antidote to city heat while making one's way from point A to point B. Sold in the same beverage stands as fruit drinks (also served on ice in bags with straws), street coffee, at least, suggests interlude.



- Coffee forms are symbolic of larger cultural discourses and flows between East and West, tradition and modernity. Participants from Malaysia, Indonesia, China, Singapore, and India extrapolated from similar cultural and coffee phenomena in their own countries to reason that Starbucks and similarly processed and packaged coffees operated as icons of Western modernity. Consumption of the 'traditional' Thai street vendor coffee as opposed to Starbucks or UCC could make a statement

about a person's values in addition to their taste preference. A participant who had spent time in Thailand further observed that instant coffee had once been the symbol of Westernized modernity. The seemingly ubiquitous old Nescafé containers, now filled with other things, were thus indexicals of this former historical moment.

Conclusion: Semiotics and Ethnography at Large

The results we outlined above are based solely on a few hours of seminar participants' Bangkok observation coupled with the few extra hours of preparation on our part. Given this time frame, we believe the results to be truly a testimonial to the power of semiotic and ethnographic inquiry. At the same time, we would argue that they are woefully incomplete. We encouraged participants to try to think in Thai 'insider' categories as we maintain that without the insider's point of view, cultural life is ultimately always misunderstood, filtered as it necessarily is, through the eyes of the observer. To do the study as it should be done, one would need to talk with Bangkok coffee drinkers, to understand what they think about coffee, to hear how they talk about coffee, to know what goes on in their heads as they take their first, middle, and last sips, to know what they think when they drink different types, to know what they are thinking about as they wait at the vendor or in the Starbucks. To perhaps hear that, in fact, the morning coffee is often drunk hot, and that we were just not touching that part of the elephant, focused as we were on the afternoon.

While ethnography has often been equated to “observation” – and implemented as a means for gaining objective truth (in opposition to what respondents might *say*) – we would argue that this is an inaccurate application. Our approach rests on 2 premises:

- Humans are semiotic spinners – we constantly create meanings for things; these meanings are often shared. As Clifford Geertz has pointed out, “*Culture is public because meaning is. You can’t wink (or burlesque one) without knowing what counts as winking...*” Observation, as a method, has merit because culture is practiced – culture lives through people’s actions, artifacts, choice of words and tone of voice just as it does through beliefs, talk, explicit perceptions and values.
- Ethnography is not a method. Rather it is a mode of cultural analysis which is iterative, interpretive and in a constant search for meaning. Data are not ‘gathered’ as much as they are produced. Which is to say, our presence, our assumptions, our views of the situation provide never ending filters for the questions we ask, what we observe, what we conclude. In a constant effort to rid ourselves of ingoing assumptions, we ground ourselves in the details of what we see, what we ask, what we experience. Everything counts as data. Anything can be a prop for understanding. We must interrogate our assumptions and our observational filters whether researching one’s own culture or another’s. Observation is important, but it is crucial to ask the actors what they think and feel.