

Drinking Wine in Iran under the Reign of Aryamehr

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Allow me a rather simple, not to say frivolous preliminary remark: among contemporary Iranian intellectuals it has become a widely used custom to refer to the period before the Arabian/Islamic conquest of Iran as “pīsh az eslām” (pre-Islamic), and the following period up to our lifetime as “ba’d az eslām” (post-Islamic). I usually feel tempted to raise some infidel viewpoints here: has present-day Iran really arrived in a “post-Islamic” era? I shall immediately refrain from any further argumentation; in any case, talking about consuming wine in Iran prior to 1979 A.D. may remind us of “pre-Islamic” conditions in the proper sense of the word.

To start with, it might be suitable to raise some considerations concerning the research methods that were applied in the context of this contribution. Originally, I had intended to base my reflections on reported source material in the sense of oral history. When I started to ask suspicious individuals who might possibly contribute to my subject, I found out very soon that my best partner in discussion and subsequently my most ample source was – myself and my admittedly fragmentary personal memory covering the period from 1962 until 1978, and particularly the time between 1964 and 1969, when I had the opportunity of living permanently in Iran – mainly in Tehran. Therefore I have reconceived this contribution as something like an evocative collection of personal memories about the consumption of wine (and also of other kinds of alcoholic beverages, i.e. *mashrūb* in contemporary Persian); they derive mainly from the nineteen-sixties A.D. (the forties H. Sh.), with some additional information leading up to the eve of the Islamic Revolution in 1978/9.

Introducing matters related to eating and drinking into studies concerning the Middle East and so-called “Islamic countries” as serious topics of research took a remarkably long time to happen. This may apply less to research in social and cultural studies such as ethnology (*mardom-shenāsī*) and cultural anthropology, but certainly for those traditions which were mainly and originally rooted in philological approaches. This consideration offers me an opportunity to mention one of the leading pacemakers in this field: Peter Heine, Berlin (*Weinstudien: Untersuchungen zu Anbau, Produktion*

und Konsum des Weins im arabisch-islamischen Mittelalter, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 1982). Since then, culinary studies form one of the mainstreams in cultural research, also in studies on the Middle East. With reference to the cultural history of Iran in Early Modern Times, Rudi Matthee from the University of Delaware should be regarded as an important standard bearer in this field of research, and we owe to him an important contribution to this volume.

With reference to the Iranian lands, another researcher deserves to be mentioned: the late Bertold Spuler who produced a voluminous study on “Iran in the Early Islamic Period” (*Iran in frühislamischer Zeit*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 1952). In addition to his “histoire événementielle”, he included a respectable chapter on cultural and social aspects with a sub-chapter here on material culture, including eating and drinking. The very last part of his text refers to “wine”, immediately followed by the final bibliography. In fact, this attempt was facilitated by an admirable book by an early German historian of the Islamic World, Paul Schwarz, who collected a vast amount of information on almost everything from early Muslim – mostly Arabic-writing – geographers of the Middle Ages (Paul Schwarz, *Iran im Mittelalter nach den arabischen Geographen*; nine volumes, Leipzig – Stuttgart – Berlin 1896–1935). Paul Schwarz’s rich collection of materials referring to almost all aspects of food and drinking is strikingly abundant.

Despite all these sources and their informative value, nobody would have addressed the question of wine so intensely if a certain degree of affinity between “wine” and “Iranians” were not a widely perceived phenomenon. This perception was not at all necessarily based on immediate experience or empirical observation but rooted far more in the global knowledge of (New) Persian poetry. One of the basic themes of poetic works since Rūdakī via ‘Omar-e Khayyām and Hāfeẓ till contemporary times (even including occasional poets like Rūḥollāh Khomeynī) refers constantly to wine. Wine had been praised in pre-Islamic times as the drink of kings and rulers, the holy fluid of Zoroastrian priests. Even after the general conversion of most Iranians to Islam (“pas az eslām”, see above!), this continued to attract public admiration as an overwhelming symbol even when consumption of wine was already a punishable offence according to the Sharī‘a.

It might have been Persian poetry with its specific approach to wine that continued throughout history to prevent a certain number of Iranians from remaining abstinent from wine, alcohol and drugs in general. Wine and wine consuming obviously remained part of the indispensable paraphernalia of prestige and power and, in many cases, wealth. Excessive wine-drinking is

well documented for rulers of the Seljuq era and their contemporaries, even more for rulers of Mongol origin and their cultural imitators, down to Timur and the Timurids, and also the Turcomans. Pious if not to say fanatic believers like the sectarian Shāh Esmāʿīl and the Uzbek rulers of Transoxiana of Sunni faith were heavy wine-drinkers, and this attitude is corroborated even for the very pious last Safavid ruler Shāh Solṭān-Ḥoseyn, whose bigotry did not save him from being addicted to wine (or God knows what else), albeit with a bad conscience.

During the nineteenth century, particularly from the late days of Fath-ʿAlī Shāh onwards, the consumption of alcoholic beverages gained additional values and dimensions: It was more or less understood as an integral part of the process of early modernization in the sense of westernisation, which from the eighteen-thirties onwards was adopted with pleasure by Iranian upper-class individuals, among them princes, high officials and their entourage and to a certain extent even wealthy merchants, including important sections of the metropolitan *jeunesse dorée* of Tehran. After the ferocious tumult of the Second Persian War against the Russians was becalmed, it became irresistibly fashionable for those who could afford it to spend whole summers in the Caucasus, maybe in Tiflis, or in the Georgian countryside. Places like Borzhom were seen later on as the first step to famous spas such as Evian, Contrexéville, Baden-Baden, Bad Gastein, and Karlový Vary (Karlsbad).

Apparently, it was mainly thanks to the Georgians that young *fashionistas* from Qajar Persia learned how to consume wine and alcohol in general: in the open-air of the countryside close to a splashing creek, a waterfall – the traditional scenery of the most popular recreation resorts in Muslim cultures – were now delightedly converted into the favoured biotopes for wine-drinkers. In the nineteen-seventies throughout Iran, a *qahve-khāne* was in fact still a place where exclusively tea was served in a rather traditional atmosphere; a *chāy-khāne* located in a rural resort was supposed to be an appropriate place to consume heavy beverages, accompanied by some skewers of *kabāb*, white cheese and bread. Today (in the Islamic Republic) these institutions still exist but, at least officially and publicly, only with tea.

There was one group within the Iranian population that for many centuries had a traditional and deeply rooted relationship with wine: Armenians. Armenians seem to have been responsible for the wine supply within Iran for an extensive period.

Be that as it may, the Georgian habit of drinking wine led the then recently converted Iranian consumers of wine immediately to a stronger habit –

brandy (Georgian) style or, in many cases, vodka (Russian style). The poetic association of wine was in many cases conferred upon 'araq or simply *vod-kā*. In nineteen-sixties' Tehran, the word *mey* was exclusively used for vodka or 'araq. The typical glass for serving vodka was called an *estekān* (from Russian: *stakan*, also widely used for tea-glasses). The units of drinking vodka were *jadval* (comparable to the Russian unit *sto gram*), *panj-sīrī* (five *sīr* à 75 grammes), *nīm-boṭr* (half-bottle) and *boṭr* (full bottle). The action of drinking any kind of alcohol (wine or hard liquor) was swallowing a "sip" (*peyk*). What remained from the Georgian heritage survived mainly in the realm of vodka rather than of wine in its proper sense. Nevertheless, wine was available everywhere in Tehran throughout the sixties (the forties), but this was perceived rather as a cultural requirement of those who had become famous as *farangī-ma'ābs*, "imitators of European life-style", and in fact mainly of those who were addicted to the French lifestyle. Those inclining more towards cultural Americanism as a fashion shifted mostly from vodka towards Scotch Whisky, and many Tehranis of the then young generation whom we might have much later defined as "yuppies" preferred Scotch, with a strong antipathy to vodka, which they subsumed as a traditional, almost typically Iranian drink, by far inferior to the then trendy American vogue. It goes without saying that vodka remained recognized as an important signifier of "modern lifestyle" but this was the modernity of secular fathers and grandfathers, who still felt a sensuous affinity to Russian habits that had had such a strong formative influence on early Iranian modernity in everyday life. The "homo novus" of the sixties was much further ahead: The *fokolī*-grandfathers had been replaced by the *farangī-ma'āb*-fathers but, many of their middle- and upper-class sons in the sixties regarded themselves strongly as Americans in Persian disguise, at least in their own imagination.

Where was the wine? First of all, importing wine never ceased to be tiresome and costly. Otherwise, domestic wine was relatively easy to obtain, mainly from Armenian wine-makers, and consumers did not care much about the quality. There were wine-producing and -selling companies particularly in the vicinity of Qazvin, moreover some regional sellers in Āzerbāyjān, and around Esfahān. But taking the limited number of wine-consumers into account (and also the fact that their expertise in enjoying wine used to be very limited), it is not surprising that at that time (in the sixties) Iranian wine did not reach anything like the quality standard of Iranian beer.

Beer was produced by companies who worked on a franchise basis with international breweries: Shams and Majīdieh were supervised by Belgian

brewers, and Argo was brewed according to Czech standards. I am not sure where the (by the way excellent) Tabrīzī beer Setāreh obtained its licence. About ten years later, with Tuborg and Skål, this “traditional” set-up of Iranian breweries was destroyed, and we witnessed an early phenomenon of globalization in this industry.

Back to wine: with regard to white wines, there was something called Riesling on the market, or more precisely, on the shelves of the American-style Tehran supermarkets. This was a sweetish alcoholic beverage, and swallowing it was not really an occasion of delight. Be that as it may, there were young Iranians who had studied in Germany and occasionally may have tried a sip of Riesling, but usually by far preferred beer. Those with a French background had more of an inclination towards red wine. From the Qazvīn corner, they could obtain something called “claret” which switched between rosé and red wine in its proper sense. In addition, there was another type of red wine which was called *kholār*, thus using the famous name of a kind of wine ardently propagated by Ḥāfeẓ in his poetry on wine-drinking. To all those who were familiar with Ḥāfeẓ the denomination of *kholār* was familiar too – but I never met any Iranian friend of mine who ever drank even a mere sip of this imitation of Ḥāfeẓ’s legendary *kholār*, and in my own experience they were right: twentieth-century *kholār* was terribly sour and there was no fun at all in drinking it.

Moreover, there was also sparkling wine produced in Iran, so-called “champagne”. Iranian champagne was a very sweet affair and it was comparably expensive – at that time, i.e. in the nineteen-sixties. You had to pay roughly 200 Iranian rials (20 tomans) a bottle, which was the equivalent of about ten Deutschmarks. A bottle of reliable and well-tasting Iranian vodka (there was a continuous dispute about the supremacy of “Balzām” vs. “Etteḥādīeh” and “Meykadeh”, as they were transliterated, both of them produced in Qazvin at that time) was available at a price of about 13 to 15 tomans.

Who were the consumers? It goes without saying that the majority of Iranian people uncritically obeyed Islamic regulations and therefore abstained from any kind of *mashrūb* (alcoholic drinks). However, there was a strongly secularized, mainly urban segment of Iranian society that evidently had a positive inclination towards alcoholic beverages. Among them, Armenians were certainly prone to the enjoyment of wine, much more than other groups. Iranians who accepted alcoholic drinks preferred vodka or Scotch (in accordance with the aforementioned different attitudes towards Western civilization). Yet far more than this strong stuff, it was beer that gained

growing acceptance daily throughout Iran. There was a very rich and almost microscopic minority situated at the highest level of the society who could afford to consume precious French wines from Bordeaux and Burgundy. Those who imitated these social classes confined themselves to less tasty local productions. Foreign residents in Iran were most certainly targets of domestic Iranian wine-producing companies but they rarely succeeded in their aim. An exceptional group of wine-drinkers was made up of Armenians and those Persians who had a close affinity to their Armenian compatriots and neighbours: A flourishing quarter of the village of Hashtgerd between Karaj and Qazvīn was inhabited by Armenians and famous for densely frequented open-air wine drinking sessions absolutely comparable to the Viennese “Heurige”. Similar reports refer to the Armenian area of Esfahān, and even Shīrāz; also some places in Āzerbāyjān were mentioned in this context.

The minority of Francophile Iranians formed only a very small part of the total population, but it goes almost without saying that they maintained an attitude of undisputable solidarity with wine and particular with red wine, disregarding the obviously very limited quality of what they drank.

Let us take a look at tourist guide books of that time (we are still in the late nineteen-sixties): the *Guide bleue*, a French publication, does not mention wine at all, with one exception – Qazvīn is mentioned as a wine-producing area. Elisabeth Malle, author of *Schröders Reiseführer Iran*, mentions wine but once, without any qualification. There was no change when comparing it with the *Guide Book on Persia* by G. H. Ebtehaj from the thirties! However, there was a small booklet named *Good Food Guide to Iran* (first edition March 1968 by INACO Ltd.) which introduced a number of currently operating restaurants, together with notes on where to drink this and that – including wine. From here we learn that restaurants named “Xanadu” and “Chez Farid” were places with a particular emphasis on wine, both having been famous for their French cuisine, the latter also for its legendary “Buffet-Diner” – once a week, every Wednesday evening a particular cook prepared traditional Iranian food – the cook had reportedly survived from the late Qajar court. Moreover, wine was offered at a good number of other places but, generally at those with a distinctly European – mostly French – touch. I remember there was a restaurant named “Paprika” run by a Hungarian lady who always tried to convince her guests to taste a sip of wine – with limited success.

These attitudes changed during the last decade of Pahlavi rule in Iran: it is true that in the last ten years before the Islamic Revolution, beer-consuming

turned out to be a more and more common and almost national habit among the Iranian urban middle-classes – presuming they saw themselves as secularized. This tendency towards a spread in the use of alcohol also affected the attitudes towards wine: around the years influenced by the so-called “2500 years celebrations” (1971) a new brand of red wine was introduced to the domestic Iranian market: “Chateau Sar-Dasht”. This was a tasty, dark-red wine of Bordeaux type which was less cheap than the frustrating, previously available kinds of wine. I had an opportunity in 1976 to observe middle-class Tehranis – ladies as well as gentlemen – who casually ordered “Château Sar-Dasht” even in places where one would certainly not have expected to find alcoholic drinks.

This evolutionary history of the spreading of wine in Iran came to an abrupt stop, as everybody knows, in 1979. The anti-alcohol campaigns of the revolutionary regime hit the headlines most of all in the destruction of the vodka shelves of the Iranised ex-Russian employees of the National Fisheries along the Caspian shores and, even more, the extinction of thousands of precious bottles of French wine in the imperial wine-cellars. The very high acceptance level of alcoholic drinks by many Iranians in the Shāhanshāhī period can be estimated in that producers of “pious” beverages still continue producing something free of alcohol which is no longer to be called *āb-e jou* (beer) but, since the Islamic Revolution, *mā’o sha’ir* (meaning *āb-e jou*, “juice of barley” – but the sound of the Arabic term signifies a much more God-fearing attitude towards this new beverage, which does not have a particularly inviting taste). For almost twenty years, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been regularly importing a huge amount of canned beer without alcohol, among others from the Netherlands (“Bavaria”) and from a Franco-German brewery located in Germany (“Prostel” by Kaiserdom, Bamberg).

And what about wine nowadays? Wine can be found at random in any urban household, mostly self-made in the bath-tube, and it is reported that foreign handbooks on wine-making seem to be rather popular in Tehran and other cities. But this is not my point: Since a great number of Iranians migrated to various (mainly Western) countries, wine is gradually gaining a new connotation as a bearer of far-distant Iranian identity. This started as early as the mid-nineteen-eighties, when clever Italian wine-makers produced a red wine called “Omar Khayyam” which was immediately purchased by Iranians not only in Italy proper but also in neighbouring countries. It must have been around this time that Iranian migrants became aware that there was a special kind of red wine cultivated in Australia called “Shiraz”. Maybe supported by the Internet, rumours immediately spread abroad

among Iranians wherever they might have been all over the world (and, with a certain delay, even in Iran itself!). They propagated the idea that Shiraz wine should be regarded as one of the valuable Iranian contributions to world culture. The consumption of Shiraz wine slowly but surely opened up access to drinking and enjoying wine for many Iranian people in the Diaspora. Be that as it may: there were touching stories like the one told about a Sufi emigrant who had reached Australia in the last century – when he arrived at an Australian village at sunset, thirsty, hungry and tired, a local farmer presented himself as a generous host who took care of the poor Iranian. As a sign of his gratitude he offered the good man a green sprig of a Shiraz grape, and this was reportedly the start of Shiraz grape plantation in Australia, finding its way in due course to California and South Africa. There were more sober musings that Dutch sailors may have brought this grape to South Africa during the late Safavid period. Whatever: a Persian text proliferated on the web just recently referring to Wikipedia's information about the Shiraz grape: it is genetically identical with the famous "Syrah" grape, a kind of wine which has been cultivated in France at least since the fourteenth century. "Shiraz" is obviously nothing other than a corruption of "Syrah". The report ends with the sentimental statement: "Alas! It would have been a beautiful story. Let us at least continue drinking this wine whose name evokes such beautiful allusions among us Iranians!"

Not only for Iranians; I myself feel the sound of an Iranian violin reverberating through me whenever I take a sip of Shiraz wine, regardless of the bottle's origin – now we can even buy Shiraz wine from Burgenland in Austria (not cheap but of unusually good quality). Let's drink just two glasses or three of this "Syrah-Shiraz" wine and suddenly we shall find ourselves transported into the spiritual world of Ḥāfeẓ, the fragrant gardens of Shīrāz, and to a banquet with 'Omar Khayyām. The latter was a thorough-going Khorāsānī and certainly had nothing to do with the South Iranian city of Shīrāz, but after the fourth glass we don't give a hoot.