Alcohol

The Complicated History Behind Malaysia's Forgotten Booze

Toddy, or palm wine, has lost popularity in Malaysia, where it's associated with lower class South Asian migrant laborers brought by the British in the colonial era.

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PHOTO BY WONG YOK TENG

It's 7 AM at a coconut plantation in the outskirts of Selangor, Malaysia. A slender man glides up the thin bark of a coconut tree. Within seconds, he reaches the top and slithers back down with a large flask filled with white, cloudy juice called toddy or palm wine.

Toddy is the sweet, mildly alcoholic juice extracted from various palms including coconut palm trees. The juice is tapped from the unopened flower of the fruit while it is still in its bud sheath. The juice drips into an earthen pot hung overnight, and in the morning, a toddy tapper climbs the palm to empty the pot into a gourd strung at his waist.

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The owner of the plantation is Mr. Nava—who asked us not to publish his first name—who watches the theatrics of his workers every morning, with mosquito patches on his shirt and a cigarette dangling from his mouth. He inherited the land in 1974 from his Kerala-born mother who was known as the "Toddy Queen" in the area. Today, he runs the plantation next to a restaurant managed by his wife. They have around 300 trees in total, and each of them produces up to two liters of toddy a day.

PHOTO BY WONG YOK TENG

People believe that the amount of alcohol in freshly drawn toddy is practically zero. It tastes mildly sweet, and hisses like soda. But toddy gets increasingly alcoholic with time, and it's most alcoholic 48 hours after it's drawn, when it's about as strong as pale ale. People usually drink toddy in room temperature or chilled, or mixed with stout. More adventurous drinkers add freshly cut chillies and onions, too. While the health benefits of toddy are still unproven, some believe that toddy lowers the risk of diabetes and eliminates stomach gas.

In the Malaysian Peninsula, the toddy drinking culture traces as far back as 1886, and was popularized by Tamil and Keralan migrants who were brought by the British for labor. The Indian migrants were delegated to work in rubber estates, where, after their early morning shifts tapping trees, many men would drink toddy as a social activity. The beverage was accessible, cheap, and requires no processing at all.

PHOTO BY WONG YOK TENG

Toddy may just be unprocessed juice from the sap of a coconut, but in colonial Malaysia, the beverage became a big problem rooted in the intricacies of race and colonization.

While it's unclear when Malaysian and British authorities began to clamp down on toddy shops, complaints of toddy consumers and warning letters addressed to toddy shop owners to regulate the sale and distribution of the drink have been recorded since the early 1900s.

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It was not curbed as strictly as *chandu* or opium at the time, but reports suggest that the wave of disapproval surrounding toddy—mostly of the "extreme drunkenness" of the migrant workers—was palpable. Various parties and anti-toddy groups began expressing scorn about the sight of Indians drinking toddy in five foot ways, which led to the prohibition of toddy consumption in public. But this only increased complaints of congestion and foul smells in licensed toddy shops.

At the same time, reports of “acute toddy poisoning” were spreading. In a 1916 report by Dr. Malcolm Watson which was presented to the Planter’s Association of Malaya (PAM), he wrote that "the unsanitary ways of Tamil coolies" were to blame for the country's health issues.

On top of linking toddy to illnesses such as diarrhea and dysentery, Watson linked toddy with the lower working class culture and habits of Tamil migrants.

“As toddy is peculiarly the drink of the Tamil, a few remarks on the conditions peculiar to the race is essential,” he wrote. “In their personal habits, especially in the matter of defecation and the subsequent cleansing of the person, Tamils are the most primitive and insanitary, and it seems to be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to improve them.”

PHOTO FROM THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF MALAYSIA

While the British were cagey about Indian workers consuming alcohol in their downtime, they didn't want to put a blanket ban on the drink, since it was a way for them to control the workers.

“It [was] not easy for Indian laborers to opt-out of the plantation, as the estates are located in isolated areas in the hinterland,” Krishnan wrote. “To this end, the British realized that toddy was the best way to shackle the workers to the plantations.”

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Plus, the government made a lot of profit from toddy consumption. Krishnan’s report said that out of the profits from toddy sales, two-fifths were paid as tax to the government and the remainder was channeled into a special fund used for the general welfare of the laborers.

Resolutions against the sale of toddy in Malaya began in 1946 by the Malayan Indian Congress, who launched a campaign to “reform social ills” of Indians. The campaign comprised people who vowed to stop consuming any form of liquor, including toddy. Because the meetings were usually held in a temple hall, vows were taken in the name of the temple deity and carried some religious weight. Peaceful picketing of liquor shops also took place. In more extreme cases, “over-enthusiastic trade union officials” used intimidation to turn "habitual drunkards" sober.

PHOTO BY WONG YOK TENG

Krishnan wrote that those who took the lead in the trade union movement were “[idealistic] young men who felt the need to clear Indian working class society from this major social evil.”

Toddy is still consumed in Malaysia today, somewhat discreetly in private residences, small shops in Indian-populated areas, and some Chinese seafood restaurants. But licensed farms like Mr Nava's operate few and far between. Mr Nava’s farm is one of the remaining few of its kind in the state following the complex history of Malaysia’s anti-toddy movement. The permit he has was passed down from his mother. He’s unsure if new farm owners will be able to obtain one today, he says. “Nowadays it’s very hard,” he says. “The state government has to approve it, and the customs [department] has to issue it.”

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While the cap on the consumption of toddy has unquestionably affected the popularity of the beverage, both Mr. Nava and his wife also attributes the vanishing culture to the rise of other liquors. Plus, there aren't many toddy tappers in Malaysia nowadays. Most of them are South Asian migrants who came to the country decades ago.

Shawn Chong, owner of the cocktail bar Omakase + Appreciate, says he shies away from toddy in his bar because of a lack of consistency in farms and family-led operations.

“When you look at the timeline of spirits over the years, they’ve become more refined," he says. "But this didn’t really happen with toddy and *tuak* [Bornean wice wine]. There are no real regulations so it’s hard to maintain the consistency.”

Because of the process (or the lack of) in toddy farms, the drink will likely never be deemed “artisanal” like whiskies and beers.

Mr. Nava isn't the only one trying to reverse the stigma around toddy. Take Narrow Marrow, a quaint café in the northern Malaysian state of Penang that serves toddy-spiked versions of mojitos. Owner Alvin Neoh says he likes observing reactions from customers when they see toddy on the menu.

“As for the locals who have never tried toddy, it can be hard to convince them to try it because of the social stigma it carries,” he says. “That’s also why we make mojitos to [ease first-timers into toddy].”

This café alone won't undo the decades of stigma associated with drinking toddy, but it's a start.

“Toddy has no branding or marketing so many think only old people drink it,” Mrs. Nava says. And youngsters see their friends drinking some other liquors like spirits or beer that are more hip. But unlike beer, toddy is not something you can get anywhere. There’s a long tradition involved.”

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