

Preface

We all use and consume gum Arabic every day. It is irreplaceable in soft drinks. It is a key ingredient in inks and paints, it sticks the coating on glossy magazines and the chocolate pastilles that melt in your mouth but not in your hand. It is used in cosmetics and gel capsules, in lithography, and to form chunks of cat food and fertilizer. It is a component of matches and explosives. It is added to milk to make it creamy, to vegetarian meat to make it tender, to wine to make it clear, and to beer to make it foam. It helps make jams and cream-cheese thick and chocolate high in fibre but low in calories. It is even found in toothpaste and in the glue used for dentures. It turns up in stock cubes, instant-dessert powders, laxatives, tobacco, icing and ice-cream, sweets and insecticides.

And gum Arabic turns up rather a lot in history. Some of the most significant events in history – the development of cursive script, the industrial revolution, the insights of Adam Smith, the moment when the first African representative (from Senegal) was delegated to the French Assemblée législative – would have turned out quite differently without the role played by gum Arabic.

For me gum Arabic does even more. It has lured me to the places where I most like to be, from Mauritania to Sudan, from the shade of *boukarous* in the Sahel to dimly lit archives in cities from London to Dakar. The more I have asked about it, the more fascinating it has become. The closer I got to its source, the more I found that it is hidden, both by people and by nature.

The tears of two species of acacia have been called gum Arabic since the middle ages, even in the Arab world, where *samgh arabi* was used as an ingredient in ink and hair pomade, among other things.¹ The acacias that exude gum Arabic do not grow on Arabian soil, but it

was in Arabian ports that European crusaders and merchants bought it, and brought it to Italy and France. Ever since, gum Arabic has reflected our view of the Arab world, its second fascinating aspect.

Until the sixteenth century, the Arab-Islamic world was largely unknown in Europe, although Muslim empires reached from North Africa and al-Andalus, Syria, and Ottoman Turkey to Persia and India. When the “Turcs” conquered Christian Constantinople in 1453 and laid siege to Vienna in 1529, their strength and determination seemed unlimited. In Shakespeare’s day, Arabs were described as utter brutes but also as highly sophisticated, disciplined and models of piety. Europeans feared them and at the same time ascribed to them the virtues they thought were fading in the West. Gum Arabic symbolised to them the wonders and graces of the Levant. Then more traders, diplomats, scholars and adventurers started to travel to the Arab world and to come back with manuscripts, contracts and their observations. In the same era, Ottoman power started to crumble. When Vienna withstood a second Ottoman siege in 1683, it was a triumph that tipped the scales. Europe had come to grips with the threat from the East and, with the knowledge of its seafarers, scholars and geographical societies, began to build the foundations of its own colonial empires.

However, while European countries came to dominate a good part of the globe, they could not get a hold on gum Arabic. This was all the more frustrating because this specific type of gum was becoming indispensable for many manufactures. But even when it turned out to be available close to Europe, near the coast of West Africa, it always escaped; or, rather, the Arab or Berber inhabitants who supplied it kept escaping the logic, the “gifts” and the obsession of its pursuers. Again, that became a metaphor for one type of experience that Europeans had with the Orient in general. Gum Arabic came to represent the mystery of what was thought of as “the Oriental mind”. Later, when colonial governments in the Sahel region organised the production of cotton, peanuts and other crops for European use, they found that it was impossible to do the same for gum Arabic.

Even today, it is difficult to get a grip on gum Arabic, because it is impossible to reproduce artificially. Therefore, the modern food

industry, which is increasingly dependent on this ingredient from the desert, still depends on the willingness of inhabitants of the Sahel to collect it. In 2001, after the attack on the Twin Towers, consumers discovered a connection between Osama bin Laden and the tears of the Acacia and then between gum and their own lives, and they realised they were condemned to the villain. The meaning of gum Arabic shifted again, from mysterious to obscure. On the global market, the name was even changed and some importers now speak of Acacia gum. But gum is elastic, it adapts. New qualities have been discovered that increase its value in the modern world, as a prebiotic ingredient and a commodity that can help sustainable development in the Sahel.



Over the years I have thought about what it is that draws me to gum Arabic, and I have come to realise that that is its very ineffability – the fact that it cannot be drawn into some standard logic of production and consumption, is not readily susceptible of economic analysis under any standard model, and has yet to give up all of the secrets of its chemical composition. I embrace its mystery as the rational excuse to investigate what is fundamentally different. In fact, my research has led me to new questions in a part of the world that I first encountered as a development worker, and it has shown me the same world again, only this time upside down.

Many people have shared with me their knowledge about gum, their sense of wonder, and sometimes a secret or two, and I am grateful to them all. Among them are Arvid Meersman of Caldic, without whose help I might not have begun writing this book; Dr. Isam Sidig and his family who showed me exceptional hospitality in Khartoum; Violaine Fauvarque, Frédéric Alland and Charles Alland of Alland & Robert, the world's second largest transformer and distributor of gum Arabic (or Acacia gum), have generously shared stories, explanations and pictures with me from their long history in the field of gum. I also thank the secretary-general of the Gum Arabic Board of Sudan Dr Abdelmagid al-Qadir for the information he has shared. In Chad, the stories of Ali Mbodou Langa, Hamid Moussa Ibedou,

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I dedicate this book to the memory of Halime Kerim.