

ELITE MALAY *KHAMR* DRINKERS IN CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIA: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

In the Malaysian context, the study of khamr has gained minimal attention, and there is a distinct lack of written literature on Malay drinkers, not to mention among the elite, while it remains an ongoing concern. Moreover, studies on khamr, according to the Islamic perspective are fundamentally based on fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the literature on khamr, specifically involving Malay drinkers in Malaysia, by analysing their pattern of behaviour and consolidating the sociological domain in the Islamic framework of the role of social agents and the fiqh of khamr. This study interviewed and applied direct observation of six informants to analyse the reasons that caused them to drink by examining their social background and highlighting the role of their social agents from the Islamic viewpoint. Findings reveal that the informants share common beliefs and values about khamr, recognising its prohibition to Muslims. However, they did not clearly understand the concept of prohibition, thus leading to many misunderstandings about the fiqh of khamr. The reasons for their drinking habits are influenced primarily by peer groups and the government, which did not comply with the shariah, thus leading them to be drinkers.

Keywords: elite Malays, khamr drinkers, alcohol, drinking, Malaysian society

INTRODUCTION

Khamr is an Arabic term that refers to anything that covers or conceals the intellect, essentially beverages containing any source of ingredients that contain ethanol and can cause intoxication, which can be of any type and any brand. *Khamr* is one of the prohibited things in Islam, and any action related to *khamr*, mainly drinking, is considered a major sin. This prohibition is categorised as a fixed law as in Surah Al-Māidah verses 90 and 91 (Ibn Manzur 2003; Al-Qaradawi 2007).

The usage of the Arabic term *khamr* is due to the lack of a suitable term to reflect the nature of that drink. Second, the Arabic word *khamr* defines in detail the word's attitude, representing the drink's detailed characteristic (Phillips 2014; Anis Najiha and Wan Nadiyah 2014).

Khamr drinking was part of a significant tradition in pre-Islamic society among the Malays, as illustrated in Malay manuscripts such as *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* in Siti Hawa (1998), in *Sulalatus Salatin* as arranged by Ahmat (2016) and in *Hikayat Raja Pasai* as illustrated by Jones (1999). Drinking was part of the Malay royal tradition and was not seen as a deviation from the Malay norms. When Islam prevailed in the Malay world in the 15th century, Islam significantly moulded the identity of the Malays by way of Muslim culture (Andaya and Andaya 2017; Milner 2011; Al-Attas 2018). Thus, as Muslims, Malays believe that *khamr* is a prohibited drink and deviated their social norms (Gordon 2001).

Since 1424, Malays have been officially prohibited from drinking *khamr* under the Undang-Undang Melaka law, marked in clause 47 (Liaw 2016). This prohibition, rooted in the Islamic faith, has led to the stigmatisation of drinkers as un-Malay and un-Islamic, making *khamr* consumption a social disorder within the Malay community. Malays, predominantly Muslims, view drinking as a violation of moral norms and a major sin, aligning with Islamic teachings and the Federal Constitution (Article 160) in the Malaysian context (Federal Constitution 2010; Amit, Hasking and Manderson 2012).

However, due to the impact of colonisation, notably by the British who colonised the Malay Peninsula, drinking *khamr* was considered a high-class culture until some Malays recognised it as part of civilisation and modernisation (Andaya and Andaya 2017). It was the common practice among the Malay rulers and the Malay elite class, who were also culturally westernised by the colonialists. Drinking was regarded in high society as being “respectable” and part of social activities at nightclubs and bars. Even more, *khamr* was honoured as a special drink for their

guests during special events known as the “drinking ceremony” that took longer, and wine would be specifically served (Nordin 1975).

Agreeing with Zeitzen (2018), the elite class refers to those in the urban upper middle and upper classes, categorised based on inherited or acquired status involving occupation, residence, economic status, social standing, and family background. Nordin (1975) defines middle-class criteria through career, income, education, wealth, leisure activities, status symbols, interests, and culture. Abdul Rahman (2002) links the middle class to state-led modernisation, industrialisation, and exposure to democratic and modern ideals, making them the most educated class seeking recognition for their views and stances.

Mohd Izwan highlights the underreporting of Malay-Muslim drinkers involved in shariah-related crimes, attributing the discrepancy to unrecorded cases, especially among elite Malay groups.¹ These cases often go unrecorded, hindering justice. Official records handled by religious departments in Malaysia do not accurately represent the number of *khamr* cases, as no specific organisation provides comprehensive data on *khamr*, maintaining confidentiality for a drinker’s identity protection.

Therefore, this research explores why elite-class Malays engage in *khamr* drinking, focusing on those influenced by British culture during pre- and post-independence years in Malaya. The study also examines the Islamic knowledge and understanding levels among elite Malays, particularly in Islamic *ahkām*. Islamic *ahkām* refers to the legal rulings or commands derived from *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence).

Motivated by the lack of literature on *khamr* drinking by Malays in Malaysia, this study aims to address the issue that is often overshadowed by other forms of substance abuse like drugs and smoking (Azizan 2016). Amit, Hasking and Manderson (2012) emphasise the need for the Malaysian government to equally address *khamr* drinking and drug abuse in order to tackle social problems.

History is one of the most significant areas in understanding the connection between Malays and *khamr*. However, there is a significant gap in history, and any such reference lacks details, as claimed by Azharudin.² Furthermore, the researcher aims to prioritise Islam as the central perspective in examining *khamr* drinking behaviour by upholding revealed knowledge as the primary source. Mohamad Kamil (1996) argues that studying Muslim society without aligning with Quranic and hadith-based theories is awkward. Ignoring Islam’s timeless framework for life and society, as noted by Ahmad (1982), renders sociological explanations futile.

Moreover, given its historical ties predating colonisation, investigating Malays' embrace of *khamr* is crucial. Taking a sip may trigger societal stigma, violating Allah's law and conflicting with Malay social and moral norms guided by Islam.

KHAMR DRINKING AMONG THE ELITE MALAYS IN MALAYSIA

To the best of the researcher's exploration of previous research, this kind of study, which focuses on *khamr* involving the Malays, a limited scholarly study has been made. It was equally hard to search for relevant past research, not to mention research involving the elite-class Malays.

Jernigan and Indran (1997a; 1997b) claimed that the Malay elite is one of the primary investors in the plantation system, profiting from the *samsu* industries. Kortteinen (1999) acknowledged the sensitivity of *khamr* drinking in Malay society, urging further study on Malays' adoption of this trend, its role in their lifestyle, and consumption levels. A decade later, Kortteinen (2008) concluded that the drinking issue in Malaysia serves to politically and socially divide races, defining Malay superiority.

Mohd Hatta et al. (2013) concluded that even though Malays drink less and rarely, once they drink, they tend to do it excessively and engage in binge-like behaviour. However, to identify the identity of Malay drinkers publicly is difficult, and it is more challenging to recognise the people who are involved in the *khamr* industries.

Zeitzen (2018) examined the Malay lifestyle, focusing on elite Malay women and their views on polygamy. She found that many were liberal in interpreting Islam, including a pragmatic approach to religion, such as trying *khamr* at private events, believing it was acceptable as long as limits are respected and justified as part of life's experiences, with trust in God's understanding.

Syed Husin (2008) claimed that several characteristics of some modern or urban upper-class Malays, like politicians, administrators, and entrepreneurs, are those who practice the Western lifestyle as their way of life, including speaking English and even drinking. They occasionally drink *khamr* since they are registered as members of prestigious private clubs such as Royal Lake Club and Royal Golf Club.³

Abdullah (2017) portrayed Tunku Abdul Rahman as an open-minded individual who openly admitted enjoying *khamr*, considering it akin to thick tea. Tunku classified non-drinking Muslims as orthodox but not fundamentalists, asserting

that Allah is the sole judge. Jeshurun (2007) noted Tunku's diplomatic approach, using drinks and gifts to resolve issues, even disregarding concerns raised by Mohamed Asri, former President of Parti Islam SeMalaysia (PAS) about *khamr* being served at diplomatic functions in Malayan overseas missions.

In his book *Lima Raja Terakhir*, Syed Hussein Alattas (1990), a writer known as Pak Habib, recounted witnessing royal families enjoying drinks at Pub Brass Grill near his office. He highlighted that during that period, Malays had adopted drinking as an alternative means to unwind and relax. Alattas (1990) also referenced Akhdiat Mirhaja's story, *Dari Istana ke Bilik Suluk*, which recounts the confession and repentance of an *almarhum sultan* who had engaged in drinking. In a ceremony with various *khamr* served, the *sultan* ordered tea to resemble the colour of *khamr*, highlighting the commonality of drinking among the upper class, where those abstaining would hide their choice to avoid standing out.

Johan (1984) contends that the British-introduced Federated Malay States (FMS) scheme aimed to create an aristocracy and provide Malays with opportunities to join the civil service, intending to integrate the Malay elite into administration under British influence. In Malaysia, Institut Tadbiran Awam Negara (INTAN) plays a role in elevating lower-class Malays to the upper-middle class, via positions in the Malayan Civil Service (MCS) and diplomatic roles.

In 1991, INTAN published a book on public executives' glossary, which included cocktail etiquette, emphasising the importance of learning drinking ethics for mingling at cocktail parties (INTAN 1991). Nordin (1975) observed INTAN training executives in formal dinner ethics, exposing them to various types of *khamr* and suitable pairings with food. Public executives need to understand drinking etiquette to integrate into the upper class, an unspoken requirement for recognition. Nordin (1975) noted that some MCSs serve *khamr* at home, highlighting the clash between public and private culture as they publicly embrace Malay-Islamic culture while enjoying drinks privately.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research applies a qualitative narrative – an of embedded single case study that analyses the profile background in detail of *khamr* drinkers among elite-class Malaysian Malay males as a unit of analysis. Each sub-case is analysed in-depth, and triangulation data collection methods were employed.

The informants were obtained through snowball sampling and categorised as “free drinkers” because they consisted of drinkers who have never been detained or arrested by any Islamic department in Malaysia under the offence of drinking *khamr*.

The study was initiated by establishing rapport with gatekeepers, including reporters, writers, authors, researchers, armies, and activists. Information collected from them about drinking issues among elite-class Malays led to key informants, ultimately totalling six individuals. The data obtained reached saturation, as responses consistently aligned with similar themes.

In-depth interviews, lasting two to three hours each, were conducted at informants’ preferred locations, utilising semi-structured questions and recording with audio equipment, following permission. Direct observation was employed for non-verbal data, including body language, eye contact, facial expressions, and gestures, recorded in handwritten notes using vision and hearing senses. An example of direct observation involved an informant openly drinking *khamr* during the interview. The observation extended to surroundings like golf clubs, recreation clubs, restaurants, and houses, providing insight into drinking conditions. The informants also presented various items validating their experiences.

Data validity was ensured by cross-referencing answers with key informants and conducting site visits to locations where informants shared their drinking experiences. Additionally, data from two informants, who are authors of autobiographies, were compared to their books to verify accuracy.

Data analysis employs a descriptive approach, combining narrative biography and interpretation to understand the reasons behind the informants’ drinking habits. The transcribed interview data is classified into three main parts: living background, drinking background, and the informants’ standpoint on *khamr* in Islam. Handwritten notes from direct observation support the narrative.

The Malays’ drinking habits are identified through background profiling, emphasising the role of socialisation processes conducted by their social agents. The Islamic worldview guides this analysis, supported by library studies as data collection.

Informants willingly shared their experiences with some details omitted for privacy, following Yin’s (1989) recommendation. Pseudonyms were used for confidentiality in discussing the sensitive topic of drinking among Malays.

SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF ELITE-CLASS MALAY INFORMANTS

This section profiles six informants. Hadi was born into an elite-class family since he was from a royal family, and the rest gained the elite class based on their education, career, position and lifestyle. They are classified as the baby boomer generation or Gen X. Born before Malaysia's independence, educated under British rule, they built their careers after the colonial era. The informants' social backgrounds are summarised in Table 1 and their drinking backgrounds are presented in Table 2.

Table 1: Summary of social background of elite-class Malays informants

Informants	Education and career	Hobbies and interests
Ahmad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • British high school education • Pursued a military career • Professional gambler • Involved in international Mafia group 	Primarily interested in gambling
Taufiq	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • British high school education • Holds a PhD in academia • Served as an academic in a local public university • Appointed as country ambassador • Involved in politics • Earned the <i>Datukship</i> title • Prominent figure 	Interested in sports
Hadi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • British high school education • Joined the army as a volunteer • Holds a master's degree in academia • Served as an academic in a local public university • Earned the <i>Datukship</i> title 	Engages in drinking, golf
Ali	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • British high school education • Gained management experience in British companies • Reached a top position in British companies 	Uncertain
Abu	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • British high school education • Holds a bachelor's degree in academia • Became a country ambassador after years as a public executive • Earned the <i>Datukship</i> title • Prominent figure 	Uncertain
Hamid	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • British high school education • Holds a PhD in academia • Served as an academic in a local public university • Involved in politics • Prominent figure 	Political movement

Table 2: Informants' drinking backgrounds

Items	Informants					
	Ahmad	Taufiq	Hadi	Ali	Abu	Hamid
Starting age	18	18	23	Teenager	Early 18's	20
Preferred types of <i>khamr</i>	Rum	Cider, beer, wine	Beer and whiskey	Uncertain	Uncertain	Uncertain
Methods of obtaining <i>khamr</i>	Provided by gambling organisers, free gift when donating blood	Bought and provided in workplace	Bought	Served and provided in working places	Bought and served in working places	Bought
First and usual places of consumption	Army camps, gambling events, hotels	High school, clubs, pubs, bars, hotels, elite recreation places	University, clubs, pubs, bars, hotels, elite recreation places, home, army camps, golf clubs	Clubs, bars and hotels	High school, clubs, pubs, bars, hotels, elite recreation places	University campus
Drinking time preferences	During gambling	After sports and hang out with friends	After working hours, occasions, events, and religious special days such as 'Eid al-fitr and 'Eid al-adha	Discussion and meetings in clubs	Most of the time	After class, during hang out with friends
Drinking mates	Gambling friends	Ambassadors' colleagues and friends in elite clubs	Friends and students	Leaders, clients and workmates	Workmates and alone	Friends
Level of drinking	Low – social drinker	Low – social drinker	Moderate	Low	Heavy	Low
Other substances consumed	Tobacco (heavy smoker)	Tobacco – previously as heavy smoker but currently fully stopped	None	None	Tobacco	Tobacco (stopped)
Current status as drinker	Stopped and repented	Will be drink if invited for social purposes	Drinker	Stopped and repented	Heavy drinker; he cannot speak without drinking because that will make his body tremble; diagnosed with numerous health problems	Stopped and repented

INFORMANTS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE *FIQH* OF *KHAMR*

***Khamr* is Prohibited in Islamic Teaching**

All informants admitted that they knew *khamr* is prohibited in Islamic teaching, particularly Hamid, who was well versed about the *khamr* prohibition. This knowledge was engraved since they were kids. It also becomes part of their faith as Muslims. However, this faith is not sufficiently convincing for Hadi since he insistently said that he did not believe in the Quran and that it was considered a fairy tale to him. In his words,

Oh, if the Quranic class is at home, my aunt teaches... but I don't understand one thing... Arabic! Who knows Arabic? Reading the Quran is okay, but what is being read, I don't know... how can I understand... There are many fairy tales.

Drinking *Khamr* is a Personal Choice within Islamic Boundaries

Knowing that *khamr* is prohibited in Islam does not mean that they understand clearly this concept. As for Taufiq, he firmly believed that a religious commandment is a form of social control, but still, drinking is prohibited by religion and not by society, which is, to him, open for interpretation depending on the situation and personal rights. It is because, previously, drinking was a common practice among the Malays, but the religious perspectives have led society to judge this practice as wrong. He also directly said that,

I was brought up during the English period, so I don't care about drinking. It's your choice. There's no question of right or wrong. I don't have this religious ambition that drinking leads to hell; that's because we were brought up like that, during that particular time.

As for Hadi, he claimed that nobody could stop him from drinking because he did not use any person's money, and even more so, he was not indebted to God. But still, he believes that only God can judge for whatever he does. In his words,

My mother doesn't try to stop me, so who else can? It's my money. Even my wife nags, but I do what I like. I'm not asking for charity. I don't owe anything to God. No one forces me. It's up to each individual. For Muslims, who can judge them? Only God can judge them.

Abu felt the same way and had already made a disclaimer early in the conversation, saying that people should not judge him for drinking because it is his choice. He said, “I will drink this (beer), don’t judge me. It’s between me and Him (Allah).”

The Quran states in Surah Al-Fātir (35:18) that each person bears his or her own sin. However, Surah Al-Baqarah (2:195) warns against deliberately causing self-destruction. Drinking *khamr*, highlighted in Surah al-Māidah (5:91), opens the door to various destructive consequences, leading to disputes and distancing from Allah. A hadith by Abi Dardā’ in Ibn Mājah (2008) underscores *khamr* as the root of all evil, inviting judgement and punishment from Allah. Surah Al-Shams (91:8) acknowledges human free will guided by inspiration, urging choices aligned with *sunnatullāh*. Islam, emphasising interdependence, respects human rights within the boundaries set by Allah, as per a hadith narrated by Abi Musa in Al-Bukhārī (2004). This concept aligns with Surah Al-Ra’d (13:15), where freedom coexists with human servitude to Allah.

Taufiq’s relativistic belief, dismissing the concepts of right and wrong, contradicts Islam’s clear distinction between good and bad, tied to the concepts of heaven and hell. In Islam, these distinctions serve as boundaries to guide human behaviour and prevent harm to oneself and others. Allah designs life as a test, with heaven and hell serving as motivation for individuals to strive for kindness and goodness. Without these consequences, life would be perceived as unfair, as seen in Surah Al-Nisā’ (4:40 and 123).

***Khamr* is an Energy Drink and Medicine; Drinking a Small Amount is Permissible**

Taufiq explained that after badminton, he would have a cold beer to chill and refresh his body, and at the same time, *khamr* functions as a heater to warm up the body. He justified that he must drink *khamr* to survive during winter or cold seasons in England by saying,

When I play badminton... I’m so tired... I drink this beer... which is very cold. A well-chilled beer right...if you go to England...you have to drink because it’s so cold...it keeps you warm...right...if you do not drink over there, you will suffer!

Ahmad noted that hospitals once provided beer to blood donors for circulation, saying, “There is the beer for health...when we donate blood, they give us two bottles...if people aren’t used to drinking, they’ll be drunk.” Taufiq shared a similar

experience, stating, “He gave me beer...I used to like to donate blood...because I could drink.”

Taufiq also believed that *khamr* is allowed for health purposes, especially wine when consumed before breakfast, as practised by his friend. He added, saying, “Certainly, it is permissible for religious reasons if it is for health, right? Just do not overdo it.” He also believed that drinking a little *khamr* was passable because he would not suffer from a hangover. He still believes that Islam prohibits drinking because it causes intoxication. As he firmly said, “I just drink a little, it’s just for fun, not to get drunk. I don’t have this religious ambition; if drinking leads to hell...err, no problem.”

These rationalisations contradict Islamic teachings, as *khamr* is not recognised as a cure and is considered a disease. Muslims are advised to avoid prohibited substances and use permissible alternatives for energy. The shariah permits using *khamr* in emergencies only when there is no alternative medicine, and a life-threatening situation exists (Al-Qaradawi 2007; Abi Daud 1990). The prohibition of *khamr* is rooted in Allah’s commandment, emphasising the ‘*aqīdah* (creed or faith) that Muslims must uphold, refraining from drinking as Allah prohibits it. The intoxication effects are secondary, and the prohibition applies regardless of the amount taken.

***Khamr* is a Social and Pleasure Drink**

Taufiq, a former ambassador, emphasised that drinking was a cultural norm among ambassadors during the unity government in the 1970s. He explained that it was about fitting in rather than religious restrictions imposed by Islamic politicians, saying,

Yes, all ambassadors were drinkers, including me. Who wants to be angry? It’s just when politics comes into religion, it’s not allowed, it’s illegal, but there is a culture, right? You must go along to get along. You can drink without getting drunk.

Abu agreed with the opinion. For Abu, when he deals with representatives from all over the world, drinking sessions are part of business networking for negotiation and decision-making purposes, mainly when it involves entertaining foreigners.

We don’t just grab a drink for the heck of it. We do it to dive into some serious stuff. Those drinking sessions? That is where the real talks happen, where we make some big decisions, mostly just to entertain guests.

Taufiq also explained that previously, especially during the British time, drinking was like an unwritten requirement for a job promotion. It happened for Ali, whereby he had to drink to get recognition and be promoted to a higher position. The drink made him fit in with his social surroundings and enabled him to handle tasks. As admitted by Abu, “When we’re in a drinking session, we need to listen carefully because they’re assessing us, you know.”

Ahmad also explained that to learn to gamble, he must learn to drink because both are interrelated. The social circle he was part of believed that a “good” gambler is a “good” drinker, so drinking enabled him to learn to gamble until he was recognised as one of the best professional gamblers. “If they’ve started gambling, you can bet they’ll be drinking. Nothing else on the menu.”

Khamr is also believed to give pleasure to release stress, as claimed by Abu. As for Hadi, in his leisure time, he enjoys drinking with friends and meeting for drinks at home or during festive occasions. He says,

Yeah, there’s not much else to do in the evening, right? So, we catch up with friends at parties. Sometimes, someone who hosts could be at their place or mine. During festivals like Hari Raya, we call up folks and invite them over for a drink. When I was a lecturer, our colleagues used to host us at their places, or we would have meetups in hotels. Those were the good old days, you know. Oh, by the way, I’ve got a house with a bar.

However, in Islam, true pleasure comes with *īmān* (faith or belief in Islam), where the heart and mind align with Allah. Happiness (*al-falāḥ*) is sourced from obeying Allah, and human life’s primary purpose is to achieve *al-falāḥ*, encompassing success and prosperity in this world and the afterlife, fulfilling two requirements: goodness in this world and the world hereafter. *Al-falāḥ* is attained by obeying Allah’s commandments and avoiding prohibitions, fulfilling the role of humans as vicegerents (*khalīfah*) in this world, leading to social development (Mohd Kamal 1994).

***Khamr* is a Symbol of the High-Class Standard**

Ahmad clearly expressed the fear of shame if he refused a drink in front of his friends. He will be judged as having a low social standard if he drinks something other than *khamr*. *Khamr* is a “must drink” particularly during gambling because he gambled for the upper class, so he felt that he must follow their culture, which accepts drinking as a common practice. *Khamr* is seen as an honourable and up-to-date drink.

Oh, if you don't drink, you feel embarrassed. It's like being ashamed not to drink. It's considered unmanly, you know...Drinking orange juice is considered low class, you're not up to my standards. Get out! So, drink. If you don't drink, foreigners see you as low class. Drinking makes you high class.

Taufiq also loves Western culture, especially English culture, which he purposely follows because it is seen as superior, especially its education system. He admitted that he learned the drinking culture to be an English man.

You can see that I'm still Malay, right? I have Malay culture, it's all still there. But in my mindset, it may be influenced by the Westerners. So, it's British-influenced sophisticated culture. It's because we grew up that way...trying to be like an Englishman...smoking, drinking, womanising, it goes together. So, if Malays want to be like the Westerners, they cannot do just one thing. You have to take the whole package. In my time, those who drank were outgoing, like Westerners...they're very extroverted.

As for Ali, he adopted the British working culture that made him drink even though he knew that it was prohibited. He drank for the sake of his job promotion and higher position in the company and for his career survival. However, in Islam, the ends do not justify the means. The prohibition of *khamr* is explicit, and as Muslims, there is no reason to deny it. Furthermore, *khamr* is not the unclear matter (*mutashābihāt*) that most people are confused about.

In Islam, all people are equal. Though Islam is aware of social differentiation, it does not recognise any distinction based on birth, descent and caste. Social differentiation is purposely for social identification, not criterion and ranking or hierarchy (Momin 2017). Modernisation and civilisation in Islam are measured through the quality system of human life that is grounded by *tauḥīd* (refers to the Islamic belief in the oneness of Allah) as mentioned in Surah Al-Ḥujurāt (49:13).

***Khamr* as a Symbol of Freedom, Maturity and Adulthood**

Hamid had gone through a period when people perceived him as a weak boy. As he was growing up, he became a young man full of spirit, active and intelligent, and recognised for his involvement in many international activities. Therefore, he felt that he was mature enough as a man to be allowed to seek freedom in life as an adolescent. He believed drinking was one of the “cool” trends that signified his freedom and maturity.

Maturity in Islam, termed *taklīf*, involves responsibility for adhering to shariah commandments, evaluating deeds, and facing the consequences. A *mukallaf* must physically and spiritually differentiate between good and bad, known as *mumayyiz*. However, *mumayyiz* is not always a *mukallaf*. *Mukallaf* status requires understanding Islamic obligations, involving a healthy mind and reaching maturity or puberty. This excludes those with mental disorders, infants, those in an intoxicated or unconscious state, and those unaware of Islamic teachings (Abd al-Wahhab Khallāf 2010).

All informants meet the criteria of being recognised as *mukallaf*. Islam considers adulthood and maturity as the foundation for responsible individuals who exercise self-control through knowledge, virtue and disciplined actions. Contrary to glorifying ignorance, Islam encourages the elevation of the mind with positive attributes. Opting for *khamr* consumption, known for its harmful consequences, reflects actions that undermine the mind, body and life. The assertion that drinking is a right to freedom contradicts the Islamic concept of freedom, which involves liberation from ignorant actions.

INFORMANTS' APPRECIATION OF ISLAMIC TEACHING

Ahmad, Hamid and Ali chose to cease *khamr* drinking as they became aware of the Islamic prohibition of *khamr*. Ahmad acknowledged starting drinking due to a lack of appreciation for Islamic practices. Ali, now a member of his neighbourhood *surau* (small prayer hall), has abandoned *khamr*, influenced by religious awareness. Similarly, Hamid corrected his path and distanced himself from *khamr*, guided by religious understanding and societal judgement. Reflecting on their commitment to Muslim obligations, Ahmad admitted neglecting *ṣolāh* (prayers) during his drinking days. Ali and Hamid shared that they also disregarded *ṣolāh* in the past. The other informants, with a “conflicted smile,” avoided discussing *ṣolāh*. The negligence towards the *ṣolāh* as essential shariah demands can be considered the internal reason for the informants becoming drinkers.

ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVES OF THE INFORMANTS' SOCIAL AGENTS

In Islam, socialisation emphasises individuals adopting manners and behaviours from the Prophet as a role model to shape human identity within society. Violence is not inherent but influenced by family, society, economy, and politics (Farid 2011). Ibn Khaldun (2014) notes that customs and traditions shape individuals'

character, which is learned through education in various settings, including family as the central education circle and formal institutions in society.

Family (Non-Formal Education)

Family is the most important social institution and a primary type of socialisation where the interaction is grounded based on blood relationships. Ibn Khaldun (2014) claimed that blood relationships have a durable power of social integration between each other that unifies them in the spirit of group belonging. The core principle of education in the family for the children is *tauḥīd*, as family bonding which affects society (Farid 2011). *Aqīdah* is the first knowledge in the hierarchy that must be strengthened to encourage self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-knowledge in the character and identity as Muslim. It is followed by shariah and *akhlāq* (Islamic ethics/Islamic morality).

Ahmad and Hamid, rooted in Islamic teachings, firmly adhere to the prohibition of *khamr*, guided by their parents. Family influence is less significant for them as they engage in drinking. In contrast, Taufiq, with more freedom, supports his family financially, making his actions, including drinking, permissible. Hadi, from the upper class, lacks proper Islamic understanding, justifying his drinking by claiming his mother never objected.

Peer Group

Peer groups, often formed in social institutions like neighbourhoods, schools and workplaces, share a mutual way of thinking, fostering close bonds. In Islam, peer groups are united by their belief in the Prophet, regardless of age (Farid 2011). These groups aim to encourage obedience to Allah's commandments and protect members from engaging in actions contrary to Islamic teachings, mirroring the goal of friendship in the relationship between Prophet Muhammad and his companions (See Surah Āli-Imrān (3:110) and Surah Al-Taubah (9:119)).

Ahmad had three peer groups: a gambling group in the army, a global Mafia group and a local gangster group. Drinking was prevalent in all three. Next, during their overseas studies, Taufiq, Hadi, Abu and Hamid had Western classmates and adopted a drinking routine in the evenings. They already started trying *khamr* in British high schools because of their circle during that time.

Returning to Malaysia as academics, Taufiq and Hadi continued their drinking culture with colleagues. When Taufiq joined politics, he was surrounded by ambassador friends who were mostly drinkers. The same goes for Abu, who was

used to the drinking culture as a Malaysian ambassador abroad, especially in the ambassadors' group.

As for Ali, he was surrounded by his British superiors and had to make himself acceptable to sustain his career. Drinking was necessary to get along with colleagues, often meeting in clubs where he had to listen carefully to discussions to avoid being judged as incapable.

All types of peer groups of the informants do not fit with the principle of peers in Islam. All the informants have mutuality in this aspect of peer group, which contradicted Islamic philosophy and practised the prohibited things. Therefore, peer factor is one of the dominant reasons that encourage the informants to become drinkers.

Government

The government provides a country's education system, workplace and facilities. According to Muhammad Asad (2009), the goal of a government in Islam is to develop a harmonious society and sustain social integration via strengthening the spirit of brotherhood by upholding justice and equity, forbidding wrong, and defending the right in the framework of Allah's law as mentioned in Surah Āli-ʿImrān (3:103–104). The best way for the government to forbid wrongdoing is via laws and policies due to political power possession. *Khamr* drinking is one of the wrongdoings that oppress oneself and others. The drinkers are oppressors towards themselves and the people surrounding them. One of the guiding principles of the state's duties in Islam is to implement the shariah laws in its administration.

For centuries, Malaysia, once a colony, inherited Western ideologies in its basic rules and laws (Syed Husin 2008). Scholars like Jernigan and Indran (1997a; 1997b), Kortteinen (2008), and Parameswari (2014) agree that the Malays' inclination towards drinking stemmed from the impact of colonisation. *Khamr*'s presence in Tanah Melayu is a significant aspect of the British historical legacy, profoundly influencing the sociocultural history of the Malays.

Ibn Khaldun (2014) stressed that if a government is colonised, the colonised nations naturally follow the colonial culture due to its supremacy and legitimacy, which is seen as the best practice to adapt to their lifestyles. The government, as the nation's leader, strongly influences the practice of religious teaching. A corrupt government would affect the development of civilisation and society.

Educational System

According to Wan Kamal (2014), one of the educational objectives during the British governance in Tanah Melayu was to introduce children to different values or non-native values. The curriculum used was similar to what was implemented in England regarding language and social values. However, it was irrelevant to local values. The students were trained to be the leaders in their communities, representing British ideologies and values to the local society.

The informants, identified as Westernised Malays, perceive colonial culture as a symbol of civilisation and modernisation, attributing their elevated status to British education and workstyles. Introduced by the colonials, drinking became a “must” practice and a ritual for specific occasions. Ahmad, Taufiq, and Hadi recalled weekends at their English high school, where students were free to have fun and engage in drinking. Upon completing school and gaining financial independence, they considered it a “license” to participate in various deviant behaviours.

Pre-independence, Islamic studies were deemed less advanced than British education, with the government showing less interest in religious education for Malays. The British administration considered Islamic education a force strengthening the Muslim soul in the Malay community, impacting their approach to English education. Consequently, the British disapproved of Islamic studies, relegating them to mosques and excluding them from the regular curriculum. Islam was not meant to be taught in English schools (Mohd Nizam and Che Zarrina 2011).

Za’ba (1958) criticised the Quranic education in Malay schools, labelling the classes as “too good to be true.” He highlighted the flawed system, emphasising its primary deficiency in focusing solely on Quranic recitation without explaining the verses’ meanings. Za’ba noted limited and inadequately skilled teachers, primarily motivated by salary. He argued that the absence of Islamic education’s comprehensive approach contributed to the weakness of *akhlāq*, serving as a key factor in fostering deviant behaviour.

That is the fact experienced by Taufiq, who was enrolled in a Quranic class every afternoon while in an English high school in Johor. It is also reflected in Hadi’s experience, who studied Quranic recitation with his aunt without understanding any single word of the Quran, leading him to disbelieve and disrespect the Quran.

Workplace

The career has determined the self-social status of the samples that lead them into certain circles, and that circle has its social demands and occupational adjustment to cope with others. For instance, the British bosses surrounded and controlled Ali. He had to drink for his career advancement. Meanwhile, Abu drank due to the common practice among ambassadors when he was trained at the Institut Tadbiran Awam Negara (INTAN). INTAN training policies are a factor that encouraged government high civil servants to become drinkers as drinking was made a culture among them previously.

According to Mustafa Ali, in the 1970s, many government officials, including ministers, ambassadors and diplomats, were drinkers.⁴ Drinking parties were official government events often held at locations like the parliament house or the prime minister's residence. These gatherings, which included distinguished foreign guests, featured various *khamr* options and standing consumption. Additionally, such parties were organised for farewells or celebrations within ministries. Some officials had personal bars at home for socialising and entertaining foreign guests. Not drinking in these situations could lead to being labeled as disrespectful. Even though Mustafa, representing PAS, abstained from *khamr*, he would request non-alcoholic beverages like Coca-Cola to maintain the appearance of conformity and respect for the event.

Facilities

During British governance, they provided multiple facilities that made *khamr* readily available, whether openly in the market or exclusively for high-class people. Za'ba (1958) vocally claimed that the existence of *khamr* shops in the Malay peninsula (urban areas in particular) that resulted from Western civilisation was a huge damnation for the Malays. Some of it continues until now, while some have stopped. Facilities here refer to the system and places.

Ahmad and Taufiq mentioned the free beer gift for blood donors as a trade in the service system implemented by previous government hospitals. Nevertheless, this system is no longer practised. The distribution of free beer encouraged people at that time to seize the opportunity to get a free drink by donating blood.

Additionally, academics like Taufiq and Hadi can freely enjoy drinks at university-managed clubs. These clubs, serving *khamr*, are available at the universities where they work. Interviews with club representatives, including a non-Malay and non-Muslim, revealed liberal Muslims who have different perspectives on beliefs and

religious practices. Despite cultural and faith differences, they enjoy drinking together. During an interview, a Malay male academic was spotted enjoying a drink at the club, indicating that many Malay academics are also club members.⁵

Like Ahmad, who worked in the army, his workplace also provided facilities called the Navy, Army and Air Force Institute (NAAFI) to have drinks. Ahmad and Hadi, who are experienced in the armies, stated they had time to enjoy drinks at the army camps provided by NAAFI, which offered the lowest price. Perbadanan Perwira Niaga Malaysia (PERNAMA), started in the early 1980s to replace NAAFI (NAAFI 2018), no longer sells *khamr*. Thus, before that time, the Malay armies were exposed to the drinking culture that led them to be drinkers.

Recreational places, including golf clubs, snooker centres and entertainment clubs, continue facilitating a shared culture of drinking *khamr*. Hadi, a golfer, frequently spends time at golf clubs for both golfing and drinking. Laws allowing *khamr* sales in public places like hotels, supermarkets, 24-hour convenience stores, and clubs contribute to this drinking culture. The unrestricted sale of *khamr* in public places raises concerns about fostering unhealthy activities and challenges control enforcement, especially in non-Muslim-majority states in a multiracial country. Additionally, the government's previous allowance of open *khamr* advertisements, as illustrated in Figure 1, further contributed to the normalisation of drinking practices during events like Hari Raya, where individuals like Hadi served *khamr* to friends at home.

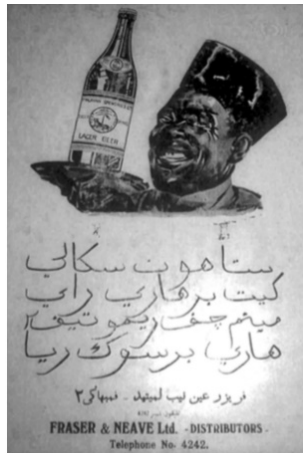


Figure 1: *Khamr* and Hari Raya advertisement believed to have appeared in a Jawi newspaper, *Majlis* in 1934.

Source: Ang (2017).

CONCLUSION

The tradition of *khamr* drinking among Malays reveals broader issues within the Muslim community. Malays engaging in it are considered socially and shariah deviant. Historical prevalence among the ruling elite shifted with the introduction of Islam, but colonial influence elevated *khamr* to high-class culture, seen as part of civilisation, aligning with Westernised norms. The research employed a scientific approach, including literature reviews and fieldwork, to understand why Malays deviate from social norms and become drinkers.

To summarise, despite Malaysia's independence, the practices triggering *khamr* drinking among Malays remain reasonable and applicable. Western (colonial) ideals and culture, including *khamr* as a pleasure drink, are still revered today despite the influence of Islamisation. Informants became drinkers due to a lack of Islamic understanding and misconceptions about Islamic teachings and the *fiqh* of *khamr*. Social agents, including government policies, influenced this misunderstanding. Westernised frameworks and non-shariah-compliant institutions led informants to view *khamr* drinking as a means of modernisation.

While specific to the case study, these findings provide theoretical insights applicable to other relevant samples. The research aims to understand the reasons behind drinking, emphasising real-life experiences without criticising individuals. Limited written literature on Malays and *khamr* drinking posed challenges in data collection. The scarcity of dedicated organisations addressing the issue led to fieldwork challenges. The rarity of informants adds value, filling data gaps on Malay drinkers.

Future research could explore drinking culture in urban and rural Malay areas, comparing similarities and differences. Investigating Islamic practices and exploring various themes related to *khamr* drinking could address research gaps. Note that this research does not extensively cover religiosity, requiring specific attention for a dedicated study on Islamic backgrounds with diverse themes and approaches.

NOTES

1. An interview with Mohd Izwan on 22 November 2016. Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, Putrajaya.
2. An interview with Azharudin, M.D. on 17 October 2017. Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.

3. An interview with Syed Husin Ali on 1 May 2019. Petaling Jaya.
4. An interview with Mustafa Ali on 29 September 2019. Kuala Terengganu.
5. An interview with Tan on 10 April 2018. Petaling Jaya.

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