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#### A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF KHAMR DRINKING IN THE MALAYSIAN MALAY SOCIETIES

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#### *Abstract*

The practice of *khamr* drinking during the pre-Islamic era in the Malay world is considered as part of tradition among the Malays and brought multiple social meanings. However, the arrival of Islam to the most regions in the Malay world, Malays are significantly known as Muslims who must refrain themselves from being *khamr* drinkers. Since then, drinking is seen as social deviance in the Malay society. The Malay Peninsular and later became Malaysia, at the time of pre- and post-colonisation introduced laws classifying *khamr* as one of the controlled substances. From the Malaysia context, Islam is gazetted as the official religion, Islamic laws were implemented explicitly on the issues of *khamr* among the Malays. Therefore, this paper aims to illustrate the scenario on *khamr* drinking in the Malaysian Malay society during and after the British ruling. Data was collected through library research, observation and interviews with related individuals and agencies pertaining to problems and issues regarding drinking in Malaysia and cases that involved the Malays. The main finding of this research is that the drinking culture among the Malaysian Malays was widely influenced by the British due to the effects of colonization that have been absorbed in the government system. The Malay drinkers are from upper, middle and lower classes. This scenario is considered as essential key points in order to study the background profile of the Malay drinkers and social factors that led them to be involved in *khamr* drinking.

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## 1. Introduction

*Khamr* is an Arabic term which refers to any liquid that comes from any source of ingredients that contains ethanol and is able to cause intoxication. It is an intoxicating alcoholic beverage which can be of any type and any brand. *Khamr* drinking is a part of social tradition all over the world included in the Malay societies. Traditionally, the drinkers among the Malays can be divided into the royal class and the citizens (*rakyat*). The drinking culture among the royal class, which included the related ruling class that was closed to the royal families, was traced in several Malay classical literatures.

In *Sulalatus Salatin*, the author illustrated that *khamr* drinking was part of the tradition for people in the palace who were either kings themselves or the ruling classes who were closely related to royal families. For example, Seri Rama was served with *khamr* in a copper bronze cup as asked by Sultan because Seri Rama was well known as a drinker (Ahmat, 2016). *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* illustrates the drinking culture of Raja Phra Ong Mahawangsa who usually drank after waking up in early morning before he converted into Islam through Syeikh Abdullah Yamani (Siti Hawa, 1998). In *Hikayat Raja Pasai*, the word '*arak api*' was used as an elephant name. At that time, elephants were recognized as a symbol of eminence for a country (Russell, 1999). The naming of such a good property as '*arak api*' represented *arak* as something special to them and reflected certain meaning (Russell, 1999).

The Malays as Austronesian speakers in the earlier ages, engaged with Indians who closely follow the doctrine of Buddhism and Hinduism. Indian emergence into the Malay world had indeed become integrated with the concept of 'being Malay' culturally and commercially through trading. Then, the coming of Islam brought dramatic changes into the Malays life that contradicted with the Indian culture (Andaya & Andaya, 2017; Milner, 2011). Therefore, drinking *khamr* is considered as deviating not only from the Islamic teaching but also from the norms as Malays since Islam prohibited the *khamr*. Those changes involved daily diet in which they are prohibited from drinking *khamr* and eating pork that was gradually adopted for over five or six centuries (Milner, 2011).

The arrival of the colonial in the peninsular changed the value of *khamr* drinking. Drinking was seen as a practice for civilized people. Drinking *khamr* became a symbol of civilization and modernization. It was seen as a noble drink in the society and those that did not drink it would be scorned (Ali Surjani, 1954). Andaya and Andaya (2017) revealed that Tengku Kudin (Kelang) pursued the civilized reputation by adopting the English way of life by drinking sherry (strong wine) even though it deviated from the Islamic teaching. For some of the Malay rulers, civilized people were the ones who adapted to, and accepted as a role model, the English law, English government and English lifestyle. This was what civilization meant for them. The western culture was considered the superior culture in the Malay society during the era of colonization particularly during the British time. Mohammad Redzuan (2018) stated that even though colonisation causes the Malay to lose their political power, they did not lose their faith. However, that faith is seen clashed with the real practice (shari'ah) aspect for some of the Malays who involving in *khamr* drinking practices. Based on that situation, how is the reality of *khamr* drinking phenomena involving the Malays in Malaysia?

## 2. Problem Statement

Swettenham (1895) wrote that the real Malays 'never drinks intoxicant' (p. 3) and 'there is no drunken husband' (p. 9) in the Malay families. Syed Hussein (2010) also mentioned that one of the good sides of a Malay is 'never a drunkard' (p. 74). Likewise, Mahathir (2000) in his speech remarked that *Melayu Baru bukan kaki minum arak* (The New Malays are not drinkers').

However, Nordin (1975), claimed that *khamr* was a common drink in the Malay royal ceremonies, parties and events. Mohd Mokhtar (interviewed on 30 October 2017) and Syed Hussein Al-Attas which also known as Pak Habib (interviewed on 22 December 2018) also admitted that they witnessed the practice of drinking among the royal families since both of them used to work under several *sultans* closely. Drinking did not just involve high class Malays. According to Parameswari (2014), some of the Malays who worked as plantation coolies drank toddy in small amount to release fatigue and to boost their energy so that they could handle heavy work. According to Hasbullah (1988) *khamr* drinking among Muslims was discovered after the Islamic religious department for each state in Malaysia held a move to eradicate immoral activities. Although the Islamic religious department was established in 1915 in Kelantan, the implementation of the enactment of the *shari'ah*, the criminal code, has already started around 1990s in most of the states in Malaysia.

In Malaysia, there is no specific organization or institution that provides in-depth data specifically on *khamr* cases. Previously, there were two organizations which focused specifically on drinking problems in Malaysia; (1) Pusat Anti Alcoholism Malaysia (PAAM) or Anti Alcoholism Centre Malaysia (Pusat Anti Alkoholik Malaysia, 1985) and (2) Yayasan Alkohol Malaysia (1992). To date, the researcher has not been able to trace these two organizations. The researcher found the data only in national archive and health reports which provided drinking records of various races including Malay.

Jabatan Agama Islam Malaysia (JAKIM), in coordination with the law department, reported that *shari'ah* crime offenses throughout Malaysia from 2011 to 2014 comprised as many as 1,746 cases of *khamr* drinking (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, 2015). The statistics show that the number of *khamr* cases of Muslims in Malaysia is still at an alarming stage. Mohd Izwan (interviewed on 22 November 2016) believed that the actual numbers of Muslim drinkers particularly among the Malays were the highest based on unrecorded cases involving other related *shari'ah* crimes such as *khalwah*, adultery, free sex, and lesbian gay bisexual and transgender (LGBT). Cases involving elite Malay groups remained unrecorded as instructed by people from that group who possess some power in the society. Thus, the number of recorded cases handled by the religious departments all over Malaysia does not show the actual number of *khamr* cases. Further, the unrecorded cases are quite challenging to trace. Data from the enforcement unit of religious departments remain confidential since these cases are related to the *shari'ah* court procedure and there are ethical issues in securing the identity of drinkers. As a result, a detailed profile of drinkers is still unavailable.

The statement above strongly indicated the uncertain and limited data about the Malay drinkers. Therefore, a need to identify and understand the scenario and phenomenon of drinking culture among the Malay in Malaysia. Such understanding is important before studying any issues related to the behaviours of drinkers.

### 3. Research Questions

How is the scenario of *khamr* drinking among the Malays in Malaysia?

### 4. Purpose of the Study

To illustrate the scenario of *khamr* drinking among the Malays in Malaysia.

### 5. Research Methods

Data was collected through library study, direct observation and interviews. It was analysed according to qualitative narrative designs. The library study included document analysis which inspected printed and electronic written data as well as video and audio data that consist of information about drinking practices in the Malay society in the Malaysian context. Some of the documents are primary documents which contain written statements about individuals and society who experienced the phenomenon (drinking) by themselves. The rest of the documents are secondary documents that contain significant information from other individuals or society who had experienced and witnessed the phenomenon. Examples of these primary documents are the writings of biography and autobiography, historical manuscripts and true short stories. Secondary data such as statistics and findings from relevant institutions and organizations included reports, letters, meeting minutes and newspapers. The researcher also referred to thesis, journal articles and academic books as well as popular books, magazines and newspapers for related information that is useful. For direct observation, the researcher investigated the drinking scenario as a member in the society. The researcher went to several clubs and places that served *khamr* to experience and observe the environment. As for the interviews, the researcher interviewed several related informants who could give information about the problems and issues regarding drinking in Malaysia and the cases that involved the Malays. They consisted of officers from multiple government and non-government agencies. The other types of informants were individuals who worked as reporters, writers, authors, researchers, armies and activists.

### 6. Findings

Syed Hussein (2008) categorized the Malays as Muslims who can be divided into three categories. The first are those that have a strong belief in and practice the Islamic teachings. The second are those that do not practice Islam and just understand Islam at the surface level even though they were born as Muslims, and they get emotionally disturbed when Islam is criticised. The third are those who claimed that they are Muslims but do not understand Islam at all. He added that the practice of Islamic teachings has become a culture in the form of rituals and ceremonies rather than philosophy and doctrine. The influence of the western system affects the values and lifestyle of individuals and groups in the upper and middle classes, especially those in the urban area. He argued that urbanization impacts on the lifestyle of the minority group of Malays who do not strongly obey religious values. This group of Malays can be seen drinking *khamr* in a coffee shop or hotel and practicing gambling in an amusement park (small scale) or in Genting Highland (large scale).

Nordin (1975) claimed that the Malay elite class who was culturally westernised by colonials recognized drinkers as 'civilized' and 'respected' people. Drinking was their hobby during leisure time in night clubs and bars. In addition, during special events or 'drinking ceremonial' that took longer in which wine was specifically served, they offered *khamr* to their guests as special drinks.

Tunku Abdul Rahman (the first Prime Minister of Malaysia), was one example that represented the upper class as a royal family and politician. Abdullah (2017) in his book 'Conversation with Tunku Abdul Rahman' wrote and described Tunku as an open-minded person who openly admitted that he enjoyed drinking *khamr* like liquor and wine during and after meals. Tunku even classified those Muslims who do not drink *khamr* as an orthodox group but not fundamentalist because he believed that all believers were fundamentalists but not all were orthodox. Tunku admitted to King Faisal (Saudi Arabia) that he was not a suitable person to be a secretary-general of the Organization of the Islamic Conference because he was involved in many contradicting cultures as Muslims such as drinking and gambling. He also described himself as a playboy. For Tunku, *khamr* is like a thick tea for him. However, he claimed to be a religious man that performed *solāh*, fasted in the month of Ramadan, paid *zakāh* and even went to Makkah for pilgrimage. He verbally admitted all these because he did not want to be a hypocrite prime minister and believed that Allah was the only one who could judge him (Abdullah, 2017).

Jeshurun (2007) recorded in his writing that Tunku Abdul Rahman solved a diplomacy issue by offering drinks and giving presents at a party at the residency. Tunku even ignored the issue raised by the late speaker of parliament, Mohamed Asri, who revealed that *khamr* was being served at diplomatic functions during Malaysian overseas missions.

Alattas (1990) mentioned that he witnessed the royal families enjoying their drinks in Pub Brass Grill, which was nearby his office. He also stated that during that time, the Malays made drinking as an alternative way to unwind and relax. Pub Brass Grill was owned by a Malay in the area of Medan Tuanku. It was a favourite place for the royal families and their friends. The other nightclubs that were owned by the Malays were Greenmaids and Tropikana.

Alattas (1990) also shared the story written by Akhdiat Mirhaja on '*Dari Istana ke Bilik Suluk*'. This story is about Almarhum Perak Sultan, who confessed all his wrongdoings as a Muslim including drinking. He finally repented and ended his life after becoming a Muslim who sincerely practices Islamic teaching. To verify the story, the researcher met Akhdiat Mirhaja (interviewed on 30 October 2017). He admitted that the story was based on his conversation with Almarhum Sultan and he recorded it in the form of a story after the Almarhum Sultan passed away.

Almarhum Sultan, who was the leader of Islam in Perak at that time, made a self-reflection after returning from umrah in Mecca. As a leader of Islam in his state, he felt extremely guilty for being a hypocrite Sultan. However, before he died, he had stopped drinking *khamr* and just enjoyed drinking Chinese tea instead. The Sultan eventually died of heart attack, but due to some political crisis in Perak, his death was falsely reported as being caused by heavy drinking.

Akhdiat Mirhaja himself witnessed that the Sultan had stopped drinking *khamr* and just enjoyed drinking tea. In fact, the sultan also died after drinking a Chinese tea in a ceremony. In that ceremony, there was a variety of *khamr*, but the Sultan had asked his workers to prepare tea for him so that his drink would look like the colour of *khamr* to avoid looking strange or odd among others his guests. This shows that

drinking was a real common practice among the upper class. Those who did not want to drink *khamr* had to pretend by ordering drinks that had the same colour (Alattas, 1990).

During the two confessions made by the Sultan as quoted above, in the palace at the ground floor level, there was a party and all his royal servants enjoyed drinking and dancing during the ceremony held for the Sultan who just got back from Mecca. The Sultan forbade everyone from entering his room and he just wanted to stay with Akhdiat Mirhaja who he considered an *ulama* and a religious expert even though the Sultan had another official *mufi*. He just wanted to reflect on himself. He was so scared and wondered if Allah would accept his repentance. Akhdiat Mirhaja explained to him about Allah's mercifulness and gave him some strength. He read a Quran with English translation while Akhdiat Mirhaja explained to him what it meant.

In addition to the royal families, *khamr* drinking was common in some government agencies. One example is Institut Tadbiran Awam Negara (INTAN) or National Institute of Public Administration. It is a training centre managed by the Public Service Department. From a social context, INTAN acts as an institution that upgrades the lower-class Malays to the upper middle class such as Malaysian Civil Service (MCS) and ambassadors. It was set up in 1972. It began as a modest training centre at Port Dickson in September 1959 and was known then as the Staff Training Centre.

In 1991, INTAN published a book on glossary of terms for public executives which contained cocktail etiquette. In that book, cocktail is defined as 'a type of reception in which only drinks and snacks are served, and the guests normally only stand'. A cocktail party is an effective time for public executives to get along or mingle with others in the form of business, entertainment and meetings. In cocktail parties, *khamr* was served. Thus, they had to slow down the absorption of *khamr* with oily food that was intentionally served together for that purpose (INTAN, 1991).

Nordin (1975) added that to be close with the public, they were trained with Islamic teaching such as praying, reciting the *du'a* and how to be an imam or the leader in *solāh*. However, to get closer to the locals and international people of different races from the upper class, they were trained with ethical values and one of them was formal dining etiquettes so that they will be acknowledged and seen as potential persons.

The formal dining etiquettes were divided into four levels that begin with a pre-dinner drink. In the pre-dinner drink, they learned about appetisers and aperitif. The aperitif consisted of a variety of *khamr* such as sherry, vermouth, flavoured wine and port wine. There were also mixed drinks such as gin-tonic, whisky soda, whisky water, brandy dry ginger ale and vodka lime. They were also taught certain terms that refer to mixed drinks such as screwdriver, bloody Mary and punch. Each drink required different glasses that represented the type of *khamr* consumed.

During a formal dinner, they were advised to order *khamr* according to type of courses that were being served. If the course is fish and chicken, they should call for wine such as Chablis, rhine wine and sauterne. If the course is steak, they should ask for red wine such as burgundy, claret and rose. Then, in the fifth course, they had to, or forced to, drink other types of *khamr* such as cherry brandy, apricot brandy, drambuie and champagne. In short, the public executives must learn drinking ethics to join the upper-class group as an unwritten requirement for the recognition that they belong to that group.

Nordin (1975) who specifically studied the lifestyle of MCS, also recorded that some of the MCS served *khamr* at their home when they hosted a meal. During meal time, they would have wine for lunch. For dinner, the drinking event might take longer. As soon as the guests arrived, they would be asked ‘what’s your beer, whisky, brandy?’ and they continued drinking after the dinner was over. Nordin (1975) observed that there was a clash between the public and private cultures that this group of people chose to show. In other words, in front of the public, they pretended to love the Malay culture that is equal to Islamic culture such as reciting *du’a* and performing *solah*, but behind the public or in private, they enjoyed drinking.

Another government organization that has been found to practice *khamr* drinking is the University of Malaya (UM) in Kuala Lumpur. It is the only university in Malaysia that still provides a club for his staff for recreation especially for drinking *khamr*. It is purposely located outside the campus but in the university’s land area. This facility is used by some of the Malay UM’s staff. The researcher interviewed two club representatives inside the club. One of the members of that club, a non-Malay and non-Muslim lecturer (synonymous name, Tan, interviewed on 10 April 2018), said that the Malay club members, who were his friends, were liberal Muslims that had an open-minded attitude and different perspectives on beliefs and practices. They enjoyed drinking together, spending time and feeling comfortable between each other even though they were different in terms of culture and faith. During that interview, one Malay man who just arrived at that club could be seen enjoying his drink. The researcher was informed that the man was one of the academic staffs in UM that produced several high impact researches for the nation. The representative of that club also showed some photos to prove that there were many Malay lecturers who were also members of that club.

In addition, the opening of Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes (NAAFI) in Singapore had facilitated the supply of *khamr* to the Malays particularly among the armies. NAAFI was created by the British Government in 1921. NAAFI Britannia Club was opened in 1952 in Singapore and in 1961 in Melaka. NAAFI was like a shop and a recreational hub that supplied goods that were needed by the armies and their families that included a variety of *khamr* at a lower price as compared to the outside market (British Pathe, 1961; NAAFI, 2018). *Khamr* drinking was also common in the army. The Malaysian army has a facility in their camp called NAAFI, which offered *khamr* at a cheap price, as shared by Pak Habib (interviewed on 22 December 2018). In the past, *khamr* drinking was part of the army’s culture. When an individual joined the army, they would automatically become drinkers. The same goes to majority of lawyers and journalists.

Habib also shared that those who were from English schools were exposed to drinking and English culture. He even shared his experience of being indoctrinated by the British culture and thinking like a British. In addition, as stated by Andaya and Andaya (2017) the Malay Administrative Service co-opted into the British system and emulated the British lifestyle. The British education system through the establishment of English schools acted as a doctrine to uphold the colony’s ideology (gold, gospel and glory). Ali Surjani (1954) criticised and expressed his disappointment regarding the drinking practices. He was concerned about the people during his time who were acknowledged and respected for their knowledge about Islam and had been called as religious teacher but did not want to miss drinking *khamr*. They were confused about the definition of *khamr* and other related terms and characteristics of the drink that are related to Islamic *fiqh*.

The practice of *khamr* drinking was also common among the youth in Malaysia. Kortteinen (2008) found through his research assistance that Malay youth from the middle-class families, drank in pubs, bars and discos. They commonly mixed *khamr* with coke or orange juice to avoid it looking like *khamr* and drank in public. That practice was disapproved by their Malay friends, but they tolerated it in the name of liberalism and modernization. *Khamr* has also been reported to be a tool of bribery. A Chinese fisherman in Kuala Selangor shared that fishermen needed to apply for license in order to cultivate certain species of shrimp that was a bit costly. Thus, as an alternative, Chinese fishermen bribed some of the Malay town officers by treating them with *khamr*, mostly beer, in restaurants during working hours. The Chinese fishermen were shocked to find that Malays took *khamr* during daytime as the Chinese usually drank after working hours. Cases regarding drinking practices among the Malays have been reported in the news in both printed and electronic media, including in YouTube channels which contain many videos on the practice shared by the users. Examples of media reported cases which involved public cases are Kartika Sari Dewi Shukarnor (Archive Utusan Online, 2010) and Haneesya Hanee, the winner of Dewi Remaja 2019 (Nur Asyikin, 2019).

## 7. Conclusion

*Khamr* is part of the British historical legacy in the Malay Peninsula, which has affected the sociocultural aspect of Malaysian Malays massively. For such a long period of time, most of the basic rules, principles and laws that are practiced in Malaysia are still based on the ideologies or legacies left by the British, who had made drinking a common culture. The Malay drinkers in Malaysia involve all classes of social stratification. For the upper and middle classes, drinking is acknowledged as a high and modern standard to be achieved in order to get along with people in the same circle domestically and internationally. Compared to the lower-class Malay drinkers, they practiced drinking due to belief that *khamr* was a 'tonic' to boost energy, as consumed by the Malays in their pre-Islamic time.

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