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Shi‘ite-Perso Views Towards Abusing Wine and Opium:
Is it Addiction or Culture?¹

By

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Abstract: In this essay, one of the most serious problems is highlighted with respect to contemporary Iranians who are largely recognized as Shi‘a believers and combine ancient Persian literature and culture from pre-Islamic periods with Islamic-Shi‘ite thought. The issue regards what their view is toward abusing wine and opium. On one hand, the rich heritage of Persian literature is full of poems, narrations and anecdotes with reference to

¹ My special thank goes to Prof. Dr. Andrew Rippin and Dr. S. H. Azimidokht for their editions and fruitful comments.
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wine and opium, while on the other hand, many parts of Shi'ite thought and teaching deem wine unclean and illegal, and abusing opium forbidden except under certain [hard-to-fulfill] conditions. The aim of this study is to express why the question "are drinking wine and abusing opium known as addiction or literal culture?" is so suspended by the Iranian community, particularly its young generation. In this regard, the standpoints of Persian poets and Iranian religious figures towards wine and opium will be considered.

Keywords: Shi'ite, Persian, Wine, Opium, Hashish, Addiction, Iran, Islam, Qur'an

Abbreviations: Shi'ite-Perso: Shi'ite Persian

1. Introduction

Several scholars have written about 'addiction' from religious viewpoints and more recently, some works have dealt with society's response to addiction. Since many societies are founded on a specific faith and religion, for instance scholars like Nazim Ghouri and colleagues consider the influence Islam has on smoking among Muslims. They understood that various contemporary religious edicts (*fatwa*) by jurists (*fuqaha*) are in opposition to smoking tobacco [1]. Muslim jurists generally refer to Qur'anic or Prophetic traditions (*hadith*) when issuing edicts. Concerning smoking, the majority turn to Qur'anic verses such as "Spend your wealth for the cause of Allah, and be not cast by your own hands to ruin; and do good. Lo! Allah loveth the beneficent." (Q 2: 195).² Apparently this verse urges Muslims not to destroy their bodies and souls. Some modern interpreters of the Qur'an also stress on this and explain that in this verse, the term 'ruin' means "falling in a way that a human is not able to recognize where he is" [2] although neither the Qur'an nor its commentaries directly mentions the topic of addiction or any particular type of drug. Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) allows jurists to decide and explain verses and traditions based on their Islamic knowledge as well as observations and understanding of social requirements. As Hallaq stated, "ijtihād is the exertion of mental energy in the search for a legal opinion to the extent that the faculties of the jurist become incapable of further effort. In other words, ijtihād is the maximum effort expended by the jurist to master and apply the principles and rules of usūl al-fiqh (legal theory) for the purpose of discovering God's law." [3] Concerning 'addiction,' the link between Islamic deduction and scientific findings is obvious as jurists mostly explain the term *ruin* [as per Q 2:195] based on scientific data presented by [western] scientists. Such scientific data may be a part of recent statistics on drunk or addicted drivers who ruin (kill) themselves as a result of abusing drugs. Research shows that 39.6% of people killed on roads in France in 2003-2004 had taken drugs [4][5]. Thus, jurists must bear in mind scientific discoveries to keep their edicts up-to-date and suitable for future generations.

Accordingly, apart from logical and scientific advice, Muslims may not consume drugs and become addicted due to religious recommendations (from the Qur'an and traditions) as well as scientific supplementations employed by jurists. However, Shi'ite Muslims mostly found in contemporary Iran and who are known as Iranians or Persians perceive the matter of addiction differently. This will be discussed in subsequent sections of this essay.

² Pickthall's translation of the Qur'an at: <<http://quran.com/>>. Accessed 25 April 2014.

2. Shi'ite-Perso Muslims

For hundreds of years, Persians as well as other Shi'ite communities have been minority groups with a significant influence on Eastern and Western societies. Nowadays and especially after the 1978 Islamic Revolution of Iran, current Iranians are largely recognized as Shi'ite believers who incorporate Persian literature with Islamic-Shi'ite culture and thought. Meanwhile, they have scattered throughout the world owing to several concerns (e.g. political, social, and cultural). Although Shi'ism became the official state religion in Iran after the kingship period of King Isma'il of Safavid (r. 1501-1524), Iran's culture and attitude have become entirely infused with the comments and traditions of Prophet Muhammad's household (*ahl al-bayt*) or even medieval Persian thinkers such as Avicenna (d. 1037), al-Biruni (d. 1048), Nasir al-Din Tusi (d. 1247) and so forth. In this section, addiction will be presented from two different stances, of Shi'ism and Persians, both of which are joined [particularly] in contemporary Iran as well as in some parts of Afghanistan. Undoubtedly, [some] Shi'ite-Perso people find their belief in Islamic-Shi'ite thought and pursue Persian culture in their history, literature and remaining arts. But in some regards, these two elements of being Shi'ite as well as Persian are not compatible and evidently clash in some features. One of these conflicting points is the problem of abusing wine and opium.

2.1. The Shi'ite and Addiction

Shi'ism is a major sect in Islam with roots dating back to after Muhammad's death (d. 632AD). It should be pointed out that it has had an influential role in the development of Islamic heritage for hundreds of years. Shi'ite believers identify 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (d. 661 AD) as their first Imam (leader) whose [other eleven] male descendants are called Imams as well. Apart from the Middle East, current Shi'ite elements play an important role in the Far-East Muslim world, and it can be seen how Shi'ite Imams are a part of Malay customs, history and literature too [6]. For instance, 'Ali, on account of his chivalry and braveness, left a major mark in the Malay Martial Arts *silat* [7]. Nonetheless, Shi'ite Imams' statements resemble divine speech for believers and the majority of Iranians. Shi'ite jurists and thinkers refer to Imams' words when issuing edicts.

Iranian jurists' views towards addiction are normally formed from such statements. Although the concept of addiction (in Persian called *i'tiyad*) was not applied in the early period of Islam, its elements were occasionally considered illegal and evil. For instance, the following is narrated by 'Ali ibn Ibrahim from his father as narrated from al-Rayyan ibn al-Salt: "I heard Imam al-Rida (the 8th Imam of Shi'a) saying, "Allah never sent a prophet without a law that prohibits the use of wine...;" or the sixth Imam of Shi'a, Ja'far al-Sadiq also stated that God, Most Holy, Most High, made only wine unlawful to consume" [8]; Even a voluptuous man called himself addicted, who drank wine a lot and sat next to beautiful ladies every night [8 (H 1276, Ch. 119, h 5)]. Some Shi'ite traditions also highlight the immorality of drinking wine for Muslims: "Abu Muhammad (a.s.) had an agent who lived in a room in a house with a white servant of the Imam (a.s.). The agent invited the servant to do evil activities with him and the servant refused to do so unless he brought him wine. The agent managed to find wine and take it to him. There

were three closed doors between them and the quarters of the Imam (a.s.). The narrator said that the agent who narrated that to me that was awake and I saw the doors open until I saw the Imam (a.s.) in Persion standing at the door. He then said, "O have fear of Allah and be pious before Him. In the morning he ordered to sell the servant and discharge me from the job" [8 (Chapter 124, 19)]. As another example, the Ayatullah named Jawad Lankarani referred to a tradition stated by Ja'far al-Sadiq, "wine is the main reason behind all sins..." and confirmed that drinking wine is *haram* or illegal [9]. It is crystal clear that apart from scientific data and Qur'anic statements, Shi'ite believers' stance on 'drinking and being drunk' is founded on Shi'ite Imams' statements or Imami hadiths. Thus, it usually happens that many modern Iranians rely on Imams' statements in order to explain scientific facts or vice versa. For one, Musa ibn Ja'far (the 7th Imam of Shi'ite) said "wine has not been forbidden due to its name, but because of its harms and mal-functions, so anything that has the same bad influence as wine is known as wine" [8]. These words have been used by Iranian scholars to define the present term 'addiction.' This hadith reveals (a) that wine is illegal and prohibited due to its corruption that leads human beings to addiction; and (b) whatever has the same [bad] influence on human beings' bodies is illegal and prohibited, so the term 'whatever' entails abusing drugs, or addiction to anything that ruins the body. Subsequently, this scholar concluded that an addicted man will ruin his life and himself [10]. It can be noted that addiction in Shi'ite thought via Islamic resources implies things that can be abused and bring corruption and ruin to the human body and soul. However, the story of wine for Iranian Shi'ite-Persians is relatively different.

2.2. *Persians and Addiction*

As far as we know, some Persian poetic literature explains moral, behavioral and other lessons through the language of poems, verses and couplets. Although many Persians, as indicated earlier, are Shi'ite, they wish to refer to literal figures (e.g., Khayyam, Hafiz, etc.) to elucidate their notions and civilization. Indeed, a large number of Persians are impressed by their poetic heritage and cannot abandon it. Yet, they unwillingly face a serious problem upon perceiving the obvious contradictions between their religious decrees or edicts and literature on common issues. One of these issues deals with wine or *sharab* in Persian, which is also called *mey* and *badih*. This term is commonly used in Persian literature and has been employed by Muslim poets and thinkers as a pure, divine and lovely drink rather than a corrupted beverage as Shi'ite Imams or Muslim jurists and preachers have defined it. Wine actually originated in the ancient Near East; Egyptians and Syrian–Palestinians were great enthusiasts of wine and beer. Wine, itself, was a beloved drink in pre-Islamic Arabia and a permanent constituent of Arab culture [11]. Besides, the historical city Shiraz in Iran was well-known for the red wine called "Sharab-e Shiraz," whose emergence dates back to the pre-Islamic period of the Middle East. There are a number of narrations and stories that signify Iranians were pioneers of winemaking (as mentioned by Khayyam in *Nowruz-Nameh*). *Sharab-e Shiraz* was imported by Alexander's army to the north Mediterranean area for its quality. Likewise, there is a story which remarks the *Shirazi wine* grape scion called "syrah or shiraz" was introduced by Gaspard de Stérinberg to the southern lands of France and Rhône Valley. These points attest that ancient Persia was the main land of wine, which was later

conquered by Arab Muslims. Further, Qur'anic verses (Q 2:219; 4:43; 5:90-91) decidedly prohibit wine (drinking) for Muslims. Subsequently, [as mentioned earlier] *ahadith* and jurisprudential (*fiqhi*) utterances strongly banned the production of winemaking and keeping this drink at home, while many Iranians who enjoyed drinking wine experienced severe conditions regarding religious conflicts with culture.

Persian poets with their profound prosaic language kept *Sharab* in their life although they were mostly Muslim. Khayyam (d. 1131) and Hafiz (d. c. 1389/90), two prominent Persian Muslim poets, applied the term *sharab* in their poems several times.

“Fill, fill the cup with sparkling wine, Deep let me drink the juice divine, To soothe mytortur'd heart; For love, who seem'd at first so mild, So gently look'd, so gaily sml'd, Here deep has plung'd his dart.” [12]

Khayyam, in a chapter in his *Nowruz-Nameh* entitled About the Advantages of Wine, referred to Galen, Socrates, Hippocrates, Avicenna and Rhazes, and said “there is nothing full of advantage for people except for wine; particularly a wine taken from a bitter grape. Its main specifications are to relieve grief and bring joy to the heart...to freshen the skin...” [13] Subsequently, Khayyam classified the different types of wine (e.g. White and Sour) with their benefits.

In response to those who question the faith of these Persian poets, it can be said that although they are known as Muslim poets, their views toward this world testify some of them did not devoted their whole life to Islam and its teachings. For instance, Khayyam frequently said he did not care about religion (*din*) and reason (*'aql*): “while some people are engaged with material affairs, and another group with religious issues, a harbinger calls that none of these groups are right. Whoever discusses the two-world matters (i.e., this world and the Hereafter), he does so in vain... I know we came to this world without our will, and we will leave it without our decision. I found a solution for all obstacles unless the destination of the human being... After you and I the world is stable without caring about our existence or death. Do not spend your time to discover an answer for these mysteries, but choose grape juice because I, personally, trebly divorced the bride of religion and reason.” [13] Concerning the views of Khayyam towards wine and religion, Mojtaba Minuvi states that “Khayyam was an open-minded thinker who never discriminated among religions and recognized the Ka'bah, church, pagoda, temple and mosque to be akin to each other; Khayyam considered all of these the product of human thought...” [13]

Khayyam's notion regarding the purity of wine is also explained by Minuvi as such: “although religious people consider wine (*badih*) unclean and forbidden, Khayyam praised it a lot... Hereby, fanatics, religionists and dishonests, dissemblers as well as sufists bothered him.”³ [13]. Such ideas about wine, this world and the Hereafter presented by Khayyam encouraged many scholars to view him as a materialistic philosopher and heretic as well.

Likewise, Minuvi stated that history conveys Khayyam was a true enthusiast of the pre-Islamic Persia and its huge monuments [13].

It should be noted that many Iranian Shi'ite scholars endeavored to express that Hafiz was a real Muslim who used the term *mey/sharab* as a metaphor to express a divine and holy wine, and not the earthy one which brings about ecstasy. On this subject, Bahauddin Khurramshahi, a contemporary Persian thinker believed that Hafiz was not a mystic who

³ These phrases mentioned by Khayyam or Minuvi have been translated by the author of this article.

devoted whole his life to spiritual exercise. Khurramshahi divides the types of wine used in Divan-e Hafiz as: mystical wine (*sharab-e 'irfani*); vinaceous wine (*sharab-e anguri*); and belletristic wine (*sharab-e adabi*), [14] of which [at least] the second (i.e., *sharab-e anguri*) signifies that Hafiz employed the same one mentioned by Khayyam in *Nowruz-Nameh*.⁴

Medieval Islam and its belletrists, philosophers, and scholars altogether saved the existence of *Shirazi wine* in the land of Persia. Western travelers who visited Persia reported that winemaking was popular in Shiraz in the 19th century. In the Qajar era, Iran opened its doors to Western engineers and personnel who conducted developmental telegraph and communications projects. Meanwhile, Charles James Wills originally from Britain stayed in Iran for several years and wrote two books in which he described his trips to Shiraz among other things. Bosworth said “Shiraz was of course noted for its wine and the pleasures of its quaffing, and Wills devotes most of a whole chapter to his adventures in winemaking whilst residing there.” [15] In “In the Land of the Lion and the Sun” Wills talks about his visit with a *Shirazi* Mulla named Haji ‘Ali Akbar and the methods of winemaking [16].

The process of *Shiraz* winemaking was refined by the end of the Pahlavi dynasty (r. 1925-1979) in Iran. After the Islamic Revolution (1979), due to the emergence of anti-Western/American thought and the promotion of Shi‘i-juristic viewpoints, most Islamic decrees were given by Shi‘i *ulema*, clergies and representatives, and at the outset, the winemaking industry in Shiraz was closed down.

The *Shirazi* wine grape bush was transported from France to Australia in the 19th century, but wine is still secretly made from it in Shiraz. Shi‘ite exegetes, *ulema* and jurists explicitly rejected drinking wine, particularly after the Islamic Revolution. Even clerics from Qum -- without having any particular expertise in physiology -- referred to Western discoveries on the disadvantages of wine to explain some Qur’anic verses.

This strong historical background related to wine and its culture in Iran is still problematic for those Iranians interested in preserving Persian literature. They wrestle with this inter-cultural contradiction of whether they ought to behave as pure Muslim-Shi‘ite or pure Persians and admirers of their poets, whereas incorporating these two seems difficult.

3. Opium and Shi‘ite-Perso

It is believed that one of the earliest references to the addiction phenomenon and drug tolerance was pointed out by al-Biruni [17]. History conveys that consuming opium was promoted among Muslims in Mecca through the Persian and Iraqi pilgrimages. Moreover, by excessively utilizing opium, poppy capsules and extracts in medical recipes, many of those involved recognized the psychotherapeutic value and gradually but surely began to consume these for the sake of their psychotropic effect on man’s behavior and consciousness. Under urban, social, economic and environmental pressures and demands, drug use provided a means of escape... [that] abusers, seeking flight from reality, brought

⁴ John Christoph Bürgel stated that Hafiz in his Divan tells us how he was in conflict with bigot clerics those who killed the people in the name of God (*Allah*) because of some ridiculous things or ‘simple faults’ like drinking wine. See: ‘Guftigu ba John Christoph Bürgel’, *Radiofarda*: <http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f9_interview_johann_christoph_burgel_iranian_studies/25331628.html> 29 April 2014.

dangerous consequences upon the whole Muslim community and its cultural, religious and economic life [17]. The initial emergence of opium [and drugs] in the body of Islam is traced back to some Islamic-Shi'ite sub-sets of mystics, Sufis, Dervishes and Nizaris who used it for their own or divine purposes. Opium was normally used by the Dervishes in Iran, Turkey, and some parts of Afghanistan⁵ and abused as a means to reach God's satisfaction. Subsequently, it became a part of the Dervish order, and drug consumption was introduced into many cells of these religious orders to help members endure the long hours of fasting, prayer, and solitary meditation. Later, this permissiveness developed into a habit that led to numerous cases of addiction. The dreadful prostitution of religion was often a cover for the pernicious influences of secret societies and the horror of unbridled political ambitions [17].

This form of opium use was mostly prevalent among Dervishes interested in mixing opium and hashish (a product of Cannabis used as a 'spiritual soporific product) for spiritual purposes and devotion to the Truth (*haqq*) [18]. Furthermore, it is indicated that some Sufis had previously applied *hashish* in their intuitions and observances [19]. Apart from the Dervishes, the majority of who were found in Persia (contemporary Iran), Turkey and other Middle Eastern countries, the terms opium and hashish were both frequently used in Persian literature. It is inferred that these two drugs were popular before the oriental people, while even Persian polymaths like Avicenna and al-Biruni endeavored to investigate the pharmacological aspects of opium and its influence on human health. The efforts of such Persian thinkers to study botanical drugs like opium (i.e., opium poppy) and prescriptions for usage are sufficient to prove that it was popular among Persians and Arabs. Al-Biruni said that people living in the tropics and hot climates had this habit of taking opium daily [17][20]. Opium was also applied as anesthesia for surgical procedures, postoperative pain and chronic pain in medieval Persia although the topical application and oral ingestion of opium were prescribed to cure severe and intractable recurrent headaches. Cannabis was also a main treatment of severe headaches in medieval Persia [20]. All these notes help conclude that medieval Persian thinkers were completely familiar with such popular drugs used as treatment and medication by contemporary polymaths. Among Persian literates, Fakhr al-Din As'ad Gorgani (d. ca. 1058), Naser Khusraw (d.1088), Khayyam (d. 1131), Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi (Mawlana) (d. 1273), Sa'di Shirazi (d. 1291), etc., often referred to *hashish* and opium (*tiryaaq/taryaaq*) in their poems and verses. It indicates that opium was a treatment, and as Khayyam said "An alien can be a friend of mine, if he be faithful to me/ And if my friend does not wish my good and fortune, he would be an alien*** [even] If poison agrees [with me] it is an opium/ and if nectar does not agree with me it would be a sting (and will bother me);" [22] or Naser Khusraw mentioned "If you are snake-bitten, your treatment is opium" and he likened opium with justice against injustice: "If justice and cruelty become an arbitrator/ justice would be opium and cruelty, poison." [23] Interestingly, one of Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi's poems entitled "Give something to Dervish" creates a link between opium and the Dervish, showing that even opium (not particularly *taryaaq*) is an anti-poison that is useful for a Dervish who lives in

⁵ See: Athanasiadis, Iason. 'Opium nights, ecstatic dervishes in watchful Kabul.' *The Majallah: The Leading Arab Magazine* (September 2011): <<http://www.majalla.com/eng/2011/09/article55226303/>>. Accessed 26 April 2014.

poverty [24]. Other expressions by Sa'adi imply that opium was popular among Iraqis and Persians and it was also a treatment for all diseases, e.g. snake bite: "Until opium was brought from Iraq, a snake-bitten person would die." Apart from opium, the word hashish has been mentioned in Persian poems, with Rumi expressing that hashish is a beneficial and nourishing element:

"...had been put benefits in cannabis's body" [25]. According to the abovementioned, the current Shi'ite-Perso(s), including Muslim-Shi'ite Dervishes, poets, Sufis and so on, are fully familiar with the status of drugs and wine. They are a well-known part of the literature of Iranians who are Shi'ite as well as those who feel obliged to obey religious edicts and regulations contrary to their literature and culture.

4. Modern Religious Edicts and Shi'ite-Perso Literature

As indicated earlier, contemporary Persians, often known as Shi'ite believers, have very poetic and supportive literature towards wine and opium. However, modern religious edicts based on logical deductions and Islamic interpretations from a scientific perspective have shut down winemaking shops, drugstores offering opium and so forth. Ruhullah Khomeini (d. 1989), the former Iranian leader, placed wine in the category of unclean things in his book on practical treatise and expressed that wine and anything that makes one drunk is unclean and illegal (*haram*). Other Shi'ite religious authorities like Makarem Shirazi, Lankarani, and Wahid Khorasani have issued the same edict. Concerning *hashish*, one of the most famous Shi'ite religious authorities, Ayatullah Sistani, said that using hashish is not allowed, contending that it is better not to use opium and if abusing it leads to serious harms and problems, it is then illegal and forbidden [26]. Ayatullah Safi Golpayegani only recommended it if prescribed by an expert physician. By reviewing major Iranian Islamic religious edicts, it is obvious that consuming opium is forbidden except with the permission of an expert religious physician, as indicated by Ayatullah Hadavi Tehrani [27].

4. Conclusions

The concluding remark, thus, pertains to a religious-cultural conflict posed by contemporary Iranians who are half Persian half Shi'ite Muslim regarding drinking wine and using opium. Iranians who wish to drink wine do so secretly, and if religious entities discover someone drinking wine, they will label them a drunk. On the other hand, the Dervishes and Sufis are no longer actively present in Iran's streets and their monasteries are under strict control. If they or other members of the community desire to use opium or hashish, they will likely be considered addicts, and neither religious nor Sufi and Dervish. Therefore, some serious questions continually suspended in the young Iranian generation's mind are: "how can they be religious Iranians while at the same time adherent to Persian classical poets?" or "how can Iranians be followers of Khayyam and apathetic towards the unseen world, but still pursue Shi'ite teachings dealing with the Hereafter?" More importantly, if they want to drink wine or consume opium, will they be called addicts and unclean people?⁶

⁶ Examples of questions are available at <<http://www.tebyan.net/newindex.aspx?pid=78685&consultationid=654451/>>. Accessed 25 April 2014.

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