

The Ambiguities of Alcohol in Iranian History:

*Between Excess and Abstinence**

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INTRODUCTION

The advent of Islam in the seventh century CE formally made wine drinking illicit in the lands that fell under its sway. Yet the spread of this new faith following the early Arab expeditions in fact did little to interrupt the long tradition of alcohol consumption in the two most important areas that were conquered in its name, the eastern half of the Mediterranean basin and “greater Iran,” encompassing Mesopotamia, the Iranian plateau, the Caucasus, and Central Asia as far as the Oxus River. The Mediterranean tradition of viniculture is so well known as not to need any elaboration. Yet the Mediterranean basin is not where the grape was first cultivated for the manufacture of wine. The earliest world’s wine culture – going back some 9,000 years – has been located rather farther to the east, in the eastern Taurus, the Caucasus and the northern Zagros Mountains of Iran.¹ Pre-Islamic Mesopotamia was also the land of wine-soaked royal banquets, of alcohol-induced divination, and of prophecy inspired by intoxicating drinks.² In Zoroastrianism, wine symbolized liquid gold and the flowing fire of the radiant sun, and as such had a ritual function, being part of a libation ritual, in which it substituted for blood. Ancient and late antique Iranian elite history could be written as the history of *razm va bazm* (fighting and feasting), with wine at the center.

There are various good reasons why the spread and adoption of Islam did not root out wine drinking, other than that human beings have always been

* I would like to thank Willem Floor, Cyrus Schayegh, and Ali Gheissari for providing me with source material.

¹ Patrick McGovern, *Uncorking the Past: The Quest for Wine, Beer, and Other Alcoholic Beverages* (Berkeley, 2009), 82. See also his contribution to this volume.

² Jean Bottéro, “Boisson, banquet, et vie sociale.” In L. Milano, ed., *Drinking in Ancient Societies, History and Culture in the Ancient Near East* (Padua, 1994), 1–13.

attracted to various forms of vice, especially if they are officially proscribed. One is that wine retained the various presumed medical benefits that doctors in pre-Islamic times had ascribed to it. Another is that its sale and consumption benefited the state by way of taxes. If this ever created a dilemma, the need for fiscal revenue typically won out over any moral objections.

There are yet other, more indirect reasons why alcohol consumption did not disappear from lands where Islam came to rule. If the Prophet of Islam was inspired by alcohol, it was by way of proscription, to be sure. But, in keeping with the moral universe engendered by Islam, it was a reluctant, gradual proscription, one that was at once absolute and relative, providing loopholes, the ability to engage in subterfuge, and the chance to have one's guilt absolved. In the Abrahamic tradition the vine and wine have been linked from the outset, and wine has been connected with drunkenness and impudence as early as the story about Noah in the Book of Genesis 9, 20–21.³ The Quran is ambiguous about wine, evincing a “progressively negative sequence” in a series of “discreet, evocative statements,” with regard to its properties and its consumption, clearly “in response to a particular set of human circumstances.”⁴ It praises wine as God's gift and recognizes it as a source of enjoyment, but “etherealizes” it by giving it a place in paradise. Reflecting the problems Mohammad had with drunkenness in his entourage, Islam's sacred text ultimately condemns wine for its effect, intoxication, which interferes with faith and the exercise of religious commands.

Yet there is relief for those who transgress. First and most importantly, those who cannot resist drinking in contravention of the Holy Law can find comfort in the Islamic notion that sin can be expiated through repentance. Drinking alcohol is a transgression for which atonement or a specific punishment is prescribed. Drinking is bad, but the act as such does not turn the actor into a heretic. It is heretical, rather, *to consider it permissible* to drink alcohol.⁵ It also helps if the alcohol one consumes is manufactured by a non-Muslim, for this absolves the person who drinks at least to some extent.⁶

³ François Clement and Edgard Weber, *Les vins d'Orient. 4000 ans d'ivresse* (Nantes, 2008), introd., 8.

⁴ Kathryn Kueny, *The Rhetoric of Sobriety: Wine in Early Islam* (Albany, NY, 2001), 66.

⁵ Devin J. Stewart, *Islamic Legal Orthodoxy. Twelver Shiite Response to the Sunni Legal System* (Salt Lake City, 1998), 47.

⁶ Robert Ker Porter, *Travels in Georgia, Persia, Armenia, and Ancient Babylonia, &c. &c. during the Years, 1817, 1818, 1819, and 1820* (London, 1821–22), 347–48.

Secondly, and related, the imbibor is offered a place of refuge of sorts in the form of the respect Islam has always evinced for the privacy of the inner home, the sanctuary of a family's honor. A strong Islamic, prophetically underwritten injunction about the impermissibility of prying into people's private lives for hidden sin – so as not to bring shame on them – has often provided some kind of legal shelter against the intrusion of the state by way of a morality police.⁷ In other words, since social solidarity is an important virtue in traditional Islamic culture, as long as drinking and other proscribed activities remained confined to the private sphere, the community tended to “keep up appearances” by pretending that no infringement was taking place.⁸

As a result, many newly converted Muslims continued to consume alcohol, and especially wine, with an alacrity barely dimmed by a guilty conscience. Pre-Islamic poets had drawn their inspiration and pleasure from wine, and the *khamriyya*, a form of bacchic poetry, survived the ban in Islam to thrive in the Umayyad period.⁹ Wine drinking was ubiquitous in the secular-minded environment of the 'Abbasid court of Baghdad. The scene of the caliph and his boon companions engaged in drinking represents a trope. The *bon viveur* image of the cultured courtier included not just the actual quaffing of wine, but presupposed knowledge about when and how to consume it, and, of course, how to come to terms with the fact that it is formally forbidden in Islam. All this is reflected in the Persianate *Ādāb* and *Naṣīḥat*, Mirror for Princes literature. Neẓām al-Molk in his well-known *Siyāsatnāmeḥ*, written for the Seljuq Sultan Malekshāh, devotes a brief chapter to the rules and arrangements for royal drinking parties. In it Neẓām al-Molk presents good-quality wine as a token of the king's lavishness and hospitality; and advises the ruler to choose his boon companions wisely, arguing that it is imperative that drinking parties be conducted in a relaxed mood, for it is “only through his boon companions that the king's spirit is set free [...]”¹⁰

The *Qābusnāmeḥ*, an eleventh-century manual written by Qābus b. Vushmgir, a vassal of the Ghaznavids and a boon companion of one of that dynasty's rulers, for his son, is exemplary in its humanism. “I will not tell

⁷ Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Princeton, 2000), 481–82.

⁸ Patricia Crone, *God's Rule: Government and Islam* (New York, 2004), 316–17.

⁹ Edgard Weber, “Le vin dans la tradition arabo-musulmane,” in Clement, ed., *Les vins d'Orient*, 54–83.

¹⁰ Nizam al-Mulk, *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings. The Siyar al-Muluk or Siyasat-nama*, trans. Hubert Darke (Richmond, Surrey, 1960, repr. 2002), 119.

you to drink,” Qābus admonishes his son, “but I can’t tell you not to drink either”; after which the author proceeds to give his offspring advice about the etiquette of drinking. A good latter-day example of the same genre, the *Anis al-Nās*, *The Good Companion*, written in Shiraz in the fifteenth century, offers similar advice. In keeping with a common association, the (poorly known) author of this manual for “the honest man” pragmatically calls wine one of the indomitable urgencies of youth. In his chapter on wine, the author turns vice into a virtue by emphasizing, right from the outset, that *towbeh*, repentance, is important, indeed essential, for the drinker, for a “man without repentance is like a fish on dry land”. He then proceeds to list the proper rules of etiquette that the drinker should take into account and live by.¹¹

A related aspect of wine drinking that scarcely needs mention is the role it has always played in Sufism, Islamic mysticism, much of which is set in the Persianate half of the Islamic universe. Wine, of course, is ubiquitous in Sufi poetry. And it is clear that Muslim mystics did not just celebrate wine as a metaphor, but indulged in it themselves, at times in great volume.¹² Among the tropes found in Sufi poetry are the *kharābāt*, dingy and dark watering holes on the edge of town. From its early manifestations, the mystical ambience also included the consumption of alcohol as defiance, as a way of thumping one’s nose at the strictures of formal religion and social convention. Hafez’s poetry in particular is filled with references to wine as a metaphor for dissent against the rigidity of orthodoxy and in particular the cant of the clerics, its self-appointed guardians. Iran’s other revered poet, Sa’di, sums up a prevailing attitude, combining suspicions about and tolerance for, the behavior of “holy men” with an insistence of the right of individuals to privacy, as follows:

هر که را جامه پارسی بینی پارسا دان و نیک مرد انگار
و ندانی که درنگاهش چیست محتسب را درون خانه چکار ؟

Reckon holy everyone in holy robes you see
View them all as good men;
And if what’s in their hearts’ unknown to you,
What business within a private house have the police?

¹¹ Shojā‘, *Anis al-Nās*, ed. Iraj Afshār (Tehran, 2536/1977), ch. 7, 189–204. For an analysis of this work, see C.-H. de Fouchécour, “‘The Good Companion’ (Anis al-nās), a Manual for the Honest Man in Shirāz in the 9th/15th Century,” in Kambiz Eslami, ed., *Iran and Iranian Studies: Essays in Honor of Iraj Afshar* (Princeton, 1998), 42–57.

¹² See Homā Nāteq, *Hāfez. Khonyāgari, mey va shādī* (Los Angeles, 2004).

WINE IN EARLY MODERN IRAN

Wine drinking remained an integral part of court life in eastern half of the Islamic world beyond the classical period, a custom that, over time, was reinforced by an influx of Turko-Mongol peoples from Central Asia with a reputation for dipsomania. The two major dynasties representing this influx, the Seljuqs and the Mongols, were both known for binge drinking. Subsequent dynasties continued the habit of elites indulging in alcoholic excess in flagrant violation of the Islamic law. This includes the Safavids, the dynasty that, originating as a mystical order from eastern Anatolia, took power in Iran in 1501 to rule the country until the early eighteenth century. In the Safavid period, wine drinking continued to conform to a long-standing shared cultural idiom. Unlike conditions in the Ottoman Empire with its cosmopolitan port cities filled with minorities – especially Christians – for whom wine was part of daily routine or even of liturgical ritual, the ambience of drinking in Iran, including that of the court, remained tribal and wedded to the open space rather than being urban-centered. Consequently, throughout the early Safavid period and periodically thereafter, alcohol consumption by the elite continues to recall the pre-Islamic *razm va bazm* tradition of hard fighting and hard drinking as the expected pursuit of warriors and the “test of a man.”¹³

Alcohol consumption in large quantities by the shah and his entourage also continued to have a spiritual, even sacral dimension reminiscent of the ancient libation rite. The king was supposed to drink, both as a sign of his stature as a “big man,” and as a way to demonstrate that he occupied his own autonomous moral space – beyond the strictures of Islam. The first political ruler of the dynasty, Shāh Ismā‘il (r. 1501–24), especially, lived up to this rank and reputation. Portuguese visitors to his court describe raucous scenes of ritualized drinking by him and his acolytes, the Qezelbash chiefs, the Turcoman warriors who brought the Safavids to power and who formed the mainstay of their military until the early seventeenth century.

The character of the Qezelbash as a wild and undisciplined tribal warrior band is epitomized in the terrible defeat the Safavids suffered against the Ottomans on the battlefield of Chaldiran of 1514. The Iranians famously lost

¹³ See Khāndamir, *Tārikh-i ḥabib al-seyar*, 4 vols., ed. Dabirsiyāqi (Tehran, 1362/1984), 4:132, cited in Maria Subtelny, *Timurids in Transition: Turko-Persian Politics and Acculturation in Medieval Iran* (Leiden, 2007), 27, fn. 66.

this decisive confrontation in part because the Qezelbash had engaged in a drunken orgy the night before. Following the debacle, a depressed Ismā‘il gave up on state affairs but not on drinking: He would die a decade later, barely thirty years old, in a drunken stupor.

Wine, moreover, served to mark the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion at the center of power. Who was and who was not invited to join the shah in his drinking parties betokened royal favor and disfavor. That Western visitors might not just be included in these assemblies but were even allowed to share the shah's own cup betrays the emphatically secular make-up of a court that was not just willing to transgress the general Islamic ban on drinking but the more specifically Shi‘i one on ritual purity as well. In this manner, drinking automatically was about power, the power of the dynasty to force his underlings to drink, or to make his clerics watch the drinking. The most celebrated of Safavid rulers, Shāh ‘Abbās I (r. 1587–1629), was known to touch alcohol, albeit in moderation, and his European observers claim that he never allowed the effect of drinking to get in the way of proper decision-making. Yet he did employ alcohol as a way to assert his power by defying the clerics attached to his court. The Portuguese father António de Gouvea bears witness to this with a story in which he describes how the shah ordered wine to be brought during an assembly where, aside from a delegation of Portuguese missionaries, various judges and clerics, including the *sheykh al-islām* of the realm, were present, and forced everyone to drink to the health of the pope.¹⁴

With regard to the consumption of alcohol, Safavid Iran evinces some of same impulses as its neighbors, the Ottoman and Mughal states. Various Ottoman sultans, from Süleyman the Magnificent to Murad IV, are known to have imbibed, even if they outlawed public drinking.¹⁵ Sultan Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty (r. 1526–30), was notorious for his frequent drinking bouts. And, in keeping with the Central Asian mode, in his autobiography he is quite open and unapologetic about this aspect of his reign and

¹⁴ António de Gouvea, *Relaçam em que se tratam as guerras e grandes victorias que alcançou o grãde rey da Persia Xá Abbas do grão Turco Mahometto, & seu filho Amethe, as quais resultarão das embaixadas que por mandado del rey D. Felipe II de Portugal fizeraõ algũs religiosos da ordem dos Eremitaas de Santo Agostinho a Persia*, (Lisbon 1611), 206v.

¹⁵ Philip Mansel, *Constantinople: City of the World's Desire 1453–1924* (London, 1995), 173–74.

personality.¹⁶ The wine cup remained an integral part of Mughal court culture until the end of the dynasty.¹⁷ Like the Safavid Shahs Soleyman and Solṭān Ḥoseyn, Sultan Nur al-Din Jahāngir (r. 1605–27) kept drinking in private even after banning alcohol in public.¹⁸

The Safavids nevertheless seem to have retained more of the Central Asian tradition than the Mughals and certainly than the Ottomans. The Italian traveler Manucci claims that Sultan Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707) forced Europeans to settle outside of the port city of Surat on account of their drinking habits. Even before the accession to power of this well-known purist, the status of Westerners is said to have been rather low because of their presumed heavy drinking and polygamous practices.¹⁹ As was true in Iran, in Ottoman lands the consumption of alcohol among Muslims by and large remained the province of the elite, the *khāṣṣ*, with the middling and popular classes drinking little more than water – and, as always, preferring opium as their drug of choice. Ottoman port cities were home to numerous drinking establishments, to be sure, reflecting the large number of their Christian inhabitants. Yet in the Ottoman Empire or at least in Istanbul, the Ottoman elite never seem to have indulged as freely in drinking as its Iranian counterpart. We have one report, dating from 1719, which states that the Ottoman court had switched from wine to coffee during receptions for foreign guests.²⁰ The custom of organizing drinking session and inviting not just the ruler's boon companions but even foreign guests, diplomats and missionaries, had never been common in Istanbul. The contrast between Iran's military with conditions in the Ottoman army is rather stark as well. Suggesting a measure of social discipline that the Iranians had not (yet) attained, Ogier Busbecq, the Flemish representative of the Habsburg state in Istanbul, in the mid sixteenth century insisted that the army of the sultan did not drink. In-

¹⁶ Stephen Dale, *The Garden of the Eight Paradises. Bābur and the Culture of Empire in Central Asia, Afghanistan and India (1483–1530)* (Leiden, 2004), 179–83.

¹⁷ Meena Khare, "The Wine Cup in Mughal Court Culture – From Hedonism to Kingship," in *The Medieval History Journal* 8 (2005): 143–88.

¹⁸ Prasun Chatterjee, "The Lives of Alcohol in Pre-colonial India," in *The Medieval History Journal* 8 (2005): 202.

¹⁹ Nicolai Manucci, *Storia di Mogor*, 4 vols. (London, 1907): 1:4 and 2:4.

²⁰ M.-F. Brosset, ed. and trans., *Histoire de le Georgie depuis l'antiquité jusqu'au XIXe siècle*, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1856–57), 1:6; Nationaal Archief, The Hague (NA), VOC 1856, Isfahan to Gamron, 17 July 1713, fol. 352; and Paula Sutter Fichtner, *Terror and Toleration: The Habsburg Empire Confronts Islam, 1526–1850* (London, 2008, 92.

deed, Busbecq opined that the absence of intoxicating drinks in the Ottoman army contributed greatly to the good order in the sultan's military.²¹ And the military was apparently no exception among the governing elite. As said, various sultans are known to have imbibed, even heavily, in private, yet at least sixteenth-century Ottoman court ritual in general stands out for sobriety.²²

Iranian society eventually was to evolve into a similar direction, even though the path was circuitous and the pace much slower. The evolution of the Safavids from a band of freebooting warriors given to the ways of the steppe, to an urban-based, bureaucratic order professing a more scriptural version of Islam created (clerically inspired) pressure on the tradition of hard drinking in public. This does not mean that the elite gave up on drinking – if anything the influx of Christians – mostly Georgians and Armenians – from the Caucasus, so-called *gholāms*, who were subsequently given high military and administrative positions, gave a new impulse to drinking as an accepted part of life. Georgian *gholāms* came to supplant the Qezelbash, to the point where by the late seventeenth century much of the Safavid military was composed of Georgians, while Armenians were prominently represented in the ranks of the administration. Both groups brought with them a culture in which wine drinking was integral and natural, an attitude that changed but little with the formal conversion to Islam presupposed by their integration into the Safavid elite. The introduction of Georgian and Circassian women into the royal harem, moreover, introduced “Christian” ways into the heart of the political decision-making arena, including, presumably, the consumption of wine. In sum with the exception of Shāh Ṭahmāsb (r. 1524–76), whose famous Sincere Repentance of 939/1532–33, reiterated in 965/1558, included abjuring alcohol, Shāh Ismā‘il's successors all imbibed, although some indulged more than others.

Heavy drinking was and long remained widespread outside the circles of the central court as well. The Ottoman traveler Evliya Chelebi, visiting northwestern Iran in the 1640s, said of the khan of Darband that he was drunk day and night.²³ The unnamed official who governed Yazd in 1666,

²¹ Metin And, *Istanbul in the 16th Century. The City. The Palace, Daily Life* (Istanbul, 1994), 187.

²² Gülru Necipoğlu, “Framing the Gaze in Ottoman, Safavid and Ottoman Palaces,” in *Ars Orientalia* 23 (1993): 311.

²³ Evliya Chelebi, *Travels*, trans. and ed. Willem Floor (Washington D.C., 2009), 93.

too, was known for his excessive drinking. The Armenian Bedros Bedik in the 1670s characterized Maṣṣur Khān, a Georgian who in the 1670s served as *qollar-aqasi*, head of the slave-soldiers, as a devotee less of Islam than of Bacchus.²⁴

Yet as much as alcohol permeated early modern Iranian society, wine-drinking retained its dubious status as a custom at variance with religious prescriptions. Alcohol might be ubiquitous in elite circles yet it remained – could not but remain – socially unintegrated. In elite circles, wine served as a social lubricant, enlivening banquets and other social gatherings, but its ultimate fate was simultaneous furtive embrace and public disavowal. It thus could never become part of a public sphere, in the way coffee and later tea became the beverages consumed in the Iranian public space, represented by the seventeenth-century coffeehouse – which, as described by various Western observers and in Persian-language sources, corresponds to Habermas's characterization of the public sphere in that it was autonomous from the state, a venue for the literate and literary classes and a conduit of public opinion, even of dissent and opposition to the state.²⁵

INHIBITIONS AND CURBING MEASURES:

Since the Safavid state manifested itself from its inception as a faith-based enterprise, the inherent tension between Islam's proscription of alcohol and the copious intake by the Iranian upper classes sooner or later was bound to erupt into conflict. As the Safavid state lost its tribal, Turko-Mongol moorings and moved toward greater conformity with a professed Twelver-Shi'i orthodoxy, if not actual orthopraxis, attitudes toward alcohol indeed began to change, or rather, prohibitionist tendencies began to assert themselves. The first manifestation of this occurred early on. Of crucial importance in the transformation is Shāh Ṭahmāsb's famous Sincere Repentance – his decision to give up on various forms of unislamic behavior, which included the drinking of wine. Shāh Ṭahmāsb issued a first *farmān*, royal edict, outlawing drinking in 1525, possibly under the influence of his *sheykh al-islām*, 'Ali al-

²⁴ Bedros Bedik, *Chehil sutun, seu explicatio utriusque celeberrimi, ac pretiosissimi theatri quadraginta columnarum in Perside orientis, cum adjecta fusiori narratione de religione, moribus*. (Vienna, 1678), 252.

²⁵ See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, 1989).

Karaki, who a year later made his own contribution to a more *shari‘ah*-minded society by issuing a *fatwā* that targeted public singing and recitation, among other activities associated with Sufis and Qezelbash elements.²⁶ The shah’s Sincere Repentance was first proclaimed in 939/1532–33. As the act and its enforcement clearly played itself out over a number of years, it was reiterated in 964/1555–56.²⁷ Aside from striking a blow at the hard-drinking Qezelbash, this decision marked a phase in the loss of the shah’s divine pretensions that had begun with Shah Ismā‘il’s defeat against the Ottomans in 1514, and symbolized a switch in the shah’s image from incarnation of the divine to that of trustee of the imam, from law-defying force to guarantor of orthopraxis. Later shahs continued to drink, but they no longer drank in the previously unselfconscious manner. Even shorn of its orgiastic dimension, drinking remained a source of raucous fun and rollicking spectacle at the royal court, with rulers amusing themselves as besotted courtiers were carried out horizontally. Wine also continued to serve as a way to pry secrets from the lips of courtiers whose loyalty was in doubt, following a tradition that Herodotus had already commented on in his remarks about the Persians, with sometime deadly results.²⁸

Still, guilt – like clerical pressure – was never far from the surface. All shahs beginning with ‘Abbās I periodically banned the consumption of alcohol. Even Shāh Šafī (r. 1629–42), who was notorious for his own dipsomania, is now known to have proclaimed a ban on drinking.²⁹ The reasons varied, and ranged from apparent royal whim to invocations of divine grace preceding a battle or a siege, to clerical incitement and exhortation. The Persian-language sources present Ṭahmāsb’s Sincere Repentance as inspired by a celestial dream, but also situate it in the context of a pending expedition against the Ottomans, who had just invaded Iraq. And the chroniclers now felt compelled to justify royal boozing. A point in case is Shāh ‘Abbās II (r. 1642–66), who, still only in his late teens after seven dry years on the throne,

²⁶ See Rasul Ja‘fariyān, *Naqsh-e Khāndān-e Karaki dar ta’sis va tadāvom-e dowlāt-e Šafavi* (Tehran, 1387/2008), 278–88.

²⁷ For this, see Rudi Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure: Drugs and Stimulants in Iranian History, 1500–1900* (Princeton, 2005), 74ff.

²⁸ See Herodotus, *Histories*, 4 vols., ed. A. D. Godley (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), The Dutch in 1664 report how Heydar Beg died from excessive drinking forced upon him by Shāh ‘Abbās II. See NA, VOC 1248, Gamron to Batavia, 30 Aug. 1664, fol. 3046.

²⁹ Abu’l Mafākher b. Faḏl Allāh al-Ḥoseyni Savāneh-negār Tafreshi, *Tārikh-e Shāh Šafī*, ed. Moḥsen Bahrāmnezhād (Tehran, 1388/2010), 22–23.

in 1649 took up the cup, while celebrating Nowruz on the banks of the Helmand River, during his triumphant return from a campaign that had led to the capture of Qandahar from the Mughals. Vāleh Qazvini Eṣfahāni, who narrates the events, is explicit about the shah's change of heart, and justifies it in two ways. First, he refers to the old adage according to which God as well as the law permit happiness and pleasure, especially in youth. The shah especially enjoys certain rights, including the right to unbounded pleasure as long as he does not neglect his realm and his subjects. For good measure, Vāleh Qazvini Eṣfahāni makes sure to absolve the ruler from any personal responsibility by blaming his courtiers for their alcoholic excess and for urging the shah to take up the cup as well.³⁰

Underneath the various proscriptions in the Safavid period we detect tensions between the Turkic, Central Asian and the Tajik, "ethnic Iranian" element in Safavid society. Karaki's opinions reflected sentiments harbored by the Arab immigrant clerics whom he represented, and his rulings targeted not just at Sufis but also the Qezelbash and their wayward ways, which no doubt included drinking (in public and to excess.) Shāh 'Abbās I issued a ban on drinking in 1603, at a time when his campaign to sideline the Qezelbash was in full swing.³¹ A most suggestive hint about "ethnic" tensions involves the accession of Shāh Ṣafī in 1629, in the different ways in which the two main chronicles narrating the event present the various proscriptive measures that were taken following the enthronement. The "pro-Qezelbash" Moḥammad Ma'ṣūm b. Khvājegi Eṣfahāni, the author of the *Kholāṣat al-seyar*, has Shāh Ṣafī begin the new shah's reign with a proclamation banning smoking and the burning of the existing crop of tobacco. Abu'l Mafākher b. Faḡl Allāh al-Ḥoseyni, the "Tajik-leaning" author of the recently edited *Tārikh-e Shāh Ṣafī*, by contrast, does not even mention this proclamation. Instead he presents a ban on the consumption of wine and the destruction of wine houses as the first official act of the newly acceded Shāh Ṣafī.³²

³⁰ Mohammad Yusof Valeh Qazvini Esfahani, *Khold-e barin (Iran dar ruzgar-e Safaviyan)*, ed. Mir Hashem Mohaddes (Tehran, 1372/1993), 480.

³¹ Georg Tectander, *Eine abenteuerliche Reise durch Russland nach Persien 1602–1604*, ed. Dorothea Müller-Ott (Tübingen, 1978), 65.

³² See Moḥammad Ma'ṣūm b. Khājegi Eṣfahāni, *Kholāṣat al-seyar. Tārikh-e ruzgār-e Shāh Ṣafī*, ed. Iraj Afshār (Tehran, 1368/1989), 39; and Al-Ḥoseyni, *Tārikh-e Shāh Ṣafī*, 22–23. For this interpretation, see Naṣr Allāh Purmoḥammadi Amleshi, "'Aṣr-e Shāh Ṣafī," review of al-Ḥoseyni, *Tārikh-e Shāh Ṣafī*, in *Ketāb-e Māh* 149 (Mehr 1389/2010): 34.

Typically and unsurprisingly, the *ulama* were the driving force behind the various bans and the retreat of royal drinking into the private sphere. In early Safavid times, Shi‘i scholars developed the idea that, in the absence of the Hidden Imam, a qualified jurist might undertake the task of leading the community of the faithful in its efforts to uphold the divinely ordained social order. This sanctioning of clerical activism never prompted the *ulama* to foreswear their allegiance to, or cooperation with, the state, but it did put some muscle into their claim to have the right of direct intervention in its affairs. The various bans all bear a clerical imprint. ‘Abbās II, exhorted by his *ulama* to clean up his act and follow the example of his pious forebear, Shāh Ṭahmāsb, foreswore wine in 960/1653, a mere four years after he had held his first *bazm* on the verdant banks of the Helmand River. Yet invariably, such bans were honored in the breach more than in the observation. Their intent was ostensibly to combat and curtail religiously proscribed behavior, but as numerous examples suggest, in reality they typically grew out of a preoccupation with the preservation of public order. Drinking in public rather than drinking per se was seen as a problem, and silence and dissimulation were the mechanisms that kept the latter out of sight.

This explains in part why bans rarely lasted long, and why were they not always comprehensive either. Under ‘Abbās II’s successor, Shāh Soleyman (r. 1666–94), wine was officially outlawed several times. Yet public bans did not necessarily entail private abstemiousness. When the Spanish cleric Cubero Sebastian visited Isfahan in 1674, he noted that there was no wine available in the city, yet he insisted that the shah and his nobles consumed it in secret.³³ Drinking clearly retained its status as a prerogative of the *khāṣṣ*.

The long-term trend toward “privatized” tippling culminated during the reign of the last Safavid shah, Shāh Solṭān Ḥoseyn (1694–1722). Upon his accession, the pious Solṭān Ḥoseyn acceded to a request from his tutor, the doctrinaire cleric Moḥammad Bāqer Majlesi (d. 1699), to outlaw all drinking in his realm – as well as other forms of behavior considered to be at variance with the *shari‘a*. This led to the ostentatious smashing of 6,000 bottles of wine found in the royal cellars, and to the promulgation of the most explicit and comprehensive anti-vice proclamation in all of Safavid history, not just

³³ Don Pedro Cubero Sebastian, *Breve relación de la peregrinación que ha hecho de la mayor parte del mundo Don Pedro Sebastian* (Madrid, 1680), 217.

in Isfahan but throughout the shah's realm.³⁴ Yet in this case, too, the ban did not last, and the first one to break it was the shah himself. In the fall of 1694, mere months after the ban had been proclaimed, the shah resumed drinking upon the medically grounded recommendation of his great-aunt Maryam Begom, who was a noted tippler herself. Public drinking remained taboo for the duration of Solṭān Ḥoseyn's reign, though, and alcohol was henceforth confined to the privacy of the palace.³⁵

There is no question that private drinking beyond the palace persisted as well. As has been true for other times and places in Islamic history, all the evidence suggests that in Safavid Iran, this type of consumption was rarely tackled, in part, to be sure, because it was much harder to tackle, but more fundamentally because it did not disrupt the social order and the appearance of conformity that Islamic societies have tended to insist on so emphatically. The *ulamā* might inveigh against it but some drank themselves, and they ultimately were powerless vis-à-vis a state with a secular will to power on which they were dependent for positions and emoluments. The *ulamā* moreover had a vested interest in the controlled existence of vice. They were mostly interested in maintenance of public order. Sharing a fear of social disorder with the secular authorities, they were pragmatic rather than idealistic and thus spared theory as well as practice by conniving at the relegation of drinking to private sphere and of tolerating the practice of religious minorities purveying wine (to Muslims). All this left ample room for the private sphere as a safety valve and a safe haven, as it has often been and still is in Iranian society.

BETWEEN THE SAFAVIDS AND THE QAJARS

With regard to many aspects of life and society, and especially in matters of material culture, the documentary evidence for the seventy-five year period

³⁴ See Moḥammad Ebrāhim b. Zeyn al-ʿĀbedin Nāširi, *Dastur-e shariyārān*, ed. Moḥammad Nāder Nāširi Moqaddam (Tehran, 1373/2004), 39–40. In provincial cities, the proclamation was engraved above the entrance ports of mosques. See Hāj Ḥoseyn Nakhjavāni, “Masjed-e Jāmeʿ-*e* Tabriz va sharḥ-e katibehʾhā-ye ān.” in *Nashriyeh-ye Dāne-shkadeh-ye Adabiyāt-e Tabriz* 6:1 (1333/1954): 36–38, for Tabriz; Rabino di Borgomale, *Mazandaran and Astarabad* (London, 1928), 37 for Amol; and James Baillie Fraser, *Narrative of a Journey into Khorasan in the Years 1821 and 1822* (London, 1825; repr. Delhi, 1984), 303, for Semnan.

³⁵ See Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, 94.

between the fall of the Safavids and the accession of the Qajars is spotty. This includes the incidence and level of alcoholic intake, for which we have few references. Yet all indications are that, following the rise to power of the Afghans and the subsequent rule by the Afsharids, culminating in the reign of Nāder Shāh (1736–47), Iran underwent a process of de-urbanization and “retribalization.” Whereas the early eighteenth-century Ottoman Empire experienced its first “modernizing wave,” which, incidentally coincided with attempts to emulate the Safavid models in matters of architectural style and poetic taste, Iranian society remained thoroughly traditional in its ways, little affected by Western models, and, as the tribal element edged out the urban, in some ways even “regressive.”³⁶ We know that the Afghans were averse to alcohol, and it seems that Nāder Shāh, too, did not drink. Yet otherwise, patterns seem to have continued, reflecting a society which remained pre-modern, unregulated and undisciplined, and where practices might flagrantly contravene the norms without leading to serious corrective measures. The Frenchman Ferrières-Sauveboeuf in the 1760s claimed that Iranians drank freely.³⁷ Indeed, in at least one instance drinking and other forms of merry-making were officially licensed, even encouraged. The place of action is Shiraz, and the enactor of this “enabling” approach is Karim Khān Zand, the warlord who emerged from the chaos following the death of Nāder Shāh in 1747 to take control of much of southern Iran. In the 1770s Karim Khān turned Shiraz, his capital, into an “abode of pleasure,” *dār al-‘eysh*, filled with brothels, inns and taverns, in an apparent attempt to “civilize” rustic non-Persians.³⁸ Concessions were still made to the military. In a policy reminiscent of that of Karim Khān Zand, who allowed his soldiers to have access to alcohol, crown-prince and reformer ‘Abbās Mirzā in the early nineteenth century licensed a wine-shop in Tabriz for the use of the battalion stationed in that city, which included many Russians. The Iranian soldiers apparently followed their Russian colleagues in the drinking habits of the

³⁶ This has been argued by Shirine Hamadeh, *The City's Pleasures: Istanbul in the Eighteenth Century* (Seattle and London, 2008), 234–35.

³⁷ Comte L. de Ferrières-Sauveboeuf, *Mémoires historiques, politiques et géographiques des voyages....faits en Turquie, en Perse et en Arabie depuis 1782 jusqu'en 1789*, 2 vols. (Maastricht, 1790), 2:62–63.

³⁸ Christoph Werner, “Taming the Tribal Native: Court Culture and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Shiraz,” in Albrecht Fuess and Jan Peter Hartung, eds., *Court Cultures in the Middle East, Seventh to Nineteenth Centuries* (London and New York, 2011), 226–27.

latter. Yet, since the Iranians would get drunk much faster than the Russians, they were often flogged for the offense.³⁹

Reform, when it came, naturally was a matter of changing elite behavior. In the early modern West, anxieties about working class behavior in the context of modernizing societies demanding discipline, proper work habits, timeliness, in sum, sobriety, prompted states to take measures against drinking by the common man. The various gin laws promulgated in England as of the mid-eighteenth century are good examples of this tendency.⁴⁰ In either case, religion played an important role, with clerics agitating against the moral and societal rack and ruin drinking entailed. Since in Iran alcohol consumption was mostly an upper-class phenomenon, it is only natural that, aside from clerical exhortation, the royal palace set the trend for sobriety. Some Qajar rulers continued to drink, but abstemiousness at the court more and more became the norm. Moḥammad ‘Ali Shāh (r. 1834–48), who shortly after his accession proscribed drinking in his realm, may even have been a teetotaler.⁴¹ This is a function of several developments. One represents a continuation – or rather the resumption – of the process of sedentarization. From the reign of Fath ‘Ali Shāh (1797–1834) court life was no longer focused on the wild steppe but centered on the royal palace located in what would become Iran’s first fixed capital, Tehran. More important is the fact that the Qajars lacked the religious credentials of the Safavids. They neither could boast a (fictitious) lineage going back to the Shi‘i Imams, nor did they introduce a new faith. They thus had to project an image of public piety and probity in order to establish their legitimacy, and abstaining from alcohol was one outward sign of this posture. A third, related process, was the rise to prominence of the Shi‘i clergy, who had emerged from the turmoil of the eighteenth century as the guiding force for a rudderless populace. The Englishman Stuart, describing Iran in 1835, reported that the Iranians he met did not drink “for fear of the eunuch, a sober and strict Muslim.”⁴² This is an obvious reference to the influence of Hājji Mirzā āghāsī, the infamous tutor and counselor of Moḥammad Shāh and his court. In the ensuing atmosphere

³⁹ Porter, *Travels in Georgia, Persia, Armenia*, 349.

⁴⁰ See Jessica Warner, *Craze: Gin and Debauchery in an Age of Reason* (New York, 2002); and Patrick Dillon, *Gin: The Much Lamented Death of Madam Geneva: The Eighteenth-Century Gin Craze* (New York, 2004).

⁴¹ See Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, 181.

⁴² Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Stuart, *Journal of a Residence in Northern Persia and the Adjacent Provinces of Turkey*, (London, 1854), 169.

of growing clerical assertiveness, the *razm-o bazm* tradition came to an end. The shah had ceased to be a warrior, and in a reflection of his domestication, *āsh*, stew, distributed during festivals, took the place of wine during public feasting.

None of this means that the ruling class at large ceased to imbibe, sometimes in enormous quantities. When they are addicted to wine, James Baillie Fraser, writing in the 1820s, insisted, Iranians “preserve no restraint, and show very little anxiety to conceal their frailty, unless when they are persons following grave occupations. Indeed, their maxim is, that there is as much sin in a glass as in a flagon; and that if they incur the penalty, they will not forgo the pleasure [...]”⁴³ Iranians, the French artist-cum traveler Eugène Flandin said, confirming the words of Fraser and many visitors before and after him, resembled all people touching a forbidden fruit by not knowing how to enjoy it in moderation. Obviously referring to the Iranians he encountered, invariably members of the ruling classes, he insisted that had never seen one who did not consume alcohol without getting so drunk as not to be able to lift his glass to his lips. Many people in Iran, Flandin claimed, would indulge in this and other vices until about the age of fifty, at which point they would repent, engage in *towbeh*. Quite a few persisted in their taste for alcohol until the very end, though.⁴⁴

Nor was drinking just an upper-class affair. The *kharābāt*, the dank dives on the edge of town run by Jews or Armenians where Muslims would go to get drunk, continued to operate, attracting men from the lower orders, many of them ruffians known as *luṭīs*. The *Vaqāye‘-e ettefāqiyyeh*, a compendium of reports on southern Iran by British officials, offers several instances of drunken brawls outside of Shiraz in 1296/1879. In one, two people were injured, one of whom later died. Near the city gates there were apparently lots of disturbances each night, with drinking and fighting ensuing.⁴⁵ Sufis drank, too, as well as smoked bang, as they had always done. As Fraser put

⁴³ Fraser, *Narrative of a Journey into Khorasan*, 422.

⁴⁴ M. Eugène Flandin, *Voyage en Perse de MM Eugene Flandin, peintre, et Pascal Coste, architecte*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1851), 2:404 and 414–15. For the same type of observation, made some four decades earlier by the French envoy Amédée Jaubert, see P. Amédée Jaubert, *Voyages en Arménie et en Perse, faite dans les années 1805–1806* (Paris, 1821), 317.

⁴⁵ *Vaqāye‘-e ettefāqiyyeh. Majmu‘eh-ye gozāresh’hā-ye khofyeh-nevisān-e Englis dar velāyat-e jonubi-ye Irān az sāl-e 1291 tā 1322 qamari*, ed. Sa‘idi Sirjāni (Tehran, 1362/1983), 172.

it, “it is a privilege of Soffeeism to drink strong liquors, smoke bang, and use every other means of intoxication, at their pleasure.”⁴⁶ Police reports for late nineteenth-century Tehran frequently refer to instances of public drunkenness resulting in disorderly conduct among common people.⁴⁷

Much evidence for continued hard drinking among the ruling classes in Qajar times comes from provincial centers and peripheral parts of the country, suggesting that the modernizing impulse had indeed started at the center, as one might expect, or conversely, that heavy drinking continued to follow old ways by being most prevalent among tribal elements, with the Kurds perhaps the lustiest imbibers. Moḥammad Khān Zanganeh Amir Neẓām, the governor of Azerbaijan in the 1830s and until his death in 1841, is a case in point. The American missionary Justin Perkins called this official “broken down by hard drinking.”⁴⁸ The aforementioned Flandin reports how, during his stay in Tabriz, the Amir Neẓām entertained him and his men to copious amounts of food and that the wine flowed freely irrespective of religion, among both the Iranian hosts and their French guests. The bottles on the Iranian side, Flandin insisted, were all empty and quite a few of them were drunk.⁴⁹ Elsewhere the same author called opium and wine abuse widespread in Iran, adding that Iranians would organize nocturnal sessions with their friends, during which Moḥammad and the wisest of his ordnances were forgotten and during which they would seek oblivion in wine from the tribulations of life.⁵⁰ Fraser, traversing Khorasan in 1821–22, met quite a few bibulous officials, most of them Kurds, descendants of the ones Shah ‘Abbās I had transplanted to the region two centuries earlier to defend the northern borderlands against Turcoman raids. Farrokh Khān, the officer in charge of the local artillery of Nishapur, was a “professed Mahometan and a rigid observer of many of the forms of his religion,” yet he “indulged very freely in the use of wine, and rather boasted of the quantity he consumed, than thought of concealing it.”⁵¹ For much of the nineteenth century, the region of

⁴⁶ Fraser, *Narrative of a Journey into Khorasan*, 570.

⁴⁷ *Gozāresh'hā-ye nazmiyeh az mahallāt-e Tehrān*, 2 vols. paginated as one (Tehran, 1377/1998), 25, 33, 36, 49–50, 68, 79, 103, 116, 143–44, 155–56, 196, 197, 243, 371, 379, 394., 250, 254, 283, 284, 301, 311, 316, 347. .

⁴⁸ Justin Perkins, *A Residence of Eight Years in Persia among the Nestorians* (Andover and New York, 1843), 226.

⁴⁹ Flandin, *Voyage en Perse*, 1:171.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:404 and 414–15.

⁵¹ Fraser, *Narrative of a Journey into Khorasan*, 391–92.

Quchān, in Khorasan, was administered in hereditary fashion by a Kurdish family of bibulous governors who indulged in the locally produced and reputedly excellent white wine. Fraser visited the town in 1822 and spent one day fruitlessly trying to obtain the necessary permit for his onward journey, until he discovered that the incumbent, Reżā Qoli Khān Za‘farānlu, and his court were “dead drunk, and perfectly unable to transact business of any kind.”⁵² The British officer Valentine Baker (aka Baker Pasha), who visited Quchan in 1873, found Reżā Qoli Khān’s descendant, Ḥoseyn Qoli Khān (Shojā‘ al-Dowleh), quite unprepared to receive him as he was asleep after a night of immoderate drinking. (He made up for this mishap by providing chairs and a table for his guests later, and by serving some good local wine the following day.)⁵³ The next town where Baker alighted on his way to Mashhad, Bojnurd, was administered by Yār Moḥammad Khān Sehām al-Dowleh Shāhdu. A cultivated man who like to read, Yār Moḥammad Khān served wine too, quite openly in fact, although he told Baker in front of all his attendees that he himself preferred arak and brandy, thinking wine “not strong enough.”⁵⁴

CHANGES IN ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

The Qajar period saw the beginning of European influence on many aspects of Iranian life.

This includes the type of alcohol people drank as well as the ambience in which they were enjoyed. Hard liquor in the form of aquavit imported from Russia had been known in Iran at least since Safavid times. The nineteenth century witnessed the introduction of new types of high-percentage alcoholic beverages into Iran as part of the country’s ongoing and more diversified incorporation into the global market. Among the elites, various types of European liquor seem to have made inroads in the early part of the century. Count von Kotzbue, the head of a Russian embassy to Iran, in 1817 observed how the Iranian guests at a banquet in Yerevan enjoyed not just wine but

⁵² Ibid., 577–78.

⁵³ Valentine Baker, *Clouds in the East: Travels and Adventures on the Perso-Turkoman Frontier* (London, 1876), 276. A similar description of the same official is given by the Russian General Grodekoff, as quoted in Lord Nathaniel Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question*, 2 vols. (London, 1892), 1:102.

⁵⁴ Baker, *Clouds in the East*, 286.

quaffed liqueur in “immense quantities.” He also claimed to have seen men who “drank off a bottle of rum at once without appearing to suffer any inconvenience of it.”⁵⁵ Fraser explained the fondness for more potent stuff by suggesting that the pleasure of drinking “consists, not in the gradual exhilaration produced by wine and conversation among companions who meet to make merry, but in the feelings of intoxication itself; and therefore a Persian prefers brandy, and deep potations, because these soonest enable him to attain that felicity.”⁵⁶ Justin Perkins, an ardent advocate of temperance, in the mid-1830s intoned that “European liquors are also rolling in upon the country like a flood.”⁵⁷

European wines seem to have entered the Iranian market quite a bit later. Far from “rolling in like a flood,” they were still far from ubiquitous by mid-century. The British Resident Justin Sheil called the Iranians “extremely fond of European wines,” yet added that, “still none among them, even the richest, are willing to undergo the expense of its conveyance from Europe. They satisfy themselves with the thin growth of their own vineyards, quantity compensating for quality.”⁵⁸ His wife, Lady Sheil, in her travelogue offers a vivid description of the new type of spirits available at the tables of the elite. Invited by the governor-general of Tabriz in 1851, noted how the “table (for there was one) was covered with a complete and very handsome European service in plate, glass, and china, and, to crown the whole, six bottles of champagne displayed their silver heads, accompanied by a dozen other bottles of the wines of France and Spain.”⁵⁹

From the mid nineteenth century we have some figures about the volume of European alcoholic beverages entering Iran. An overview from 1869 of imports into Tabriz, lists wines and spirits from France, England and Russia worth 56,000 French francs.⁶⁰ In 1896 the French consul in Tabriz noted that almost all imported wines came from France, adding that consumption was limited, since most Muslims abided by the Koranic law, whereas the number

⁵⁵ M. von Kotzbue, *Narrative of a Journey into Persia in the Suite of the Imperial Russian Embassy of 1817* (London, 1819), 122–23.

⁵⁶ Fraser, *Narrative of a Journey into Khorasan*, 422.

⁵⁷ Perkins, *A Residence of Eight Years*, 225.

⁵⁸ Lady Sheil, *Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia*, (London, 1856), 157.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁶⁰ Archives des Affaires Étrangères (hereafter AAE), Paris, Corr. Commerciale (CC), Tauris, 1869–70, fols. 432v.

of resident Europeans was too low to make a real difference.⁶¹ British sources convey the same message about Shiraz, where in 1893 the “demand for European wines, beer, and spirits was ‘very limited.’” The writer added that “only a retail business could be done through Armenian shopkeepers.”⁶² Demand seems to have gone up in the next two decades, for in 1902–03 wine imports amounted to 12,850 bottles of French wine, 19,834 bottles of Russian wine, and 3,944 bottles of wine coming from Great Britain. At the same time 260,346 bottles of spirits, 85 percent of them imported from Russia, had entered the country. In keeping with a trend among the Ottoman upper classes at the time, and as the French representative who provided these statistics noted, a fairly large number of Iranians had meanwhile taken to the habit of *zakuska*, hors d’oeuvre, accompanied by vodka. Beer, too, had made inroads at this point. In the said year a total of 134,634 bottles entered the country, 121,130 of which originating in Russia.⁶³ Exemplifying how far, by the late nineteenth century, Iran’s upper classes had moved away from the raucous open-air bacchanals of the Qezelbash, Nāṣer al-Din Shāh (r 1848–96) liked to drink a glass or two of French Bordeaux at dinner.⁶⁴ The E’temād al-Saltāneh also reports how the shah, before attending an execution, drank some Bordeaux to calm his nerves.⁶⁵ We might call both examples the outcome of a civilizing process along the lines proposed by Norbert Elias, whose famous study does not, inter alia, deal with drinking habits.⁶⁶

Yet the dilemma between pleasure and guilt remained, as did the way of dealing with it. The E’temād al-Saltāneh in his diary observes how, during their stay in Moscow in 1306/1889, a stop on Nāṣer al-Din’s third journey to Europe, the shah’s companions did not observe the *ruz-e qatl*, the annual commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Ḥoseyn, but instead indulged in

⁶¹ AAE, CC, Audibert, “Commerce de Tauris,” Tabriz, 12 June 1896.

⁶² National Archives, London (NA), FO 1894, DCR, Report for the year 1893–94 on the Trade of Shiraz (London, 1894), 13.

⁶³ AAE, Corr. Politique (CP), n.s., Perse 47, “Rapport sur le mouvement commercial de l’année persane bars-il, 21 mars 1902 a 20 mars 1903.” For conditions in the Ottoman Empire at the time, see François Georgeon, “Ottomans and Drinkers: The Consumption of Alcohol in Istanbul in the Nineteenth Century,” in Eugene Rogan, ed., *Outside In: On the Margins of the Modern Middle East* (London and New York, 2002), .

⁶⁴ E’temād al-Saltāneh, *Ruznāmeḥ-ye khāṭerāt-e E’temād al-Saltāneh* (Tehran, 3rd edn., 1356/1977), 300.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 778.

⁶⁶ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (New York, 1978).

the free wine offered to them by the mayor of the Russian capital. The next day, so as to expiate their sins of the previous night, they rolled out their prayer rugs and engaged in worship. Yet the moment the prayer was over and lunch beckoned, they started drinking again with the excuse that the water in Moscow tasted so bad as to be undrinkable.⁶⁷

Foreign influence on drinking habits and the types of liquor consumed by Iranians intensified as a result of the strong Russian presence in northern Iran, which around the time of the Constitutional Revolution (1905–11) evolved into outright military occupation of parts of the country's north. Russian aquavit had been a staple of diplomatic gifts from Russia since the Safavid period. In the late nineteenth century, as Russia's influence on Iran increased, its import and consumption are said to have increased. Sayyed Ḥasan Taqizādeh in his autobiography quotes a doctor who at the turn of the century claimed that in Tabriz more arak was consumed than in Tbilisi.⁶⁸ In 1909 the French consul in Tabriz reported that the "cabaretiers" of the lower orders had "triumphed" by obtaining the free circulation and consumption of alcohol.⁶⁹ The German author Kuss in 1910 claimed that, because of Russia's influence, vodka was now common in the north, adding that often not real Russian vodka but a mixture prepared with turpentine was manufactured in Rasht, the capital of Gilan.⁷⁰ A report about the latter province from the period in the early 1920s, when Gilan was under Russian control, insists that alcoholism was rampant among the region's Armenian and Russian inhabitants and that a predilection for the best wines and spirits prompted a search for good French wines, cognacs and liqueurs among the well-to-do classes.⁷¹ The French consul in Rasht at the time added that much of the wine consumed in Gilan came from Russia and that alcohol was sold clandestinely in coffee houses in the province.⁷² Cognac, too, entered Iran at the time, from India as well as from countries such as France and Greece.⁷³ Next to cognac the most popular alcoholic drink among upper-class Iranians was champagne. Fantastic prices were paid for this luxury item. Wine was imported from France and Germany for the same clientele. Medicinal wines, so-called

⁶⁷ E'temād al-Saltāneh, *Ruznāmeḥ-ye khāṭerāt*, 642.

⁶⁸ Sayyed Ḥasan Taqizādeh, *Zendegi-ye tufāni (khāṭerāt)* (Tehran, 1379/2000), 45.

⁶⁹ AAE, CP, n.s., Perse 6, Nicolas, Tabriz, 10 Aug. 1909, fol. 200.

⁷⁰ Walther Kuss, *Handelsratgeber für Persien* (Berlin, 1911), 121.

⁷¹ AAE, CP, n.s., Perse 49, "Notes sur Guilan," fol. 57.

⁷² Ibid., "Notes sur les conséquences économiques de la guerre en Guilan," fols. 5 and 27.

⁷³ Kuss, *Handelsratgeber*, 121.

China wine, with brands such as Vin de Bugeaus and Servallo (from Trieste), found a good market. Liqueurs were mostly imported from France, with the firm Potin offering various cheap, generic types.⁷⁴

By now, beer, too, was consumed by the most affluent Iranians, but even more so by resident foreigners. In the north Russian beers were most common, with brands brewed in Samara, Astrakhan, Riga and Odessa. Beer from Riga cost 180 qran per crate of sixty bottles. In the south, by contrast, the great heat made strong brews more popular. There, German and English brands prevailed, and could be found even in the small Gulf ports, yet they were relatively expensive and could not compete with American beer, most notably Schlitz-Milwaukee, which found its way to Iran in relatively large quantities.⁷⁵

NEW FORMS OF ANXIETY AND DISCIPLINE

In a fascinating mixture of old impulses and new sensibilities, those who drank in the nineteenth century often did so defiantly. This type of ostentatious drinking recalls the libertine, anti-clerical attitude of traditional high-minded Sufis claiming a private moral sphere that is so powerfully articulated by Hafez and his fellow poets. What was new in the Qajar period was not so much the vehemence with which drinkers showed their contempt for the increasingly abrasive *ulama* who felt no longer restrained by a forceful ruler capable or willing to rein them in, as the “modernizing,” Western inflected disposition reflected in the defiance of those who made little effort to observe the laws of the Prophet. Flaunting one’s drinking became an explicit political statement, a way of showing a “modern” attitude by way of heaping scorn on obscurantist clerics and their cant, and as such it was part of a social ferment in nineteenth-century Iran that proved to be a breeding ground for Babism and other forms of radicalism as well.⁷⁶ By the early twentieth century, this new, Western-style consumption of alcohol, mostly arak and vodka, would give rise to the famous bars and cafes and cabarets of Lāleh-zār Street in Tehran.

At the same time, reactions to what was perceived as enhanced public drinking came in the form of a new approach, which sought to curb and con-

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ For more on this, see Matthee, *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, 199–204.

tain through admonition and exhortation, using arguments that were no longer grounded in traditional morality. In former times opposition to alcohol had invariably been couched in religious terms; bans had always been proclaimed in the name of conformity with the tenets and prescriptions of Islam. Anti-liquor campaigns, often following riots instigated by clerics and targeting Jewish property, would occur into the twentieth century. But as of the late nineteenth century, one observes a growing medicalization in the evaluation of the use and abuse of alcohol. A good example is the creation of a Western-style society to combat alcohol among Armenians in Azerbaijan, which included illustrated lectures about the hereditary nature of alcohol abuse and the physical harm caused by drinking.⁷⁷ Publicists, too, began to present drinking as harmful, using arguments borrowed from European scientific research. Opium received the bulk of the attention because it was (rightfully) seen as the greater problem. But alcohol, too, came under fire for its debilitating effects on both the body and the brain, leading to a loss of judgment and memory, quite aside from the lack of willpower it was thought to reflect and, in a vicious cycle, produce.⁷⁸ An early manifestation of this new discourse appeared in 1289/1872, in the newspaper *Iran*, in the form of a serialized treatise on the “decline of order in the world as a result of alcoholic drinks.” Its author, a doctor from Kashan, voiced his concerns about European influence in the form of the introduction and ready acceptance of all kinds of new liquors into Iran.⁷⁹

This new approach intensified in the 1920s, reflecting the new era represented by Reżā Shāh and his policies. Despite the occurrence of the Constitutional Revolution in the first decade of the twentieth century, Iran remained a largely traditional society until the reign of Reżā Shāh, who set out to modernize the country through social disciplining, determined to regulate society by inculcating seriousness and a sense of order among its members. The burgeoning women’s press of the time took part in this new discourse. The Esfand 1306/March-April 1928 issue of *Peyk-e Sa’adat-e Nesvān*, a women’s journal published in Rasht, opened with an article titled “War has to be Waged against Opium.” The article clearly reflects a prevailing con-

⁷⁷ For this, see Taqizādeh, *Zendegi-ye tufāni*, 44.

⁷⁸ See Cyrus Schayegh, *Who is Knowledgeable Is Strong: Science, Class, and the Formation of Modern Iranian Society, 1900–1950* (Berkeley, 2009), 92, 179.

⁷⁹ Mirzā Taqī Ṭabīb Kāshānī, “Dar bayān-e ekhtelāl-e neẓām-e Irān beh vāseṭeh-ye mosakkerāt,” *Irān*, 10 Šafar 1289/29 April 1872.

cern about opium addiction as the greater scourge on society, which the author called a “national disease.” Yet the article also warned about alcoholism, claiming that the pressures of modern life would easily lead the rich and poor to the use of opium or alcohol. The difference, the author insists, is that the rich tend to consume alcoholic drinks of better quality that are less damaging, whereas people without means suffer greater harm for consuming alcohol of low quality while often drinking on an empty stomach.⁸⁰ The *Sālnāmeḥ-ye Pārs* of 1314/1935, warned that despite its many medicinal applications, alcohol is a poisonous substance, adding that it is erroneous to think that arak and other hard liquors are harmful but that wine somehow is an exception.⁸¹

Various Western-educated Iranian doctors in this period wrote theses that spelled out the dangers of alcohol and referred to anti-alcohol campaigns in Western countries, including the United States.⁸² An example is Dr. Sa‘id Malek (Loqmān al-Molk) from Tabriz. Educated at the Loqmāniyeh School in that city, he subsequently studied medicine in Paris. He would go on to become a well-known lecturer at the Dār al-Fonun in Tehran, and eventually served as minister of health. He wrote a dissertation titled “Eye disease as a result of alcohol and tobacco use.” Another doctor, ‘Ali Akbar Jalāli, in 1945 submitted a dissertation on the human nervous system to the Medical Faculty of the University of Tehran which sums up the changed attitude toward alcohol. He acknowledged that alcohol was not as much of a problem in Iranian society as opium. He nevertheless warned that, in recent years, the consumption of alcohol had spread. Whereas previously religion and the force of shame forced people to drink in hidden places, he intones, they now consume it openly and brazenly. Basing himself on the latest, mostly French research, Jalāli argued that alcohol produces all kinds of ailments, some of which are hereditary, affecting the brain, cause premature old age, and leading to criminal behavior. His recommendations for remedies range from restricting to closing wine shops.⁸³

⁸⁰ *Peyk-e Sa‘adāt-e Nesvān* 1:3 (Esfand 1306/Ramāzān 1346), repr., ed. Banafsheh Mas‘udi and Nāṣer Mohājir (Berkeley and Créteil, 2012), 4–6 (134–36 in new edn.).

⁸¹ *Sālnāmeḥ-ye Pārs* 1314/1925, 88, 89.

⁸² See “Ḥormat-e mosakkerāt dar Englis,” *Tarbiyat* 22 Sha‘bān 1321/12 Nov. 1903.

⁸³ ‘Ali Akbar Jalāli, “Ta’sir-e alkol bar dastgāh-e pey.” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Tehran, Faculty of Medicine (1323–24/1945).

State reactions, meanwhile, did not stop at exhortation. One of the first proclamations issued by the new government upon staging the coup that brought it to power in February 1921 included a prohibition on, first the importation, and a few days later, the overall consumption of alcohol. The sale of liquor was outlawed and shops where alcohol was sold were closed. Presumably inspired by Sayyed Żiā Ṭabāṭabā'i, Reżā Shāh's fellow conspirator, a cleric, the measure was also designed to forestall Bolshevik influence by way of strengthening Iran's religious profile.⁸⁴ Upon Ṭabāṭabā'i's forced resignation in May 1921, liquor stores and places where alcohol was served were allowed to open their doors again.⁸⁵ Within a year, the ban (on foreign imports) had been "considerably diluted," largely for reasons of revenue, as the British resident in Tehran put it.⁸⁶ In December of the following year, Iran's newspapers published a ministerial announcement spelling out the conditions required for recruits into the Aragh Brigade, which included the stipulation that men entering the army be free from opium and alcohol dependence.⁸⁷ December 1926 saw the proclamation of new ban on the importation of luxury imports – of items whose domestic manufacture should be encouraged – which included alcoholic beverages.⁸⁸ In 1926–27 tariffs on alcohol reached 100 percent, putting it beyond the purchasing power of most Iranians.⁸⁹ The result was a steep decline in imported liquor. The imports dropped from 5,603,000 qrans in 1304/1925–26 to 3,949,000 qrans in 1305/1926–27.⁹⁰

Yet neither the many admonitions nor the various curbing measures taken by the state seem to have led to a decrease in the level of alcohol consumption; indeed, indications are that it went up, evidently riding on an increase in relatively cheap, domestically produced alcohol. After falling precipitous-

⁸⁴ Hoseyn Makki, *Tārikh-e bist sāleh-ye Irān. Kudetā-ye 1299*, 3 vols. (Tehran, 1323/1944; repr. 1358/1979), 1:298–99; and Ja'far Shahri, *Tārikh-e ejtemā'i-ye Tehrān dar qarn-e sizdehom* (Tehran, 3rd ed., 1378/1999), 4:378–79.

⁸⁵ Shahri, *Tārikh-e ejtemā'i-ye Tehrān*, 4:380–81.

⁸⁶ IPD:6:416 (E8057/8057/34, N°314: "Persia. Annual Report, 1922. XII - Medical Affairs. (2.) Sanitary and Allied Questions," 64).

⁸⁷ NA, Iran. Political Diaries (IPD). 6:648 (E1285/255/34, N° 599: "Enclosure in N°1: Intelligence Summary N° 51 for week ending Dec. 22, 1923," 2)

⁸⁸ AAE, CC, Tehran to Paris, 8 Jan. 1927 and 10 Feb. 1927, fols. 65ff.

⁸⁹ AAE, CP, n.s. Perse 62, fol. 116.

⁹⁰ *Tableau générale du commerce avec les pays étrangères pendant l'année 1305* (Tehran, 1927), xi/2, "Importations."

ly from c. 5000 hectoliter in 1920 to some 1,300 in 1921, the consumption of spirits as recorded by way of figures on taxation shot up to almost 2,000 in 1922 and 1923, and then back to nearly 5,000 the following year, to reach c. 5,500 in 1929.⁹¹

Much of this was probably consumed indoors. Friedrich Rosen, a German diplomat stationed in Iran in the early twentieth century, described entertainment among the well to do as follows: "The guests would be received in the state rooms of men's apartments, and treated to a variety of salted and roasted seeds, nuts, pistachios, almonds, etc., and small glasses of very fine tea and arak." Echoing earlier observers of life in Iran, Rosen also commented on the propensity among those Iranians who drank to do so generally "with the idea of getting totally intoxicated," since the "sin [...] is anyhow committed, therefore it is advisable to make the best of it."⁹² And Merritt-Hawkes, writing in 1933, the height of the Reżā Shāh period, observed that, "In houses where Eastern influence is strong, the men have whiskeys and sodas (when they can be obtained) as well as wine and the Persian spirit, *arak*." Arak, she noted, was "drunk in enormous quantities but is generally bad."⁹³

By that time, Lāleh-zār Street had opened up. Originating as a garden, the Bāgh-e Lāleh-zār, this famous street had been laid out in the 1870s at the orders of Nāṣer al-Din Shāh after his return from his first European trip. In the first half of the twentieth century Lāleh-zār Street developed into the entertainment district of the capital, a symbol of modernity filled with cinemas, theaters, cabarets, and European-style restaurants and bars serving food and drink. Elsewhere in the city the Western bar, translated as *piyāleh-forushi*, made its entry as well in the late Qajar period. Substituting for the traditional speakeasies, the *kharābāt* and *meykhāneh*, the *piyāleh-forushi* would become more common under the Pahlavis, when it also spread to cities beyond Tehran.⁹⁴ The modern hotels that opened in the 1960s invariably had their own bars, catering to more westernized Iranians as well as to foreigners. Yet,

⁹¹ *Baladiyeh-ye Tehrān. Devvomin sālnāmeḥ-ye eḥṣā'iyeh-ye shahr-e Tehrān/Deuxième annuaire statistique de la ville de Teheran, 1925–1929* (Tehran, 1310/1930),

⁹² Friedrich Rosen, *Oriental Memories of a German Diplomatist* (London, 1930), 135, 139.

⁹³ O. A. Merritt-Hawkes, *Persia. Romance and Reality* (London, 1935), 20, 119.

⁹⁴ See http://www.darioush-shahbazi.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=314&Itemid=12

overall, Iran continued to be, as it had always been, a “most sober nation,” where most people lived and died without ever tasting wine.⁹⁵

This situation – in which alcohol was publicly available yet not common; its consumption limited, as before, to the lower classes and the haute bourgeoisie – remained in place until the end of Pahlavi rule in 1979. By the early 1960s twenty factories in Iran produced alcoholic drinks with 382 workers, making: 7.92 mln bottles of vodka and arak, 96,256 bottles of cognac, and 462,630 bottles of wine. There were also four beer breweries with 183 workers producing 7.68 mln bottles of beer.⁹⁶ In later editions of the *Iran Almanac*, the source of this information, there are no more references to the production of alcoholic beverages, perhaps in deference to religious pressure not to publicize alcohol consumption. If so, this was a harbinger of things to come: After 1979 conditions came full circle: Iranians once again had to turn to the privacy of their homes to attain their alcoholic dreams.

⁹⁵ Rosen, *Oriental Memories*, 139.

⁹⁶ *Iran Almanac* (1963), 24.

