



Fig. 1: A street vendor in Dakar serves instant coffee from a makeshift Nescafé cart—an intimate exchange embedded in everyday urban life. (Photo courtesy of Ohsoon Yun)

On Tiny Cups

Tracing the Invisible Routes of Coffee Culture

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1. Street Cups in Dakar

In Dakar, coffee arrives in motion—not in cafés or on household trays, but on sidewalks, wheeled carts, and makeshift metal stalls. The carts share a recognizable design: two linked oil drums with a gas tank below and a kettle or pot above. A large plastic cup is used for mixing; a tiny paper cup delivers the final pour. With swift, practiced movements, the vendor arcs the liquid high between vessels, echoing the Moroccan tea ritual where repeated lifts and drops blend flavor and build foam. But this is not mint tea. It is Nescafé, stirred into hot water, mixed with powdered milk, and sweetened heavily—syrupy, not optional. Unless you ask from the start, your cup arrives half sugar, half coffee.

The cups themselves are striking—slightly larger than a thimble, wax-lined, designed for two or three sips. Though disposable, they define the experience. Transparent sleeves holding stacks of these cups hang from the cart like soft armor—functional, yet oddly aesthetic. The barista may sit on a plastic stool or drift from block to block, but the cart’s silhouette is constant—legible even to those who don’t share the language.

Elsewhere on the same streets, another

Coffee’s journey is usually traced through beans. But the humble cup tells another story—quiet, overlooked, yet just as powerful. From the aromatic brews of Saudi Arabia to the bustling streets of Dakar, from Tokyo’s curated cafés to the traditional homes of Ethiopia, these small vessels carry cultural memory. This essay follows the hidden geography of coffee cups—how they travel across continents, adapt to local rhythms, and subtly shape ritual and daily life, knitting together moments from east to west, and west to east.

coffee circulates. Less formal in setup but just as recognizable, Café Touba vendors carry everything they need: a thermos of pre-brewed spiced coffee, a large mixing cup, and a stack of tiny serving cups. The choreography is similar—the high pour, the steady hand, the brief exchange. The dark, herbal brew—often infused with grains of Selim (*Xylopia aethiopica*) and cloves—comes not from a tin but from memory and muscle. And again, the same small paper cups: the vessel as the final point of contact.

That moment—standing on a dusty street, holding a fragile paper cup of overly sweet instant coffee or spiced brew—was disorienting. The drink itself was forgettable; the vessel was not. Culture does not always announce itself. Sometimes it slips quietly into the hand. The cup became a trace, a signal, a compression of ritual into gesture.

Why pause there, with that small cup? Perhaps because it resembled so many others I had seen—in Ethiopian homes, in tea shops in China, in Turkish street stalls. Familiar, yet unmoored. This cup, stripped of context, seemed to float between meanings: between Africa and Asia, tradition and improvisation, performance and necessity. That tension—between recognition and displacement—is where this story begins.

2. What Is a Cup?

In Dakar, a cup of Café Touba costs fifty CFA francs; sweetened Nescafé costs one hundred. The difference is not only price. Café Touba moves through the city like an informal offering—tools in hand, liquid pre-brewed, the setup improvised, almost marginal. Nescafé arrives from a fixed

cart—a rough, welded kiosk that, with its speed and familiar taste, reads like a tiny café, enough to justify more. But what I’m tracing here is not Touba or Nescafé. It is the cup: a vessel so ordinary, so ever-present, that it rarely draws attention even as it reaches our lips every day.

We often praise coffee as the art of water and fire, as if those two elements alone conjure the drink. I would argue something is missing. Coffee, as we experience it, cannot exist without the cup. It receives the brew, contains the heat, and carries it toward us. The cup mediates between substance and sensation, ritual and routine. It is the silent infrastructure of every coffee moment, and yet we rarely ask: what is a cup? Children answer easily: a cup holds liquid. But when does it become more than a container—when does it become a signal, a symbol, a story? In a world where coffee organizes our rhythms—waking, working, resting—the cup remains strangely invisible even as it structures how we drink, how much we drink, and how we feel about what we’re drinking.

There are cups with catalog numbers and cups with names; cups behind glass as curated objects. Some are porcelain; others glass-blown, bamboo-molded, silicone-cast. Some are made to endure; others to vanish in moments. Shapes vary: some taper upward like the wax-lined cups of Dakar; others curve outward like the small ceramics of Ethiopia’s coffee ceremony. Bowls, often conflated with cups, invite two-handed holding—warmth, reflection. Cups, by contrast, imply movement: lift, sip, return.

The line between cup and bowl is neither universal nor trivial; it is cultural, material, symbolic. In some contexts, a bowl is called a cup; in others, a cup takes on the intimacy of a bowl. These design choices encode values—speed or stillness, sharing or solitude, formality or spontaneity. Shape, weight, and texture carry social cues as surely as utility.

In Ethiopia, I often encountered two distinct cups for different coffee styles. The *sini* (ሲኒ, “Chinese”) is a small, handleless ceramic cup. The *buruchuko* (ቡርህካቆ, “little glass”) is a thick glass used for macchiatos, often with a metal spoon resting inside. Both contain coffee, but they signal different experiences—slowness, ritual, and hospitality in one; efficiency, modernity, and mobility in the other. The cup is not passive; it actively shapes the coffee moment.

When does a cup become noticeable? Perhaps when unearthed from a royal tomb, displayed in a museum, or spotlighted in an art installation. But sometimes meaning arrives more quietly. A paper cup on a Dakar sidewalk, costing less than a dollar, can hold more than liquid: memory, association, recognition. In 2025, I stood with such a cup—neither precious nor permanent, yet familiar. It evoked other cups I had known: a *sini* in Ethiopia, a sake cup in Kyoto, a tea cup in Guangzhou. How could something so disposable carry so much resonance?

As a cultural geographer who has spent years studying coffee and its rituals, I began to see the cup itself as a kind of narrator. It held not just coffee, but traces of aesthetic sensibilities, economic choices, and geographic echoes. It whispered of trade routes, colonial pasts, and design philosophies passed through generations. In a world that celebrates coffee as a liquid that connects people, it is the cup that makes that connection visible, tangible, intimate. The cup enables the journey. Beans can be harvested, roasted, and brewed—but only the cup allows the drink to be shared, held, remembered. The cup gives coffee its social legibility, its emotional touchpoint. Perhaps it is time we pay attention to the cup—not merely as a tool, but as a vessel of meaning.

3. Why Small? Ritual, Routes, and the Missing Map

In Dakar, coffee is served in the smallest of cups—smaller than a demitasse, smaller even than the *finjān* (فنجان, “small cup”) common in West Asian traditions. The flimsy paper shot-glass is passed from vendor to customer with a high-arc pour that suggests a distant aesthetic lineage. It stands in quiet contrast to grande and venti, to double-walled tumblers and refillable flasks of the global coffee economy. And yet, in this small cup, something lingers. The act of pouring is not merely utilitarian; it is expressive—a moment of attention, performance, memory. It summons older rhythms when vessel size communicated presence more than productivity. These cups do not simply hold coffee; they hold attention. And attention becomes a threshold where the everyday meets the ancestral, and the vessel begins to speak.

There is ritual in smallness. A sip from a tiny cup is not meant to quench but to

pause. One drinks not to consume, but to mark the moment. A social clock ticks between sips, and the emptied cup is not an end but an invitation—a silent prompt for refill and continuation. This rhythm echoes across traditions. In Ethiopia, the *sini* is refilled without request. In West Asia, rounds of *qahwa* (قهوة) follow a cadence of silence and return. In East Asia, delicate ceramic cups for tea or sake invite pause and attentiveness.

Different in form and context, these cups still share a code of tempo and restraint. They slow the drink, stretching it across minutes and meanings. The small cup refuses the logic of volume; it insists on attention.

Why small—why Dakar? The answer lies not only in aesthetics or economy, but in routes we seldom map. If we chart coffee by beans and markets—Ethiopia to Arabia, Arabia to Europe, Europe to colonies—the cup’s itinerary diverges. The tiny paper cups in Dakar do not descend from Ethiopia’s highlands, where the clay *jebena* (ጃቤና) is the ceremonial brewing pot. Their form belongs to a different lineage, resonating with the handleless, low, delicate silhouettes of East Asian tea cups and with terms that traveled through the Middle East and North Africa before reaching West Africa. In Ethiopia, the ceremonial cup is called *sini* (ሲኒ)—a borrowing via Arabic *ṣini* (“Chinese; porcelain”)—which in Amharic names the small, handleless cup used in the ceremony.¹ The lineage points to porcelain trade and the adoption of aesthetic values carried along Indian Ocean and Silk Road routes. From tea tables in China to mint rituals in Morocco, from spice-laden coffee in Saudi Arabia to Senegalese street corners, the small cup has journeyed far—geographically and symbolically.

This is the missing map—not of coffee beans, but of coffee vessels. A cartography of cups. If today’s global coffee scene is dominated by large ceramic mugs and branded paper to-go, it is not because those forms are universal, but because they are cultural—speaking of speed, abundance, and scale. Elsewhere, another tradition endures. The small cup fosters return. It encourages exchange. It extends the moment. Its limitation invites repetition. Within repetition, a deeper hospitality emerges—rooted not in how much is offered, but in how often.

As I traced these routes, my role shifted. I had long studied the geography of coffee—its movements, meanings, markets. Now I was drawn to what had been present all along: the cup. To follow the cup is to see the invisible infrastructures of coffee culture—the unspoken codes, the rhythms of gathering, the shapes of pause. The cup is not merely a vehicle; it is a map, a marker, a memory. It reveals how coffee is carried, shared, and domesticated in everyday life.

And so, I find myself becoming not only a geographer of coffee, but a geographer of cups.



Fig. 2: An Ethiopian coffee ceremony setting with jebena, small cups, incense, popcorn, and sugar—a slow ritual of gathering, storytelling, and shared time. (Photo courtesy of Ohsoon Yun)

4. Global Journeys of the Cup

Once passed hand to hand, the cup now moves through global logistics with astonishing speed—in shipping containers, warehouse pallets, algorithmic delivery routes. Increasingly it carries not only liquid, but brand, identity, and aspiration. A scribbled name—“latte,” “your name here”—can summon an entire world of consumption. But whose world? Whose time, whose ritual, whose value does that cup represent?

Unlike beans, whose routes from farm to market are comparatively traceable, the cup’s journey is diffuse and fragmented. A single city block might host IKEA mugs (affordable Scandinavian homeware), Muji tumblers (minimalist Japanese design), Daiso character cups (cheerful, low-cost goods), and high-end European porcelain gleaming in department stores. Each encodes a worldview—minimalist or playful, ostentatious or nostalgic. The cup has become a market object, not just a vessel but a curated symbol of lifestyle, taste, and speed. No brand globalized the cup like Starbucks. What began in Seattle became planetary not through taste alone, but through experience—and central to that experience is the cup. The Italian espresso demitasse was scaled up, thickened, and reimagined as a portable lifestyle accessory. Size equaled value. Holding a Starbucks cup signals participation in a global urban rhythm. The cup became a companion—personal, portable, branded—measured not in milliliters but in minutes and movement.

Yet not all cups follow this route. The Ethiopian *sini*, the Middle Eastern *finjān*, Morocco’s delicate tea glasses, East Asia’s white porcelain bowls resist the logic of disposability and scale. They hold not only coffee or tea, but cultural memory, embodied gestures, and slow time. Their design privileges repetition and restraint: pour again, offer again, remain present again. These cups are not optimized; they are situated. And because they resist acceleration, they open space for relation.

I remember the paper cup I held in Dakar. Small, hot, gone in three sips, it nevertheless asked me to slow down. No logo, no slogan—just warmth and the dusty rhythm of the street. To many, disposable. To me, resonant. It belonged to a lineage with no barcode and no catalog number, but with memory—whispering of other hands, other places, other times. The cup’s global journey is not a single narrative. It expands, contracts, vanishes, reemerges. Some cups are used once and discarded. Others are washed, stored, passed on. Between these extremes lies a question: how do we want to hold time? With the oversized, branded cup of convenience? Or with the small ritual cup that calls us back—not for more volume, but for more meaning? To trace the cup is to follow the material infrastructures of care, taste, and belonging. It is to ask how vessels—not only the drinks—shape our sense of presence. While modern coffee culture prizes mobility and convenience, the small cup remains a counterpoint. It refuses to vanish. It lingers. From that quiet persistence, the final story begins.

5. The Cup Remains

Long after the coffee is gone, the cup remains. Even when aroma fades, warmth cools, and conversation dissolves into memory, the cup stays—quietly, unobtrusively—on the table, in the hand, on the shelf. It holds more than liquid. It holds a trace. It holds time. A witness to the moment just passed, it absorbs presence without demanding attention. We rarely think of it, yet we never drink without it.

Across cultures, the cup is overlooked yet constant. In Ethiopia, the handleless *sini* used in coffee ceremonies mirrors the aesthetics of East Asian tea bowls, its shape whispering of routes that crossed deserts, empires, and seas. In Dakar, the thin paper cup of sweet, spicy Café Touba bears no outward sign of inheritance, yet compresses centuries of ritual into a



Fig. 3: A tiny paper cup of Café Touba—sweet and slightly spiced, reminiscent of Korea’s *Ssanghwa-cha* (쌍화차). (Photo courtesy of Ohsoon Yun)

street-side transaction. In Tokyo and Seoul, cafés experiment—minimalist mugs, poetic ceramics, aromatics-forward glass—echoing the past while speaking in the present. Regardless of style, the cup endures. It is the element that binds these settings together. Coffee has long anchored rituals of pause, productivity, and pleasure. Without the cup, those rituals do not unfold. The cup determines portion, temperature, tempo. It mediates the encounter between drink and drinker, setting the tone not only for how we consume, but how we remember. A cup holds warmth, invites sharing, and receives our silences without question. It is not merely a container; it is an interface between people, between past and present, between culture and body.

Through centuries, the cup has crossed regions and regimes. It has been carved from horn, thrown in clay, spun from bamboo, glazed in porcelain, pressed in paper, forged in steel. It has worn imperial insignias and global logos alike. Yet beneath the changes, its role persists: to carry, to connect, to hold meaning—mundane and sacred, individual and communal, local and planetary.

After years of studying coffee not only as a crop or a commodity but also as a geography of human experience, I have come to see the cup as more than a supporting actor. It is a storyteller. It remembers the roads coffee has traveled, the hands it passed through, the gestures repeated around it. I have lost cups I cherished and found meaning in the most ordinary ones. Cups are shaped by culture, and they shape it in return.

A question that began simply—why are the cups in Dakar so small?—ends with this recognition: to understand coffee’s movement across the world, we must also understand the vessels that carry it. Beans can be traded; brewing methods can change. But the way we hold and experience coffee is embedded in our histories, habits, and sense of belonging. The cup is not just part of that experience—it is the structure that makes it possible. Long after the last sip, the cup remains: in the faint ring it leaves on a table, in warmth lingering on the palm, in the quiet second before it is set down. In the end, it is not only coffee that moves through the world, but the cup that teaches us how to carry it.

Notes
1 Ohsoon Yun, *Coffee Tourism in Ethiopia: Opportunities, Challenges and Initiatives* (PhD diss., University of Exeter, 2014), ch. 8. (Etymology: Amh. *sini* < Ar. *ṣini* “Chinese; porcelain”; cf. Ar. *finjān* “small cup”).