

# An unholy brew: alcohol in pre-Islamic Java

Old Javanese literary and epigraphical records suggest that a number of alcoholic beverages were known in Java before 1500, and fermented and distilled drinks were used in secular as well as in ritual contexts. Alcohol influenced social, cultural, religious and political life in pre-Islamic Java in many ways: from the ordinary to the unexpected. Fermented beverages were represented by several types of palm wine, rice beer, sugar cane wine, liana-based intoxicating brews, tuber-based beers and a number of fruit wines. Contrary to an established view, distilled beverages were introduced to Java only by the late 13th century, most probably through the Mongol or Chinese agency.

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“Among us there is no marriage feast without drinking. And at the festivals of the natives, where they are not of strong religious convictions (and usually they are Moslem only because their fathers, grandfathers and remote ancestors were Moslem – in reality, they are little better than heathen), large square bottles are always kept standing, and they are not sparing the use of these. But an evil greater than alcohol is here and that is opium. Oh!” These are the words from a letter penned by Kartini in Jepara in Central Java, and sent on 25 May 1899 to her Dutch friend Stella Zeehandelaar.<sup>1</sup> Many centuries before Kartini was born, in 1428, Chinese Ma Huan authored an account of another Javanese wedding: “[w]hen they reach the groom’s house, they strike gongs, beat drums, drink wine, and play music. After a few days they disperse.”<sup>2</sup> Still earlier, at the beginning of the 13th century, the *Sumanasāntaka*, an Old Javanese poem composed by Mpu Monagūṇa, gives us a fictional account of the wedding of Prince Sāmba and Princess Yajñavati, at which alcohol flowed freely: “Liquor in great quantities, tasting deliciously, comforting and inebriating, was much in demand. The drinks poured continuously from rock-crystal pitchers like fountains of palm syrup. Sugar cane wine and rice beer were drunk one after the other, like holy water and mead welling up from glass vessels.”<sup>3</sup>

Admittedly, more than at any other social event, consumption of alcohol was sanctioned at weddings, as testified by the three passages quoted above. Unlike in modern Bali, a primarily Hindu society where palm wine and other alcoholic drinks continue to be consumed, and where alcohol has a number of ritual uses, in contemporary Islamic Java alcohol is an extremely controversial issue. Yet, textual evidence suggests that in the past the people in Java used fermented and distilled drinks in the secular as well as in the ritual context. In fact, in pre-Islamic Java alcohol influenced social, religious, cultural and political life in many ways: from the ordinary to the remarkable and surprising. Before 1500, alcohol was widely used in Java as well as in Bali and more than a dozen types of fermented and distilled beverages have been documented from Old and Middle Javanese inscriptional and literary records.

## Drinking landscape: fermented beverages

Of all the potentially fermentable substances in Java, the variety of palm tree species from the *Palmae* family stand out. Many produce fruits that might have been occasionally turned into fermented drinks, but a more intriguing and culturally important alcoholic beverage was made from their sap. Traditionally called ‘palm wine’, the beverage is produced by the natural fermentation of the sap – which ferments spontaneously with natural

yeasts – and its alcohol content varies in the range of 1-6%, depending on a number of factors. In the past, the Javanese made several types of palm wine, some of them in several grades, using mostly the fermented sap of the coconut palm (*Cocos nucifera*), sugar palm (*Arenga pinnata*), Palmyra palm (*Borassus flabellifer*) and Nipah palm (*Nipa fruticans*). They knew a variety of fruit wines, and produced the sugar cane wine called *kilan* in Old Javanese. This mildly alcoholic, nourishing drink seems to have been, among other of its uses, served as a ‘welcome drink’ to guests in religious establishments, as we gather from a number of Old Javanese texts. The Javanese also made grain beers (*brəm*), including a potent rice beer (typically but imprecisely called ‘rice wine’), tuber-based fermented concoctions, and liana-based intoxicating brews. Old Javanese textual evidence indicates that ‘rice wine’ was fermented for months in stoneware containers buried in the earth, and a great number of stoneware jars imported to Java from China and Vietnam since the 8th or 9th centuries may have been used as fermenting vessels to mature ‘rice wine’ and to produce one particularly strong type of sugar cane wine. From the late 13th century onward, distilled liquors, a completely new category of potent alcoholic drinks, became known and consumed in Java and elsewhere in the Indo-Malay world. Textual and material evidence also suggests that superior Chinese alcoholic beverages, such as filtered ‘rice wine’, were imported to the Indo-Malay world since the 12th century in containers known to ceramic scholars as ‘mercury jars’. There is also evidence that Javanese elites consumed grape wine, which was imported in small quantities from Iran and by the early-modern period also from India and Europe.

A growing body of evidence indicates that until the 15th century alcohol was a more important phenomenon in many parts of pre-modern South, Central, and Southeast Asia than previously believed.<sup>4</sup> Java was no exception to this general pattern; while alcohol seems to have been enjoyed by many, it had its enemies as well. Texts in Old Javanese (800-1500), in particular religious works and codes of ecclesiastical rules, present intoxicating drinks as forbidden, addictive and impure. Other sources, including literary prose and poetry, law texts, texts on the eroticism, and historical accounts, describe and represent alcohol as arousing, nourishing and important in a variety of cultural and political contexts. In fact, the enduring impression one gets from Old Javanese literary and inscriptional records is that an enormous diversity, both of drinks and drinkers, complicates simplified discourses in religious works, and resists any straightforward conclusions. It seems that in coastal and drier parts of Java, alcohol was consumed more commonly than in the mountainous, inland areas; in some drier regions of Java, where Palmyra palms (*lontar*) were common, fresh palm wine may have been drunk just to quench thirst, as was common until recently in drier parts of Bali. In the *Sumanasāntaka*, a venerable head of a royal-sponsored

hermitage, reminds his guest, prince Aja, that “it would be best if you were not too uneasy about drinking palm wine. We drink it like water here. There is nothing else for you to drink.”<sup>5</sup>

## Alcohol distillation in pre-Islamic Java: transfer of Mongol technology

Apart from fermented alcoholic drinks, much more potent distilled beverages, such as arrack, were consumed. Historians of Java and scholars of Javanese literature have mostly assumed that distilled beverages were already known and consumed in Java by the 9th century, but this common and widespread misconception has led scholars to render simple fermented beverages such as *sīdhu* or *māstava* as ‘rum’ and ‘brandy’, liquors which were, in fact, unknown in Java before the late 13th century. Distilling was originally confined to just a few areas of the world, where it was most likely invented independently.<sup>6</sup> There are indications that distillation may have been known in ancient India, but the knowledge seems to have been lost by the Gupta period, if not earlier.<sup>7</sup> Refuting older theories of ancient knowledge of alcohol distillation in India, McHugh has recently defended the view that distilled beverages were introduced to India only during the period of Delhi Sultanate, apparently from Persia, sometime during the 14th century.<sup>8</sup> Java most probably received the new technology from southern China, a region from where at least one type of ‘rice wine’ has been imported since the 12th century, if not earlier. In China, the process of vaporization and re-condensing alcohol had been known since the Tang Dynasty, and by the Song period distilled wine had become an affordable article of commerce due to the use of improved stills.<sup>9</sup> The *araqī* style distilled wine, well-known in Java by the 15th century, was developed by the Mongols during the Yuan dynasty, when portable stills were widely used. Interestingly, the official history of Koryo indicates that *soju*, a Korean distilled drink based on rice beer, first began to spread from the encampments of the Mongol army in Korea, and was first called *arkhi*.<sup>10</sup> I consider it quite plausible that this particular type of alcohol distillation was also introduced by the Mongol military troops into Java, who invaded the island in 1292.

Before 1500, the Javanese had a sophisticated drinking culture: a number of specialized vessels were used to prepare, store, serve, drink and ceremonially present alcohol. Contrary to traditional views that alcohol was typically poured directly into the mouth from simple earthenware containers, people in pre-Islamic Java used drinking vessels ranging from coconut shell halves, palm-leaf cups, segments of bamboo tubes, through local pottery as well as imported stoneware and porcelain vessels, to rare glass cups and exceptional golden goblets. The available evidence indicates that the consumption of alcohol substantially diminished only during the first half of the 17th century when Javanese society became more strictly Islamic, and when other intoxicants, especially tobacco, coffee and opium became more common. By the 18th century, alcohol consumption in Java was limited mostly to parts of the gentry and other elites, some non-Javanese ethnic groups, and medical use.

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