

# Book Review: Jürgen Wasim Frembgen, *Tausend Tassen Tee*

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Exploring media means following cultures and ways of communicating that materialise in many forms. *Tausend Tassen Tee* by Jürgen Wasim Frembgen deals with the culture of tea drinking in the Islamic world: dishes, preparation, locations, social settings and imaginary. The author seems predestined to write about his subject as he is an expert in the material culture of Sufism and through his ethnographic fieldwork has long personal familiarity with the regions of Pakistan and India.

To present his results, Frembgen chose a medium that at first glance might seem a typical “coffee-table book”, with its rich illustrations and its cover portraying an expressive and colourful calendar sheet from India in the 1950s that depicts a woman with a cup of tea. A closer look reveals a detailed documentation of tea drinking in the Near and Middle East in the form of a reflective combination of text and more than 60 “speaking” illustrations, mostly photographs taken by the author.

In the first part of the book, Frembgen presents general information: botanical issues concerning *camellia* or *thea sinensis*, forms of trade and medicinal aspects as well as cultures of preparing and serving tea. Tea drinking is described in its social aspects, hinting at the main section of the text.

This introductory part is followed by a “thick description”. This contextualized examination of tea drinking provides almost intimate insight into tea-houses gained by the ethnographer during years of travelling – in Morocco, in cities such as Cairo, Damascus or Istanbul and at pilgrimage sites in Pakistan and India. These some hundred pages are particularly valuable because of their illustrations, which show mainly contemporary but also some historic interiors of kitchens and guest rooms and therefore present a whole imaginary of such semi-public spaces. Additionally, the ethnographer not only presents his observations from a bird’s eye view, but also tells of his encounters with ordinary people like taxi drivers, who drink and explain tea, and with connoisseurs and professionals, both men and women, who prepare tea. In these parts we find

emic and etic perspectives (Clifford Geertz, Russell T. McCutcheon) combined. Readers learn that tea drinking is a way of life mirrored in the material culture and the bodily and sensational acts of social gathering and drinking, mainly from small cups. And tea drinking is also bound up with an old oral culture of sayings and local stories, which Frembgen has collected.

The author is conscious of spatial dimensions. He describes famous teahouses as public and political spaces. With parallels to the German Weisswurst divide and the Swiss so-called *Röstigraben*, the Himalayan region can be socially divided into areas of tea drinking with milk and tea drinking without milk. Within a male world, the teahouse is (or was) a space of gathering outside the family home. Frembgen also makes reference to women and their collective cultures of drinking tea, but their places are normally closed to him (one exception is seen in the illustration on page 49 with female stea-cooks in Morocco). Broadly framed, he shows a traditional lower-class or middle-class world where tea is prepared in a samovar, with spices and maybe milk added. That traditional world and its social structures have started to vanish, even in Pakistan and India. The samovar is replaced by the Lipton teabag and tea-to-go is a trend around the globe. Hence, it is all the more important that this traditional world of tea drinking is documented.

De facto this book is a contribution to an elementary field of everyday culture. Implicitly it adopts perspectives and raises questions inherent in contemporary research, especially research on material culture and religion that takes into account, along with the material, whole sensational sets (Birgit Meyer), habitus and imaginaries (Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati). But other than in a few footnotes, Frembgen does not explicitly contextualize his study with debates current in the humanities. That absence may reflect a desideratum within the German tradition, where the study of food cultures is an inhomogenous field. For the Islamic world, not much analysis has been done beyond Peter Heines' works on wine and culinary cultures that appeared in the 1980s and again in 2014. The German humanities are less differentiated in their approach to food cultures than are English-speaking disciplines, where we find, for example, Sami Zubaida and Richard Tappers, *A Taste of Thyme: Culinary Cultures of the Middle East* (2000), and, in the United States, anthropological programmes in food studies.

Perhaps it was this lack of a scholarly context that caused the publishing house and the author to opt for a more popular design and content (with footnotes but without separate bibliography) that might stand out on any coffee (or tea) table. That approach would appear to propel the romantic stereotypes at the end of the book that contradict modernity: "To drink a cup of tea means contentment and well-being. It is part of a way of life of calmness and serenity" (136). Nevertheless, reading the complete book is certainly

worthwhile, to gain insight into drinking tea as a highly social and cultivated practice in the Middle East.

In this book – much as in his other projects like ethnographic films – Frembgen presents himself as a sensitive intermediary with empathy for the culture he conveys to his reader, surely significant for the topic addressed by this issue of the *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*, the use of media in religious studies.