

The Eastern Way of Timekeeping: The Object and Ritual of *Nargile*¹

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*The clock, not the steam-engine,
is the key machine of the modern industrial age.*³

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Foreword

A few years ago, when the ideas that motivated writing this paper first emerged, my friends and I had a hard time finding a place to smoke a *nargile*. Aside from our academic interest in objects, culture, and meanings, we really wanted to experience the *nargile* as a ritual. We eventually found a few places, but our quest for the tradition is worth analysis. Basically, we, as people living in big cities of Turkey, wanted to be a part of this mystic ritual. We knew that it was an old tradition with important geographic, historic, and contextual significances, but it was not a part of our daily lives in any sense. Why? The changing life styles dominated by the rules of societal modernization are not in conformity with the speed of such an experience so, except for a few specific places, it was not rational or profitable to sustain this kind of ritual in coffee houses. Yet we were astonished to find out that many other people in Turkey had developed a curiosity and interest in *nargile* smoking.

Today, you can see a lot of places including coffee houses and cafés that offer *nargile* smoking, along with table games that can be associated with other time-consuming pleasures. Capitalism once again found a way to incorporate a cultural element by making it widespread everywhere recklessly. Although this is the case, the emphasis of this paper is not on these formations, but rather on the “essence” of the ritual—if there is any—in contrast with a modern background such as its/our relation to the concept of time; the inner dynamics of modernity and the modern individual, and a sense of identity.

Nargile

Nargile is the Turkish word for a device also known as a hookah, shisha, hubble-bubble, or water pipe. A *nargile* basically is “a tobacco pipe whose smoke is drawn through water by a long tube before reaching the mouth.”⁴ The working principle of a *nargile* is to inhale the burned tobacco after passing it through the coldness of water, believed to filter the smoke. The special tobacco that is smoked in a *nargile* is called *tömbeki*. A *nargile* consists of several parts including

1 *Nargile* is the Turkish word for the device that is called a hookah, shisha, hubble-bubble, or water pipe. *Nargile* is basically “a tobacco pipe whose smoke is drawn through water by a long tube before reaching the mouth” (Procter 1978).

2 This paper was presented at “Mind the Map: Third International Conference on Design History and Design Studies” (July 9–12, 2002, Istanbul). I would like to thank my colleagues Maryse Erkip and Ali Yaycioglu for helping in the editing of this revised version.

3 Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc, 1963), 14.

4 *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, Paul Procter, ed. (London: The Pitnam Press, 1978).



Figure 1
Detail from a *nargile* (photo: Sebnem Timur).

the pipe bowl (*liile*), the body (*gövde*), the flexible hose (*marpuç*), and the metal tube (*ser*). Pipe bowl refers to the upper part, usually made from clay (In the example shown, it is metal) in which the tobacco is burned using charcoal. The metal tube connects the pipe bowl to the body. The body is the main part; usually glass, metal, or crystal; that holds the water. A flexible, hose-like pipe is used to convey the smoke to the user. It is connected to the body through a junction on it. Each piece is produced by specialized craftsmen, and sold in specific districts of the town in which they are produced.⁵

Every object demands a certain use through its function. *Nargile* smoking demands certain environmental and social conditions as part of its ritual. "It takes about an hour to smoke a pipeful of fruit tobacco, two hours for the stronger stuff."⁶ It is not a fast process, on the contrary, it demands time and a certain state of mind or being. There is a saying that, for an ideal experience of a *nargile*, that is, *masa*, *mese*, *köse*, *Ayşe*, which could be translated (without the rhyme) as: tongs, oak, corner, and *Ayşe*, (a woman's name). Tongs refer to the adjustment of the fire burning the tobacco; oak refers to the kind of charcoal to be used to get the best efficiency; corner implies that the one who smokes a *nargile* prefers somewhere out of the way, and peaceful; and *Ayşe* symbolizes the ability and rapidness of the one who serves.⁷

In his essay: "Inhale the Pleasure of an Unhurried Ottoman Past," Kinzer describes the Erzurum Nargile Salon that he visited in Istanbul:

There is not much noise inside. Conversation is only occasional, and always soft. The sound of dominoes being played or backgammon tokens being moved is often all that competes with the soft gurgle of bubbling water. Some patrons work absently on crossword puzzles, and others seem lost in contemplation.⁸

During the reign of Murad IV (1623–1640), people started to smoke *nargiles* in Istanbul.⁹ As Bozyigit describes, the *nargile* was an inevitable element of the old Istanbul coffee houses.¹⁰ Coffee houses are significant in understanding the environment and social atmosphere suitable for the whole act of *nargile* smoking. They were the commercial places, first established in the sixteenth century, providing the social spaces for individuals from different corners of Istanbul to communicate. They fulfilled the needs of passing spare time, amusement, conversation, and other mundane necessities of people; but they also produced and diffused different kinds of cultural worlds.¹¹ It was the social atmosphere of the coffee houses that provided the conditions for sociability. *Nargile* smoking and coffee drinking were the processes that defined this sociability by legitimizing the individuals' existence in the coffee houses. With the advent of the coffee houses in neighborhoods, the traditionally introvert-shaped lives of people whose activities were confined to their private dwellings

- 5 Ali Esat Bozyigit, "Nargile," *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi*, (Encyclopedia of Istanbul from Yesterday to Today), Vol. 6, N. Akbayar, et al., eds. (Istanbul: Kültür Bakanlığı, Türkiye Ekonomik ve Toplumsal Tarih Vakfı, 1993): 45–46.
- 6 Stephen Kinzer, "Inhale the Pleasure of an Unhurried Ottoman Past" *New York Times* (June 10, 1997).
- 7 Burçak Evren, *Ottoman Craftsmen and Their Guilds* (Istanbul: Dogan, 1999).
- 8 Stephen Kinzer, "Inhale the Pleasure of an Unhurried Ottoman Past."
- 9 Burçak Evren, *Ottoman Craftsmen and their Guilds*.
- 10 Ali Esat Bozyigit, "Nargile."
- 11 Ekrem İsin, "Kahvehaneler" ("Coffee Houses"), *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi* (Encyclopedia of Istanbul from Yesterday to Today), Vol. 4, N. Akbayar, et al., eds. (Istanbul: Kültür Bakanlığı, Türkiye Ekonomik ve Toplumsal Tarih Vakfı, 1993), 386–392.

and religious places (mosque) started to change. Gradually, coffee houses became centers for political discussion in which not only the elite, but also ordinary people, participated. Previously located around religious places where an *imam* was in charge by his unidirectional speech, in time these centers shifted to the coffee houses. Therefore, common participation increased and even cultural sharing developed. People who shared the same culture, but belonged to different social groups, came together in these coffee houses and formed community structures in which they organized their common activities.¹²

The meaning and social significance of coffee houses, as well as the activities in these places, have changed over time. Hence, coffee houses are still meeting points for certain groups of people. Going back to Kinzer's observations of the Erzurum Nargile Salon:

Smoking a *nargile* is nothing like smoking a cigarette. A seventy-one-year-old pensioner named Ismet Ertep said, as he looked up from his pipe, "Cigarettes are for nervous people, people on the run." When you smoke a *nargile*, you have time to think. It teaches you patience and tolerance, and gives you an appreciation of good company. *Nargile* smokers have a much more balanced approach to life than cigarette smokers.¹³

Apart from being a social phenomenon, the *nargile* always has been a symbol of the "Orient." Looking at some nineteenth century paintings, it is easy to observe that people were depicted as smoking a *nargile* while resting in *sedirs*; or that nargile-smoking harem women were depicted as daydreaming in fully furnished rooms with a lot of carpets and draperies of curtains. There might be several reasons for the choice of the *nargile* as a symbol for the oriental experience. First of all, it is an object of mystery in the sense that it combines the ephemerality of smoke with water that often is assigned to the unconscious. It is water that keeps the secrets of what lies beneath. Smoke, on the other hand, always has been associated with the spiritual. It is not a physical substance, and its positive existence can not be frozen as it comes out and disappears into the air. Therefore, the main aim of this paper is to look at the *nargile* as an object of Eastern conception, and to discuss the ways in which the existence and sustainability of a particular object is determined or dictated through its use. If we go back to the ritual of using a *nargile* within the context of coffee houses that determine the leisure activities of a community of people, one can argue that the unchanging nature of *nargile*-smoking behavior and the related leisure can be analyzed within the concept of time.

12 Ibid.

13 Stephen Kinzer, "Inhale the Pleasure of an Unhurried Ottoman Past."

Nargile and Time

Lewis Mumford, in *Technics and Civilization*, states:

The clock, not the steam-engine, is the key machine of the modern industrial age. For every phase of its development the clock is both the outstanding fact and the typical symbol of the machine....¹⁴

The clock is the ultimate machine and the forerunner of other machines, both in the sense of introducing rationality, standardization that led to the division of labor, by dividing time into identical components. Mumford differentiates between mechanical and organic time. He says that the clock has created a mechanical sense of time that is different from the organic that can be associated with the growing of hair, the time between sowing and harvest, or from birth to death. By contrasting these two terms, he differentiates the abstract conception of time, which is mechanical and manipulative, from the organic conception of time, which is linear and cumulative in its effects.¹⁵

The Eastern conception of time can be associated with an organic understanding. Long before the object of time had been turned into a mechanical tool in Europe, one of the oldest and most sophisticated clocks was constructed in China in the eleventh century. It was more like a mechanical calendar rather than a mere clock, because it used water power and displayed and represented astronomical time.¹⁶ It was designed to mimic the movements of the planets. The difference is that, while the European conception of time is to control, the Chinese version is to move with it. This is not to say that "East" is the "Other," which is defined as "the different *from*," but to suggest that the cultural forms are and can be seen and read as the outcomes of particular mental concepts, which cannot be put into a hierarchical order or in relationship of superiority or inferiority.

In order to understand the slowness of *nargile* smoking, and the act of sitting in coffee houses for hours, one should first understand and feel the concept of time and the daily life experiences that are intermingled in the fabric of the culture in question.

The sensuous involvement natural to cultures in which literacy is not the ruling form of experience is sometimes indicated in travel guides, as in this item from a guide to Greece: "You will notice that many Greek men seem to spend a lot of time counting the beads of what appear to be amber rosaries. But these have no religious significance. They are *komboloia*or "worry beads," a legacy from the Turks, and Greeks click them on land, on the sea, in the air to ward off that insupportable silence which threatens to reign whenever conversation lags."¹⁷

14 Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, 14–15.

15 Ibid.

16 Jean Gimpel, *The Medieval Machine: The Industrial Revolution of the Middle Ages* (London: Pimlico, 1988).

17 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge, 1964), 78.

As McLuhan quotes, the gesture involved in clicking worry beads is similar to the one required by *nargile* smoking, and it suggests a same kind of duration in relation to positioning to the outer world. Not only belonging to the Islamic tradition, rosaries are also used in “Roman Catholic religious practice that consists of saying the set of prayers that are counted in this way, while thinking holy thoughts.”¹⁸ This function is similar and can be seen in East Asian religions, as well as in Orthodox, Protestant, or Jewish traditions. The basic difference between Turkish and Greek “rosaries” is that they not only have a religious significance, but also have become a companion, especially for men, in daily life.¹⁹

The clicking of beads, as an everyday activity, demands a gesture that depends on repetition. The repetitive movement of clicking could be read as the accompanying of the passing of time, but not rushing, counting, or fighting against its passing. It is the peaceful and obedient company of the flow of time. The *nargile* can be thought of as the instrument of the Eastern way of consuming time, or timekeeping. It is like an instrument that is played, with the act of inhalation of *time* through water, and then giving it back to the world through the ever changing density of the smoke. The inevitability of existence is justified and repeated in every click and breath.

Resistance?

Today, the *nargile* salon that Kinzer has visited is still there, under the Fındıklı Mosque, near the American Bazaar at Tophane. But today there are a series of salons, side by side. People of different age groups, tourists, youngsters with jeans, artists with their books, retired men with thick and brown eyeglasses, boys and girls—they all sit there and drink their tea and draw in the filtered tobacco smoke, as well as the atmosphere that is created by the stone walls of the neighboring mosque and the diversity of the community that they are a part of. The interesting part of the scenery is that, on the same line with the salons, there are shops selling Donna Karan t-shirts, Versace jeans, Timberland shoes and boots—all original at full price—under the glowing illumination of the shiny bands of fluorescent lights. This place provides a hybrid combination in terms of the space-time duality of societal modernization. It can be called eclectic more than hybrid, because of the spatial articulation of two differently lived and experienced modalities of time; one is the imagined and obedient time of the *nargile*; the other is the shops selling sign-values of famous brands. This place, by being next to the capitalist formations of modernity, becomes a space of resistance. A resistance which is stubborn with the unchanged, historical, and even authentic use of the object *nargile*. These people go to the *nargile* salon to slow down their spirits, within the pace of the economy of their daily lives.

18 *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, Paul Procter, ed. (Harlow and London, Longman, 1978), 965.

19 Burçak Evren, *Ottoman Craftsmen and Their Guilds*.



Figure 2

A view of a coffee house.

(<http://www.milliyet.com.tr/ekler/vitrin/19990417/August 2202>).

What is specific about the *nargile* is that almost no new versions or designs of it are being used in these coffee houses. The archetypal object, with its complicated silhouette and basic working principle, is accepted as it is. Furthermore, the more the object reminds us of an historical entity, with references to the oriental or Ottoman contours and lines the closer it gets to the idea of preservation of an essence about it. This objective resistance to change also becomes the symbol of resistance to modernity itself. It becomes an aesthetic as well as a cultural response. It defines its own space, time, and *habitus*, with its rituals and positioning towards life, with its own distinctive style, whose traces are visible on the object itself. The object is stable, and it requires a similar gesture from the user. The subject of the *nargile* is the fixed, unmoving, staying and waiting person—unlike the wandering *flaneur*. Most of the time, this act of stopping is accompanied by an act of looking, watching, and sometimes reading. It should be noted that this is not a spare time activity. There is no expected rational or instrumental outcome of the whole experience of the *nargile*. It is the anchor of the human body, within the rushing, competing, and alienating forces of modernity. And it is an anchor in the sense that it ties the body to the mainland of a different space and time, or just to the possibility of it.



Figure 3

Display of a *nargile* sales corner (photo: Sebnun Timur).

Time and Body

Combined with the concept of time, *nargile* smoking is a bodily experience. It is an activity that situates the body in space and time in an act of remaining in the stillness of the stay. As Game says, “to be in the body is to be in time.”²⁰ Inhaling time with the body is the kind of bodily experience that a *nargile* offers. It also is visual; the movement is actualized in the movement of the water, indicating that something invisible is passing through. It demands a certain slowness against the mechanically accelerated pace of life.

“... what he says is a deceptively simple example of duration: sugar melting in water. ‘I must wait until the sugar melts.’ There is my duration, and that of the sugar melting; and a waiting.²¹ Duration is a waiting, a deferral, and a mixing of systems, for which we could read intertextuality.”²² Here, we could talk about the burning of the charcoal; the stillness of the water, and the permeability of it as a medium for the air to go through; the yielding smoke and finally the sitting body operating, controlling, and acting with the whole system—the act of waiting; waiting with time, not against it; and not by rushing, competing, or trying to count it.

Conclusion: Quest for the “Lost” Object

Finally, I want to tie this argument to where my friends and I started; to the drive for our quest for the object of *nargile*. Esra Akcan, in her essay “The Melancholy of the ‘Other’ World...,” mentions Freud’s distinction between mourning and melancholy.²³ She says that Freud defined the object of melancholy as a loss whose sorrow does not last, and the subject of melancholy as someone who resists accepting the loss by trying to preserve it under the house of his/her being. This loss can be a thing, a person, or an ideal. In mourning, the subject faces the loss and, after a period of grief, overcomes it. But in melancholy the subject is so tied to the lost object that he/she makes it a part of himself/herself.

Akcan takes this concept of melancholy and associates it with the East/West dichotomy. She positions the East as the melancholic subject who has lost the natural right to be a part of “being universal” that is one of the basic discourses of Western modernism. According to this view, by being “non-Western,” the East has lost something from the start. Will the East enjoy its local values, or try to become universal within the modernist codes? This question reminds us of one of the inner contradictions of the local/global discussion.

So, extending this argument to our quest for the lost object of *nargile*, I can argue that the kind of mood that drives the modern subjects of the East to the symbolic world of the *nargile*, is a melancholic one. It is like trying to open up a space, both personal and local, within the global mechanisms of modernity. This is what makes a new design for a *nargile* very difficult. Preserving or even regenerating a lost object is the key element here. The revival of a lost tradition can be seen as a symbol of resistance to modernity; if

20 Ann Game, *Undoing the Social: Towards a Deconstructive Sociology* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1991), 95.

21 H. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, A. Mitchell, translator (London, Macmillan, [1907] 1913), 10.

22 Game, *Undoing the Social: Towards a Deconstructive Sociology*, 99.

23 Esra Akcan, “The Melancholy of the ‘Other’ World: Bruno Taut in the ‘East,’” “Domus m: architecture, design, art, communication” issue of “*Other*” *Geographies under Globalization* (February/March 2001) (Istanbul: 1Numara Hearst).

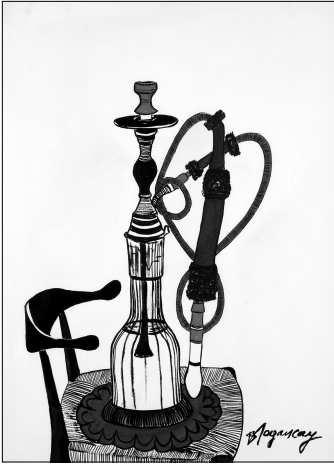


Figure 4

"Water Pipe" by Burhan Dogancay, 1963
76 x 56 cm (Gouache on paper) from the
Dr. Nejat F. Eczacıbası Vakfı Collection.
Permission of the artist.

we associate modernity with the rise of industrial capitalism; the creation of commodities; a consumer culture; its desire-creating mechanisms and if we associate the modern subject with his/her problematic sense of identity in this world construct. The whole ritual has been going on in its own slow and silent way through the course of history. People's interest in this practice is significant to understand the mechanisms of tradition, modernity, and identity with respect to a specific object.

As Chaney argues, "Being a member of a culture is having at hand the conventions of performance framing particular and characteristic ways of using objects and environments"²⁴ In the case of *nargile* smoking, the particular ways of using the objects and environments could be tied to the assumption that "the experience is shared in the act." As Jarman quotes, "... it is the active participation in ritual events that is the significant means of encoding social memory into the individual body."²⁵ Therefore, being a part of the ritual and experiencing it is different from merely knowing it. The fact is talking on a mobile phone while smoking does not change the fact that the person is wired—with the *marpuç*—to the historical, cultural, and any other motive that shaped or created the circumstances, customs, or traditions of a shared past. It is like the metaphor of an actual bond, both to the object itself and also to all of the values it represents or that it is thought to be a part of.

Besides providing a particular use within a particular environment, a *nargile*, in its entirety, is a specific object. The *nargile* is repeated in terms of its visual qualities, during its production in time. This is not to say that it has not undergone any changes. Of course, an historical study of the changes of the *nargile* over the course of time would show these differences—which obviously is not the aim of this study—but in terms of a visual expression it looks as if it belongs to an historical cross-section that is mimicked for the sake of preserving a sense of origin or essence about it. This imaginary essentialism is what makes the *nargile* more static and resistant to change. The closer to an imaginary model it becomes, the stronger its ties to a "lost" space and time that we want or imagine to be a part of or experience.

24 David Chaney, *Lifestyles* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 147.

25 Neil Jarman, *Material Conflicts: Parades and Visual Displays in Northern Ireland* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1997), 8.