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URBAN CULTURAL SPACE[https://doi.org/10.34680/urbis-2024-4\(2\)-217-226](https://doi.org/10.34680/urbis-2024-4(2)-217-226)**Ashoughs and poets
in the 17th-19th Eastern Armenian and Iranian café houses****Tatevik Saroyan** Yerevan State University History Museum, Yerevan, Armenia
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ABSTRACT

The study endeavors to examine the dynamics of movement, posture, and social interactions within cafés operating in the two neighboring countries during the 17th to 19th centuries. These establishments, which began their global spread in the 17th century, served as quintessential gathering places for men in Eastern societies, where various discussions took place amidst the accompaniment of ashough music and poetic recitations. They were venues where the intellectual and creative figures of the era – writers, musicians, and artists – regarded cafés as the ideal platform for self-expression, thus becoming the centres of contemporary performances, festivities, and multicultural exchanges. Due to the deepening cultural relations, artists from neighboring regions, such as Iran and Armenia, frequently performed in cafés across both countries, thereby fostering a reciprocal exchange of artistic expression. This is why many Armenian public figures of the time – musicians and writers enjoyed recognition in Iran and possessed knowledge of the Persian language. Similarly, a comparable environment was established in cafés operating within Armenia, where prominent Persian artists showcased their talents. Nevertheless, with changing times and the evolving nature of artistic expression, cafés gradually lost their prestige as primary centres of entertainment and transformed into more inclusive spaces frequented by the general public. Today, they continue to serve as venues for live music, book presentations, and lectures, retaining a legacy of cultural significance.

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Introduction

Coffee was first introduced from Ethiopia to Yemen in the 15th and 16th centuries, and subsequently, it spread to Cairo, Mecca, Medina, Constantinople, and Isfahan (Weinberg, Bealer, 2002, pp. 3–4). The beverage was originally served in gahvekhanas, or cafés, which provided ideal settings for men to gather and enjoy themselves. These venues became hubs for social interaction, intellectual discourse, and artistic expression, offering patrons the opportunity to engage in conversations, play games, discuss politics, and appreciate poetry and music, all while indulging in coffee. Through the proliferation of this cultural phenomenon, the East served as a model for other nations, particularly Western and Eastern Armenia. It is worth noting that cafés often emerged in proximity to significant landmarks such as churches, mosques, and marketplaces, ensuring a steady stream of customers. Writers and painters were particularly fond of coffee, and artists sought out cafés as venues to showcase their work, engage in friendly competition, and garner recognition. Consequently, cafés evolved into custodians and disseminators of cultural heritage across generations. In this article, we aim to explore the cultural and artistic evolution of cafés in Persia and Eastern Armenia during the 17th–19th centuries, with a focus on the performances by troupes and poets.

17th–18th centuries Iranian cafés

Iranian cafés, known as gahve khaneh (Persian: café), emerged as social hubs during the 16th century. After the enthronement of Abbas the Great the first gahve khaneh was established in the city of Ghazvin during the Safavid era, and their significance grew exponentially, leading to their proliferation in major cities like Tehran, Tabriz, Isfahan, and Rasht. During this period, gahve khanehs became renowned as gathering places for intellectuals, including writers, painters, poets, and members of the upper social echelons. It's worth highlighting that royal dignitaries were accorded special respect when they visited gahve khanehs. Historical records suggest that Shah Abbas the Great occasionally made discreet, unannounced visits to various gahve khanehs, underscoring the importance of these establishments in Safavid society.

Gahve khanehs of the 17th–19th centuries also functioned as hubs for folk art. For instance, there were dramatic performances, Naqalli presentations (Iranian Dramatic Storytelling), Shahnameh Khan painting exhibitions (gahve khane painting. Some of these artworks are on display in the Reza Abbasi Museum in Tehran) and also demonstrating a cohesive cultural milieu, as the general public engaged with these entertaining performances (fig. 1). They gained a deeper appreciation for the rich, magnificent Persian art and literature, which vividly depicted Safavid Persia's daily life, human relations, and societal norms. In gahve khane, even nomadic actors who lacked formal performance venues endeavored to showcase their talents. It is noteworthy that the majority of café owners were amateur poets and musicians.

The esteemed French traveler Jean Chardin embarked on a noteworthy expedition, commencing with his visit to Constantinople and the Black Sea in 1666. His sojourn extended to Iran twice in 1666 and 1667. In 1670 he came back to Paris. Continuing his exploratory pursuits, he ventured forth to Georgia, Armenia, and Isfahan in 1672 and 1673. It was from the insights gleaned during these extensive travels that Chardin crafted his magnum opus, "The Travels of Sir John Chardin," a monumental ten-volume work esteemed as one of the preeminent early studies of Safavid Iran and the broader Middle

Eastern milieu. Within its pages, Chardin meticulously chronicles the epoch, furnishing readers with significant details concerning the prevailing zeitgeist and the indigenous populace's way of life.



Fig. 1. Ghahve Khaneh.

Source: <https://www.tasteiran.net/stories/10065/iranian-coffee-house-ghahve-khaneh>

Of particular note in Chardin's narrative are his vivid descriptions of Persian café houses, which he extols as the epitome of elegance within the urban landscape. These establishments, according to Chardin, served as veritable havens of amusement for the local denizens. They provided a forum for unrestrained discourse and intellectual exchange, wherein even the most contentious political matters could be openly debated and scrutinized without fear of reprisal.

As an astute observer, Chardin also casts his discerning eye upon the prevalent culture of coffee and tea consumption during the era, remarking that "...they were spacious rooms located in the best parts of the cities. They offered spacious interiors replete with amenities such as water basins. Furthermore, Chardin paints a picture of grandeur, describing how these magnificent venues featured galleries where patrons could partake in the consumption of coffee while being serenaded by the recitations of esteemed figures such as mullahs, dervishes, and poets, who regaled audiences with works of verse and prose" (Chardin, 2012, p. 316).

Following Chardin, other travelers also confirm that troupes reading poetry and telling stories could be seen in the Coffee Houses. This established a connection between the dissemination of oral literature and café houses, which were often designed as an amphitheater to accommodate visitors. It should be noted that Coffee Houses were situated adjacent to mosques, where religious leaders also frequented and imparted moral tales to the audience (Mokhber, 2019, p. 101).

However, over time, these establishments evolved into political agitation centers within the Ottoman Empire and Persia. Shah Abbas I began to curtail their activities due to concerns about the disorderly unreliability atmosphere in cafés and eventually prohibited them by the end of the 1650s. Conversely, Persian café houses provided the French

with an opportunity to interpret and adapt the concept by their customs and practices, serving as open spaces for free thought (Mokhber, 2019, p. 101).

In the 17th century, Voltaire, a frequent patron of French cafés, expressed admiration for Persia:

“Persia was more civilized than Turkey at the time. People’s manners were gentler, and art was held in higher regard... Sciences also received greater encouragement. There was scarcely a city without several colleges dedicated to the teaching of polite literature. Overall, the information available to us about Persia suggests that there has seldom been a monarchy on earth where the people enjoyed their human rights to such an extent. No people in the Eastern regions of the world had as many resources to confront life’s tragedies and mental weaknesses. They gathered in spacious cafés, where waiters served this beverage, which had not been available in Europe until the late 17th century” (Mokhber, 2019, pp. 143–144).

In addition, Persian Armenians played a significant role in shaping coffeehouse culture and facilitating the dissemination of coffee throughout Europe, notably in France. For instance, Voltaire frequented the coffeehouse established by Gregory from Isfahan on Mazarin Street (The Home Friend, p. 51).

The Armenian merchants of New Julfa ascended to prominence as monopolists in the export of Persian silk and other Eastern commodities, including coffee, which swiftly ascended to preeminence in the market, particularly at the port of Marseilles (Aslanian, 2011, pp. 75–76), where they conducted deliveries. Concurrently, European customs and attire were introduced to Persia by Armenian traders from Europe, who also popularized pastimes such as the shell game played at café tables (Chardin, 2012, p. 273).



Fig. 2. Shahname. Musicians painted in Shahname, 1830.
Source: Mashtots Matenadaran № 535, p. 154b

Historian Ralph Huttox provides intriguing insights into Persian cafés. These establishments emerged as favored venues for recitations from the Shahnameh, attracting performers from diverse backgrounds (fig. 2). Some impoverished scholars or students were engaged in recitations part-time to supplement their income. There were prevalent also professional reciters. Occasionally, individuals staged such performances not out of necessity but for personal amusement. Puppet shows of various kinds were also a feature, particularly during Ramadan, though they had no popularity (Hattox, 2015, p. 42).

Despite being prohibited for nearly 150 years (Mokhber, 2019, p. 101), cafés were eventually permitted to reopen towards the close of the 18th century under the Qajar family's rule, driven by widespread demand. They continued to serve as forums for discussions ranging from politics to literature, frequented by writers, poets, and royalty alike¹.

19th-century Iranian café Houses

From the Safavid period to the establishment of the Qajar dynasty, cafes that had been declining due to efforts to prevent chaos and maintain social control resumed their activities.

In the article “Coffee House: A Historical Attraction in the Landscape of Urban Tourism in Iran” (Basouli et al., 2022, p. 24) it is mentioned that: “Qajar era, as in the Safavid era, there were numerous coffee house poets, unfortunately, there is no information available about them today. One of the poets who has dealt with his life and his travels to the coffee house is Shater Abbas Sobouhi “Shater Abbas was one of the poets who went to Khan Marvi coffee house with his friends during the Qajar era and recited his poems there. Other coffee-house artists are known as Yeksavar, Miralahi, Moghimi Zarkash, Mulana Haidar, the storyteller, Muzaffar Hussein, and others. At that time the prevalence of Shahnameh reading, narration, lyric reading, and eloquence increased the literary function of coffee houses” (Basouli, Derakhsh, Masadi, 2022, p. 24).

During the Qajar era, the number of coffeehouses in Iranian cities, particularly in Tehran, increased significantly, especially in the mid-19th century. Unlike the coffeehouses of the Safavid period, which primarily were for the wealthy, Qajar coffeehouses opened their doors to a wider segment of society. These establishments became vital hubs of public life, offering entertainment and a place for social interaction. Coffeehouses during the Qajar era were integral to their respective communities, and often associated with specific professions. Many guilds had their own dedicated coffeehouses, which functioned as informal “work exchange” venues. Traders from these communities were familiar with where to find the skilled workers they required, and similarly, professionals knew they could discover qualified specialists in these cafes (Rezvani, 2023, p. 45-46).

These coffeehouses also served as gathering places for guild representatives, where access was typically restricted to members of the community. Visitors enjoyed games and were entertained by poets and storytellers (Rezvani, 2023, p. 45-46).

19th century Eastern Armenian musicians (ashoughs) in cafés

Regarding the consumption of coffee in Eastern Armenia, references can be found in a number of historical sources.

¹ Mobarhani M., Ghahve Khaneh. The Culture of Coffee House, 14.01.2020.

<https://www.tasteiran.net/stories/10065/iranian-coffee-house-ghahve-khaneh> (uploaded day: 22.01.2024)

However, we should note that information from the 17th and 18th centuries is limited, with most of the significant material originating from the 19th century.

Notably, one of the earliest accounts is provided by Jean Chardin, who recounts in his travel notes that, while traversing through Armenia, he contracted dysentery and was treated with coffee by the local monks (Chardin, 2012, p. 20).

Additionally, historian Yervand Shahaziz references two cafés in his study of “Old Yerevan,” (Shahaziz, 1930, p. 120) in addition to structures within the Yerevan Fortress predating the Russian-Persian war. These details shed light on how Persian khans facilitated the introduction of coffee to Armenia during the Persian era, although its dissemination among the public was limited.

Nevertheless, Alexandropol (Gyumri) gained prominence in the 19th century due to the proliferation of artisan cafés hosting performances by renowned bands of the era.

It is pertinent to note that ashough poetry constitutes a captivating, distinctive genre of Armenian literature, deeply rooted in folklore (Sahakyan, 1961, p. 9). The art of the ashoughs holds ancient roots among Armenians. During the ancient pagan era, when Armenia lacked a written literary tradition, the gusans, or folk singer-poets, roamed from city to city and province to province, acquainting the populace with the lifestyle of different regions (Yeremyan, 1921, Introduction).

The Persian term “ashyg” or “asheg,” meaning “love” or “lover,” found its equivalent in Armenian as “ashough,” despite its non-Armenian origin. While there are multiple synonyms in Armenian for “ashough,” such as gusan, singer, player, and musician, the term specifically denotes an individual who embodies both poetical and musical prowess. In Tačkastan (Ottoman period Turkey) and Persia, many of the ancient ashoughs were individuals in love, leading the populace to refer to them as “ashough singers” or “singers in love.” Consequently, society continued to use “ashyg” or “ashough” to denote musicians and singers, under the assumption that “ashyg” signified “singer” (Levonyan, 1892, p. 12).



Fig. 3. Gevorg Brutyan. Ashough's café in Alexandropol.

Source: <https://arar.sci.am/dlibra/publication/217206/edition/197857/content>

The art of the ashoughs, representing a direct extension of medieval Armenian lyric poetry, is inseparable from the broader history of Armenian folk art. From the 16th century onwards (and possibly earlier), Armenian poetry predominantly manifested through the medium of the ashough (fig. 3). Even the ballad poets of yore could not escape the influence of the ashough's melodies, as evidenced by the great poets of the 17th to 19th centuries, who crafted their immortal and beloved works by emulating the art of the ashoughs (Durgaryan, 1986, p. 3).

This unique coffeehouse culture, characterised by gatherings of artisans and the performance of ashough singing, began to flourish in Eastern Armenia following the conclusion of the Russo-Persian War (1826–1828) and the Russo-Turkish War (1828–1829), when the Russian Empire annexed a substantial portion of the region. This military-political shift was accompanied by organized migration and the resettlement of Armenians in territories previously inhabited by Muslims, thereby contributing to the development of a distinct social and cultural milieu centered around the coffeehouse. Numerous Armenians residing in Iran and Western Armenia chose to resettle in Eastern Armenia.

It should be emphasized that the emergence of “ashough” culture in the coffeehouse environment in Eastern Armenia was largely inherited from Western Armenia and Turkey, where, since the 17th-century, Armenian merchants facilitated the import and export of coffee from Karin, Van, Smyrna, and Constantinople. This not only positioned this natural product as a new and promising commodity but also allowed it to permeate Armenian households, becoming an integral part of daily life.

The significance and scale of coffee consumption expanded to such an extent that, by the 19th century, it had evolved into a distinct professional trade with its own designation. Within the records of such economic activities, the terms “ghahvechi” and “coffee makers” (“srtchagorts”) frequently appear, indicating the specialization of this craft. Importantly, the rise of this profession was paralleled by the establishment of coffeehouses in artisanal towns, which served not merely as sites for the sale of coffee, but also as venues for performances by gusans (traditional minstrels), ashoughs, and folk poets (Aghanyan, Harutyunyan, 2023, p. 203).

At the outset of the previous century, with Eastern Armenia's integration into Russia, a substantial influx of Armenians migrated to Transcaucasia, establishing communities in Shirak, Javakhk, Akhaltsikhe, Yerevan, and various other locales. Armenian immigrants from Karin, Kars, Basen, and other regions brought with them numerous trades to Alexandropol. The city masons, carpenters and blacksmiths, who honed and propagated their craft, earned considerable renown.

Among the migrant Armenians were renowned ashoughs originating from major cities in Turkey, captivating the populace with their songs and music. The newly established cafés of the city served as their meeting grounds, where artisans congregated during leisure hours, particularly in winter. Notable ashoughs frequently journeyed from afar to vie with local masters in public competitions held in these cafés.

Initially, local ashoughs predominantly composed Turkish and Persian songs. However, the succeeding generation gradually eschewed foreign languages in favor of Armenian, especially dialects from Kars, resulting in an increased prevalence of songs in the native tongue. Indeed, Armenian gradually emerged as the primary language for the ashoughs (Durgaryan, 1986, p. 4).

Craftsmen's clubs, cafés, taverns, wine houses, and later beer houses constituted integral and vital facets of entertainment for Alexandropol residents. Historiographical investigations reveal that in the 1860s, the city boasted 26 cafés, which played pivotal roles in shaping its cultural milieu (Bazeyan & Aghanyan, 2014, p. 50). Club-café also served as excellent venues for patrons to enjoy performances by local or visiting musical ensembles. Engaging with the art of the ashoughs addressed not only aesthetic concerns but also delved into socio-political, social, and religious-ethical issues. Ashoughs possessed the unique ability to address myriad topics openly or, at times, allegorically through their songs, resonating with the concerns of the people of Alexandropol and Armenians in general.

Within club-café, both local and itinerant ashoughs regaled audiences with famous oriental romances, fairy tales, and muhamma riddles while organizing competitions amongst themselves and with the spectators (Aghanyan, Harutyunyan, 2023, p. 206). The most renowned ashoughs frequently visited permanent cafés. Everyone's discourse found a home in a permanent café setting. One of the earliest ethnic enclaves in Alexandropol comprised the Gheirati community, which established one of the area's inaugural cafés and remained actively engaged (Durgaryan, 1986, p. 5).

Ashough Havasi regularly performed at his designated café. Each day, laborers would flock to the café, requesting their favorite dastan or song from him, generously compensating the musicians' band. Some ashoughs exercised autonomy in selecting their performance venues and repertoire. Ashough Paytsare, known for his proficiency in tailoring, also excelled in playing the tar. His compositions were highly esteemed and frequently sung at gatherings, weddings, and cafés alike. When not addressing the audience, Paytsare enjoyed reclining on the café's settee, surrounded by fellow ashoughs, serenading customers with his melodious and sadaph-decorated tar (Aghanyan & Harutyunyan, 2023, p. 207).

Among the revered ashoughs mentioned, Jivani (Serob Levonyan) stood out as a towering figure in 20th-century Armenian ashough culture, elevating the art form to new heights and inspiring subsequent generations of ashoughs. The young prodigy made his debut at the age of 18 at Taloy's café, owned by Shara Talyan's family, which regularly hosted performances by vocalists and instrumentalists (Talyan, 1973, pp. 7–8).

Conclusion

Regrettably, these once-renowned and beloved entertainment hubs gradually waned in popularity with the decline of ashough culture. The emergence of literature, theater, and journalism, coupled with educational advancements, heralded a new era of cultural refinement (Durgaryan, 1986, p. 15). However, the problem was not only that. With the approval of the Soviet Union, the trade unions were also closed, which harmed cafes, as they were directly related to the crafts. The Soviet leaders regarded these venues as undesirable meeting places, perceiving them as sites for the exchange of ideas that contradicted state ideology. Consequently, a series of prohibitions led to the gradual closure of cafes. As a result, cafes ceased to serve as cultural hubs and public gathering spaces, both in Alexandropol and Yerevan (Saroyan, 2023, p. 192). The city's cafés could no longer fulfill the artistic aspirations of the populace with their mundane interiors fairy tale-telling troupes. Consequently, the dwindling troupe sought alternative stages, either at

public events or in distant locales and villages, where folk singers, poets, and troupes were invariably greeted with warmth and reverence (Durgaryan, 1986, p. 16).

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