
The objectives of examining the production, trade, and consumption of alcohol in pre-Islamic Java have clearly been achieved in this monograph. It is praiseworthy on its structure, thematic development, and multi-disciplinary approaches. These approaches include history, linguistics, anthropology and others, and are reflected in the extensive primary sources and nuanced reading of literature in the field. Author Jiří Jákl is clearly an authority on the topic but his publications also attest to his varied and diverse research areas, including Java's early culinary history, textile trade and human-animal relations. From the outset, Jákl has researched on Old Javanese history and his doctoral thesis was on warfare in pre-modern Southeast Asia. As a food historian, this book for me further encapsulates the thesis that food and drink are not only biological requirements of humans but inform us on social meanings pertaining to attitudes about class, race, gender and other cultural values.

The author states that it was not his intention to write a narrow history of alcohol. He did not by any means, but he cut across a swathe of history, casting wide and transregionally in languages and cultural practices. He informs us that he tries “… to use literary and epigraphic vignettes available to us in capacity of small windows through which to look at the past of Javanese society in the years before 1500 ce” (p. xi). As historians we can only examine slices of history, through lenses of anecdotes, narratives, and the like. Indeed, human social interaction in thought and deeds are untidy and it is not always helpful to falsely corral them neatly into logical and chronological sequences. Old Javanese texts (800–1500), particularly of religious works and codes of ecclesiastical rules, present intoxicating drinks as forbidden, addictive, and impure. Other sources, such as literary prose and poetry, legal documents, texts on eroticism, and historical accounts, tell us that alcohol was viewed as arousing and nourishing, and that it played an important role in social and political contexts. These sources also depict diversity, both of drinks and drinkers. The author details the different of types of alcoholic drinks documented in Java before 1500 ce and discusses vessels used to serve, drink, and ritually present alcohol. The evidence tells us that palm wine was the predominant alcoholic drink in pre-Islamic Java.

The book consists of the introduction and two parts. The introduction lays out the socio-cultural history of alcohol and its use in Java before 1500 ce, placing it in comparative perspective with other parts of the Indo-Malay world and the “Sanskrit Cosmopolis.” The author discusses the use of Old and Middle Javanese texts and its reliance on comparative evidence gathered from other...
cultures. Chapter one examines tapping and production of palm wine, the most common liquor in Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean islands. In chapter two, the author explains his term “rice beer” in preference to “rice wine,” a brew found all over Southeast Asia. It also covers “inebriating snacks,” delicacies made from fermented rice and were mostly served at women’s festivities. The third chapter discusses sugar cane, an important ingredient in ascetics’ diet pre-Islamic Java, which was also made into sugar cane wine and was drunk widely. Chapter four hypothesizes that the draksa of Old and Middle Javanese texts does not refer to grape wine but to Chinese rice beer or rice wine, an imported beverage to pre-Islamic Java from south China.

Chapter five looks at a category of “spiked drinks,” arguing that mushrooms were predominantly used to enhance alcohol for more potency in pre-Islamic Java. Chapter six pieces together textual evidence on when and how distillation of alcoholic beverages began in early Java. Jákl speculates that distillation was learned from the Chinese who were in Sumatra and other Malay-speaking regions. In chapter seven, the author dispels the myth that drinkers in the pre-modern Indo-Malay world drank palm wine by pouring the beverage directly from a vessel to their mouth. He calls attention to the linguistic ambiguity behind this claim and points out that woven leaves, coconut shells, and bamboo tubes were used to serve, drink, and present alcohol. Chapter eight continues on drinking vessels and the way alcoholic beverages were dispensed to drinkers. Drinking practices are also dealt with here, paying attention to feasts and banquets, the seating order, and the food served. Chapter nine looks at the status of palm wine and suggests that this milder wine was viewed as distinctly different from other types of alcohol.

Chapter ten discusses alcoholic drinks sold by vendors in stalls in ports and urban and village markets. Unlike rice beer and distilled drinks, palm wine was not traded over great distances due to its shorter shelf life. Chapter eleven examines festive and communal drinking, elaborating on the importance of alcohol in the political domain and its association with hospitality and state-sponsored festivities. We learn that alcohol was part of important rituals at marriage ceremonies, wedding feasts, and sexual intimacies in chapter twelve. Chapter thirteen looks at alcohol as an important element in Javanese warfare. This ranged from the imbibing of it in pre-battle feasts to its role in magical practices of spiritual empowerment of soldiers and their weapons. Jákl analyzes alcohol-related rituals and religious events in chapter fourteen. Alcohol was served as an accompaniment to food or offered to demons and protective spirits. Palm wine was the most common drink served at sima feasts.

Chapter fifteen discusses the use of alcohol among Javanese Buddhists and worshippers of Bhairawa. The author asserts that although Buddhism prohib-
its ingesting intoxicating substances, there were exceptions documented from several parts of pre-modern Buddhist Java. In chapter sixteen, the author points out that Old Javanese texts indicate that drunken people were not viewed differently from people who were dizzy or delirious due to spirit possession, seasickness, illness or the chewing of betel quid (p. 297). In chapter seventeen, Jákl demonstrates that habitual drinking and alcoholism existed in pre-modern Javanese society. He notes that there is no evidence to show the proscription of alcohol before the introduction of Islam. Chapter eighteen investigates the consequences of Islamization on alcohol use in Java, noting that many Javanese consumed alcohol up to the seventeenth century. Indeed, alcohol drinking was the norm among the Javanese gentry well into the nineteenth century. The final concluding chapter recapitulates that more than a dozen kinds of fermented and distilled alcohol were imbibed in Javanese society prior to 1500 CE. The most prominent of these were several types of palm wine. In addition to sugar cane wine and a variety of fruit wines, the Javanese also brewed three types of rice beer.

The author explains in substantial detail the sources he employed, pointing out the precaution in the use of literary texts. He states that “literary texts are not reflective of the totality of experience of making, drinking, and appreciating alcohol; they merely provide windows on particular traditions in particular times, and absence of evidence for certain practices is not evidence of their absence” (p. 3). He also carefully justifies the ways in which he provided his own translations of Old and Middle Javanese texts. A couple of criticisms I have of this monograph: the general index and the lack of a glossary. An index is the roadmap of a book. The index of this book does not do justice to such a fine piece of work. I also think a scholarly tome with countless terms from many languages deserves a glossary. Finally, while the beautiful images towards the end of the book add even more appeal to this book, the provenance statements of the illustrations are insufficient.

Nevertheless, Jákl is to be commended on his broad-ranging research and synthesis of published and unpublished sources, expertly tying together diverse topics on kinds of wines and beers, production methods, alcohol consumption, rituals, and drinking comportment. This book is relevant to everyone interested in premodern and early-modern history of Southeast Asia, particularly in intoxicants, diet, and feasting. In the wider context, it is useful to researchers of social and cultural history of Southeast Asia, Asian Studies, literature and culture, food history and food studies.

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