Akademika 72 (Januari) 2008: 25 - 44

Negotiating Ethnic Identities: Alcohol as a Social Marker in East and West Malaysia

STIMO KORTTEINEN

ABSTRAK

Dalam masyarakat Malaysia masa kini terdapat dua kecenderungan yang bertentangan berkaitan pandangan mengenai pengambilan arak (alkohol). Pada satu segi pengaruh Barat termasuk terhadap pengambilan minuman arak semakin meluas seiring dengan proses perindustrian dan peningkatan taraf hidup. Pada segi yang lain pula, dalam beberapa dekad belakangan ini kelihatan Islam telah menjadi semakin berpengaruh di Malaysia. Makalah ini bertujuan meneliti pengambilan arak kini dan pengalaman positif mahunpun negatif yang berkaitan dengan arak di Semenanjung Malaysia dan Sarawak. Maklumat mengenai Malaysia Barat (Semenanjung) telah diperolehi pada tahun-tahun 1996 dan 1997, sementara maklumat mengenai Malaysia Barat (Sarawak) pada tahun 1999. Namun, kajian ini bukan hanya mengenai kuantiti dan kualiti arak yang diambil di Malaysia. Isu arak diguna sebagai 'jendela' melalui mana isu yang lebih luas mengenai pembinaan sempadan etnik atau ras diteliti. Secara rasmi, orang Melayu tidak minum arak kerana mereka beragama Islam. Namun, dari segi realitinya terdapat orang Melayu yang minum arak. Dari segi ideologi, politik dan sosial kegiatan meminum arak diguna sebagai satu cara memisah-misahkan ras di Malaysia dan secara khususnya pula untuk mendefinisi superiority golongan Melayu.

ABSTRACT

From the point of view of alcohol consumption, there are two contradicting tendencies in the present-day Malaysian society. On the one hand, Western influences, including the consumption of alcoholic beverages, have gained ground along with industrialisation and increased standards of living. On the other hand, Islam has become more influential in the country during the past couple of decades. These two contradict each other as far as alcohol consumption is concerned. The article sets out to examine present-day alcohol consumption as well as positive and negative experiences related to alcohol in Peninsular Malaysia as well as in Sarawak, East Malaysia. The focus of the article is to study the impact of ethnic and religious identity on alcohol consumption in East and West Malaysia. The information on West (Peninsular) Malaysia was collected in 1996 and 1997 and the information on East Malaysia (Sarawak) in 1999. The study, however, is not only about the quantities and

qualities of alcohol consumed in Malaysia. The alcohol issue is used as a 'window' through which the broader issue of the construction of ethnic or racial boundaries in the country is studied. Officially, Malays do not drink alcohol because they are Muslims. In reality, however, some Malays do drink. Ideologically, politically and socially drinking is used as a way of segregating races in Malaysia in general and defining the superiority of the Malay race in particular.

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multiracial society. Racial identities while well formed and strong were created and consolidated by British colonial rule when differences between racial groups[1] were governed by occupational categories. Government decree and the interests of the emerging capitalist economy into discrete groups segregated the population. Both residential and occupational divisions were compounded by language and cultural norms of ethnic affiliation (Guinness 1992, 14). The Chinese were mainly residents in urban areas, in economic activities associated with working in tin industry, and in trade and commerce. Indians worked in rubber plantations in isolated parts of the rural areas. Malays were engaged in subsistence agriculture without much contact with either the Chinese or the Indians (Abraham 1997, 4). This racial division also largely coincides with religious differences. Malays are Muslims, Indians Hindus and Chinese Buddhists or believers in other Chinese faiths. After Independence in 1957, the racial or ethnic division has been reproduced and reinforced by the policies of Malay-led governments.

In 1997, according to ILO data, out of a population of roughly 22 million, around 62 per cent was Malay, 29 per cent Chinese, nine per cent Indians and the remaining one per cent *Orang Asli* (Malaysian aboriginals) and other races and nationalities. The Chinese have traditionally been regarded as the best-to-do of all the races. The indigenous Malaysian business class has traditionally consisted primarily of Chinese, while the Malays have generally been regarded as farmers, and the Indians as the least well-to-do ethnic or racial group.

The populations of Sabah and Sarawak on the Borneon part of the country are more heterogeneous than in the Peninsula. In these states, no one ethnic group constitutes a majority, as do the Malays, the *bumiputera*[2], on the Peninsula. The *bumiputera* in Sarawak comprises many ethnic groups of which the Iban, who accounted for about 30 per cent of the total population in 1988 (more recent data has not been available), constitute the largest group. Together with the Bidayuh (8 per cent) and Orang Ulu (5 per cent; consisting of sub-groups such as the Kenyah, the Kayan, the Kelabit and some other groups) they are increasingly referred to as *Dayak*. The vast majority of the *Dayak* are non-muslims. The other two major *bumiputera* groups are the Malays (21 per cent)

and Melanau (6 per cent). The Malays and the majority of the Melanau are Muslims. The Chinese, forms about 30 per cent of the total population with the vast majority of who are non-Muslims (Annual Statistical Bulletin Sarawak 1988).

Economic growth in Malaysia has been quite rapid, in the average, during the past three decades. This is also reflected in the *per capita* income. In real terms, income per capita has more than doubled from RM1,900[3] in 1970 to RM4,270 in 1990 (Malaysia 1991:37). In current prices, the per capita income was RM6,200 in 1990 and RM9,800 in 1995 (Malaysia 1996:36)[4]. In terms of per capita income, Malaysia ranks way above most so-called developing countries and is classified by the World Bank as a middle-income country. On the other hand, income differentials have increased rapidly during this period and it can be argued (see Guinness 1992) that the New Economic Policy (NEP) implemented by the Malay-led government between 1970-90 was instrumental in keeping the poor Malays poor while benefiting mostly the Malay urban and rural elites and the rising urban Malay middle class.

In addition to rapid economic growth, the structural transformation of the Malaysian economy has been rapid and extensive. Since 1970, Malaysia's economy has been transformed from that of an agricultural economy and a primary producer to an increasingly industrialised one with a large and expanding service sector.

Urbanisation in Malaysia has also been relatively rapid. In 1970, Malaysia's population was 10.4 million with slightly more than a quarter living in areas classified as urban. In 1980, out of a total population of 14 million, slightly more than one-third (34 per cent) lived in urban areas, mainly due to rapid urbanisation in Kuala Lumpur and the surrounding areas. By 1990, more than half of the total population of 19 million lived in cities and towns and, by 1995; the share of urban population had increased to 55 per cent (Abdul Rahman Embong 1996:61-62).

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The objective of the study is to examine the role and functions of alcoholic beverages among various social strata and ethnic groups in East and West Malaysia. For a visitor in the country, uneven regional development is conspicuous even within the economically boosting Peninsular Malaysia. One does not have to go far from the largest urban centres to encounter localities and communities that are very much affected by the rapid process of change within the Malaysian society but who, simultaneously, have the other foot in the society of yesterday. According to previous studies (see Kortteinen 1999), these non-metropolitan areas are areas where it is most probable to find a community where various systems of production and life-styles co-exist and intertwine and where, consequently, the actual research locality for the study at hand may best be found. Therefore, in Peninsular Malaysia, the actual collection of the material

has taken place in the town of Kuala Selangor, which is situated about 60 kilometres northwest from Kuala Lumpur. In Sarawak, information was collected in Kuching (the largest urban centre in the area), in a smaller urban area and in the *kampung*.

The growth of the middle classes, largely as a result of government policies, may be interpreted as one of the most conspicuous symptoms of the 'modernization' of the Malaysian society. As is indicated by various studies, the growth of these social strata in Asia tends to bring with it Western patterns of consumption, including alcoholic beverages. Starting from a Western type nuclear family, as opposed to the traditional extended family, the lifestyle of the new middle classes is transformed. Simultaneously, you still find traditional ways of living and attitudes very viable.

The increasing influence of Islam in Malaysia is also a conspicuous development although it is not as easily documented as the growth of the new middle classes. However, Islamic fundamentalism does not yet play a significant role in the country and the leading political party, United Malay National Organization (UMNO), is formally a non-religious organization. Hence, the notion of the increased importance of Islam in the country mostly refers to less radical forms of the religion.

Racial compartmentalisation is reflected in the manner in which alcohol is dealt with in the Malaysian society. Malays, who by definition are taken to be Muslims, are not supposed to drink alcohol at all. However, the religions professed by the majority of the Chinese and the Indians do not restrict alcohol consumption. Officially, drinking alcohol is regarded as a problem of the poor Indian households living and working in the oil palm plantations. Drinking among the Chinese, who, in the average, are better off than the Indians, is less or not discussed. Traditionally, alcohol consumption (*arak*, local wine) has also been a part of the everyday life of many local *Orang Asli* (aboriginals) (Andaya & Andaya 1982: 221). Thus, (excessive) alcohol consumption is ideologically and politically restricted to the poor and racially, or in ethnic terms, to the Chinese, Indians and *Orang Asli*. Consumption of traditional alcoholic beverages, particularly in East Malaysia, i.e. Borneo, is not discussed in the media.

In reality, however, it is general knowledge that there some Malays who do drink alcohol. This is reflected in various measures taken by the administration to curb Malay drinking. In August 1996, For example, the Selangor Religious Department bought six breathalysers not to be used in traffic control, but in pubs and bars frequented by Malays to check the nature of the beverages they have been consuming. Behind this action was the concern of the Department over many Muslims straying from the norms of Islam. The department receives 130 to 180 complaints a month over Muslims consuming alcohol (*The Star*, August 9, 1996).

Because of the ethnic and religious composition of the population in Sarawak, cultural norms (official ones at least) related to alcohol consumption are very

different from those prevalent in the Malaysian Peninsula where Malay, i.e. Moslem domination is the determining feature. In fact, alcohol production and consumption in Sarawak has long historical roots and alcoholic beverages have been an integral part of everyday life, ceremonies and rituals of the various indigenous (non-Moslem) ethnic groups. Local wine (*arak*) has been produced and consumed for centuries (Roth 1980:383-392). In the early twentieth century, production and sales of *arak* was one of the principle sources of income for particularly the Iban (Andaya & Andaya 1982:221). Also, consumption of a rice-based beer, *tuak*, has long been an essential part of life in traditional long-house dwellings in Sarawak.

These two tendencies, the growth of the new middle classes and the increasing importance of Islam in Malaysia set the field of this study. While the former supposedly brings along more liberal attitudes, the latter may bring along stricter attitudes towards alcohol. The study aims at examining the role and functions of alcoholic beverages at the crossroads of these two contradicting tendencies in the two very much differing socio-ethnic environments in Malaysia that is the East and West. The specific questions that answers are sought for include the following. Has alcohol consumption in Malaysia increased or decreased during the past decades? What are the prevalent consumption patterns among various social strata and the so-called racial groups? How have consumption patterns changed during the past 10-20 years? What are the reasons for these eventual changes? How do people from different social strata and ethnic groups see the role of alcohol in their own lives now and before? Answers are sought to the question whether the different socio-cultural environments in Peninsular Malaysia and Sarawak have an impact on developments in alcohol consumption in terms of ethnic and religious identity.

Before this, to the writer's knowledge, no research on alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems has been carried out on the general population in Malaysia. There have been some studies of drinking among specific groups. These include the elderly, rural Malays, *Orang Asli*, secondary schoolchildren, and those admitted to hospitals (for a more detailed description of the studies see Jernigan 1997:28-29). In addition, in 1996, the government carried out a national household mobility survey of a random sample of families. The questionnaire contained questions about alcohol use, but this set of questions were not posed to the Malay households interviewed (*ibid*:28).

This study at hand is not only about the quantities and qualities of alcohol consumed in Malaysia. The alcohol issue is only used as a 'window' through which to study the much broader issue of the construction of ethnic or racial boundaries in the country. Officially, Malays do not drink alcohol because they are Muslims. In reality, however, at least some Malays do drink. Drinking can, and as I argue, be used as a way of segregating races in Malaysia. Since Malays are Muslims and Muslims by definition do not drink, the fact that the Chinese, Indians and *Orang Asli* do drink, can be used by Malays as a way of marking

ethnic as well as religious purity. The question is about negotiating boundaries between various socio-ethnic groups in Malaysia and this takes place both in the public/political sphere as well as on the grass root level, although in a different manner.

RESEARCH METHODS

Structured interviews were carried out on a sample of the population of the larger Kuala Selangor area, including parts of the surrounding countryside in addition to the town centre and the nearby housing estates. The interviews were completed by April 1997. In Kuala Selangor students of anthropology and sociology of the University of Malaya (Kuala Lumpur) carried out structured interviews on a total of 523 samples. In Sarawak, 228 interviews were carried out (74 in Kuching, 29 in a town, and 125 in the *kampung*) in September 1999.

In the surveys, an effort was made to ensure that the samples included all major social strata and the various residential areas. This did not pose problems since, in a country like Malaysia, areas of residence are relatively easily defined according to social and racial status. One is able to identify areas of residence of the poorer strata as well as the middle classes and the richer people. Interviews were carried out in the *kampung*, in the towns, and in residential housing areas surrounding the town centre.

With the questionnaires, information was collected on all the household members. In addition to questions about alcohol consumption and its perceived effects, there were questions about incomes, property, employment, consumption, agricultural activities, and perceptions of the social organisation of the community, political attitudes as well as aspirations for the future.

The Malaysian cultural code dictates that interviews be carried out only with the heads of the households who, in most cases, were male although there were also some women whose husbands had died or they were divorced. Therefore, the information on other members of the household also came from the head of the household.

The households to be interviewed were selected using the method of organised random sample. Once the residential area was identified, the number of inhabitants within the area was estimated and, depending on the number of interviews needed, every n^{th} household was interviewed. For example, if the number of interviews needed was 100 and the number of inhabitants estimated 1000, every 10^{th} household was interviewed. If there was no-one in or the interviewers (normally in pairs) were not welcome, the next house was selected and from there on once again the 10^{th} house. This proved to be a very efficient and time saving method. There were very few refusals.

From the total of 523 interviews in Peninsular Malaysia, 60 per cent were directed toward Malays, 27 per cent to Chinese and the remaining to Indians.

These proportions correspond to the racial division of all of Peninsular Malaysia. Chinese and Malays are slightly under-represented in the sample while Indians are a bit over- represented.[5] In Sarawak the setting was quite different due to the different socio-economic environment in the state. There, only 13 per cent of the interviewees were Malays and the same proportion was Chinese. The majority were Iban (42 per cent) followed by the Bidayuh (32 per cent). Other ethnic groups amounted to one per cent of the population interviewed.

AVAILABILITY[6] OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES IN MALAYSIA

According to the FAO Food Balance Sheets (Table 1), alcohol availability was on the increase from the early 1970s until the mid-1980s. After this, there would seem to have been a decline. Beer would seem to have accounted for most of the absolute alcohol available (around two-thirds) with a slight tendency to increase its share. Simultaneously, the share of distilled alcoholic beverages of all absolute alcohol consumed has decreased from 44 per cent in the early 1970s to 32 per cent twenty years later. Wine consumed is marginal compared to beer and distilled alcoholic beverages.

In 1970, the total population of Malaysia was 10.4 million and, in 1997, 21.7 million. In the early 1970s, the proportion of Malaysia's population under age fifteen was 45 per cent and, in the early 1990s, 38 per cent (Jernigan 1997:27). Thus, basing on the FAO figures, which are presented in terms of weight (1 kilo

TABLE 1. Availability of alcoholic beverages in Malaysia 1971-1995, in absolute alcohol ('000 Metric Tons).

Annual averages	Beer		Wine		Distilled beverages		Total	
	MT	%	MT	%	MT	%	MT	%
1971-75	1.4	56	-	-	1.1	44	2.5	100.0
1976-80	2.6	63	0.1	3	1.4	34	4.1	100.0
1981-85	3.1	58	0.1	2	2.1	40	5.3	100.0
1986-90	3.2	63	0.1	2	1.8	35	5.1	100.0
1991	4.0	68	0.1	1	1.8	31	5.9	100.0
1992	3.0	67	0.1	2	1.4	31	4.5	100.0
1993	2.7	64	0.1	3	1.4	33	4.2	100.0
1994	2.3	61	0.1	2	1.4	37	3.8	100.0
1995	2.3	61	0.1	2	1.4	37	3.8	100.0
1991-95	2.9	66	0.1	2	1.4	32	4.4	100.0

Note: Conversion factors: Beer 3%, wine 10%, distilled alcoholic beverages 35%.

Source: FAO Food Balance Sheets for the respective years.

of absolute alcohol equals to 1.274 litres), the annual average *per capita* consumption of alcoholic beverages in terms of absolute alcohol among the adult population would have decreased from 0.56 litres in the early 1970s to 0.48 litres in the early 1990s.

Compared to consumption levels in the industrialised or the developing countries, these figures would seem to indicate extremely low levels of alcohol consumption. The FAO data is, however, problematic in many respects. The most important flaw perhaps is that, according to the data, no distilled alcoholic beverages are produced in the country, but instead all available have been imported. However, this is not the case. A visitor to any larger supermarket or grocery store in Peninsular Malaysia or Sarawak will soon find out that there are a wide variety of various domestically distilled alcoholic beverages on the shelves.

It seems that the local producers of these beverages are mostly Chinese owned distilleries. There are eight principal distilleries in the country (Jernigan 1997:27). The products have become to be known as *samsu*. Nowadays, *samsu* production and retailing has been made legal and takes place under a government licensing system. *Samsu* is distilled from rice and has an alcohol content of 37-40 per cent by volume. There are also milder versions with an alcohol content by volume of around 20 per cent, targeted at the younger population.

The price of a 6.4 decilitre bottle is between RM10 – RM12.50. According to data collected by the Confederation of Malaysian Breweries and Liquor Importers, in 1988, the consumption of industrially produced *samsu* amounted to 0.7 per cent and locally produced *samsu* to 3.6 per cent of all alcohol consumed. The respective figures for 1998 were 0.2 per cent and 1.7 per cent. When *samsu* availability is included, it is probable that most of alcoholic beverages available in the country are distilled spirits. Also, palm wine, or "toddy", which is a mild fermented alcoholic beverage with an alcohol content ranging from 5 per cent to 20 per cent (see Kortteinen 1989), is not included in the FAO data. According to the FAO data, most beer available in Malaysia (over 90 per cent) is produced in the country (naturally, from imported raw materials). The figures on beer are probably much more reliable than the figures on distilled alcoholic beverages. Carlsberg and Guinness dominate the beer market under a licence.

Once the exclusion of domestic production of distilled alcoholic beverages and toddy is taken into account, consumption figures in Malaysia increase. It is difficult to give an accurate estimate, but an educated guess would be that annual *per capita* consumption figures would exceed one litre of absolute alcohol. Even so, the figure is low by international comparison, which is not very surprising since the majority of the population are Muslims who are not supposed to drink alcohol at all.

It is also impossible to evaluate more accurately the impact of *samsu* and *toddy* production on the developments in the overall availability of alcoholic beverages. In any case, it seems obvious that, during the National Economic Policy (NEP) period (1970-1990), there was no significant decrease in alcohol

availability, although, as far as distilled spirits are concerned, the local industry is primarily owned by the Chinese and the major objective of NEP was to increase Malay participation in the corporate sector. Due to heavy taxation on alcohol, the Malay-led government has had a vested although veiled interest in the well being of the alcohol industry.

ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION IN KUALA SELANGOR AND SARAWAK

In the previous section, aggregate availability of alcoholic beverages in Malaysia has been discussed using available statistical data. Aggregate level data on alcohol availability, does not, however, directly tell us anything about the actual grass root level consumption. This has to be studied using different methods of data collection.

In the study at hand, alcohol-related questions presented to the interviewees in the larger context of a study on the change of social organisation in a small town in Peninsular Malaysia, Kuala Selangor, and in Sarawak, East Malaysia. The questionnaire used in the surveys included a separate batch of questions on alcohol consumption. As opposed to the above mentioned national household mobility survey conducted by the Government, the interviewers (students of anthropology and sociology at the Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur and the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak) were not given directions not to ask these questions from the Malay respondents as well. Instead, they were advised to use their discretion. Alcohol is a sensitive issue among religious Malays and forcing questions about their alcohol consumption might have jeopardised the whole venture. Thus, the students were advised to pose the questions to Malays only when they felt comfortable in doing that. In addition, the batch of questions on alcohol was placed at the end of the questionnaire. It was felt that this would yield the best results. The respondents were asked, in addition to the quality and quantity of alcohol they drink, about the behavioural concomitants of drinking and consequences of single drinking occasions, conditions related to prolonged drinking, the positive and negative effects of alcohol and social reactions to drinking.

From among the respondents in Kuala Selangor, 12 per cent (63) admitted to drinking alcohol. In Sarawak, the respective figure was 59 per cent (135). There were significant differences between the races. Among the Chinese, in Kuala Selangor, 32 per cent were drinkers and among the Indians, 23 per cent. In Kuala Selangor, one Malay respondent admitted to drinking alcohol.[7] In Sarawak, the proportions of drinkers were as follows: the Malays 11 per cent, the Chinese 72 per cent, the Iban 78 per cent and the Bidayuh 75 per cent. Drinking alcohol seems to be a part of the Sarawakian culture even among the Malays. This is a very different situation from that of Peninsular Malaysia.

In Malaysia, the races and social strata are also divided along residential lines. To ensure the inclusion of all social strata in the samples, interviews were carried out within various residential areas, urban, housing estates and *kampung* as well as palm oil estates. In the estates around Kuala Selangor, 17 per cent of respondents were drinkers, in the housing estates 15 per cent, while in the town centre 10 per cent and in the *kampung* 8 per cent. Since all estate workers are Indians, there is some social basis for the official ideology of alcohol drinking being an Indian problem. In Kuching, Sarawak, 50 per cent of the respondents were drinkers, in the small town, as much as 86 per cent and in the *kampung*, 65 per cent. Clearly, although this is officially denied, drinking is not only an issue that concerns the Indians but also a phenomenon that is spread across ethnic and racial lines, in Peninsular Malaysia as well as in East Malaysia.

The quantities of alcoholic beverages consumed were estimated by asking the respondents, how many bottles of beer or *tuak*, glasses of wine and/or glasses of distilled spirits they normally drink a week (see Table 2).

Among the drinking population in Kuala Selangor, Indians and particularly Indians on the estates, are by far the heaviest drinkers with annual *per capita* consumption levels of absolute alcohol exceeding 14 litres. The respective figure for the Chinese is about 5 litres. For all of the drinking population, this amounts

TABLE 2. Mean *per capita* consumption of alcoholic beverages in terms of absolute alcohol among the drinking population, Kuala Selangor 1996/97 and Sarawak 1999 (in litres).

	Kuala Selangor				Sarawak					
	Beer	Wine	Distilled Beverages	All (KS)	Beer	Wine	Distilled Beverages	Tuak	Langkau	All (SRW)
Town Centre	1.1	0.0	0.0	1.1						
Housing Estates	1.5	1.2	2.3	5.0						
Kampung	1.9	1.2	1.8	4.9						
Estates	3.0	1.6	9.6	14.2						
Kuching					0.6	0.3	0.2	0.3	0.1	1.5
Town					0.4	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.2	1.4
Kampung					1.3	0.8	0.8	1.9	1.2	6.0
Total	7.5	4.0	13.7	25.2	2.3	1.4	1.3	2.4	1.5	8.9

Note: The figures on absolute alcohol were computed in the following manner. Beer: It was assumed that the size of a bottle of beer is 0.3 litres of 3.5 volume per cent ethanol. Wine: It was assumed that a glass of wine contains 15 cl of 10 volume per cent ethanol. Distilled beverages: It was assumed that a glass of spirits contains 5 cl of 35 volume per cent absolute alcohol. Tuak: It was assumed that a bottle of *tuak* has an average content of 0.75 litres and an alcohol content of 3.5 per cent by volume. Langkau: It was assumed that a glass of *langkau* has an average content of 5 cl and the drink an ethanol content of 35 per cent.

to an annual consumption of 7 litres. It needs to be kept in mind that the above figures only refer to the *drinking* population, which is male (since the interviews were carried out with heads of households who were mostly males).

The figures presented in Table 2 implies an annual consumption level of absolute alcohol among the total population around 0.8 - 0.9 litres computed against the total sample population of 523 in Kuala Selangor and 228 in Sarawak. This comes very close to estimates based on figures on national *per capita* availability of alcoholic beverages in Malaysia discussed above. The findings also seem to confirm the fact that most alcohol consumed in the country is distilled spirits (industrially or domestically produced) and beer. Consumption of wine, in terms of absolute alcohol, is annually around half of the consumption of beer and distilled spirits.

There are, however, significant differences between Peninsular Malaysia and Sarawak. There is a clear tendency for the industrially produced beverages to be consumed more often in Peninsular Malaysia whereas the traditional beverages are still popular in Sarawak. On the other hand, consumption of industrially produced beverages, particularly beer, is most common in the more urban areas, both in Peninsular and East Malaysia. The level of alcohol consumption among the drinking population is also quite different between the two regions. In Kuala Selangor, those who drink, drink almost three times as much as the drinkers in Sarawak and this despite the fact that the proportion of drinkers in Kuala Selangor is much lower than that in Sarawak (see Table 3). This implies that, if one considers the public health aspect, more "traditional" patterns of drinking would seem to lead to more moderate levels of consumption among the drinkers than what is brought along with urbanisation and the accompanying "Western" life and drinking styles. However, in international comparison, the level of alcohol consumption in both areas is still low.

The number of drinkers in Kuala Selangor seems to be a function of income (Table 4)[8]. The higher the person's income, the more likely he/she is an alcohol consumer. This applies to both Chinese and Indians and seems to give indirect support to the assumption that alcohol intake increases along with the increase

TABLE 3. Drinkers by Income Group and Race, Sarawak 1999 (%).

Income group (RM)	Malay	Chinese	Iban	Bidayuh	Others	Total
<300	-	-	50.0	50.0	-	100.0
301-400	-	-	-	100.0	-	100.0
401-500	-	-	66.7	33.3	-	100.0
501-1000	-	8.3	8.3	83.3	-	100.0
1001-2000	-	31.6	42.1	26.3	.	100.0
2001-3000	-	57.1	28.6	-	14.3	100.0
3001-5000	-	100.0	-	-	-	100.0
5001 <	25.0	75.0	-	-	-	100.0

TABLE 4. Drinkers by race and income quintile, Kuala Selangor 1996/97

Percentage	Malay		Chinese		Indians		All	
(%)	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<20	1.0	1.8	-	-	-	-	1	1.7
21-40	-	-	-	-	1	20.0	1	1.7
41-60	-	-	1	14.3	2	28.6	3	3.8
61-80	-	-	9	34.6	1	12.5	10	10.0
81-100	-	-	29	42.0	4	80.0	33	25.6

Note: Percentages refer to the share of drinkers in each income quintile.

in the general standard of living, including the birth of the so-called new middle classes.

The quality and quantity of alcoholic beverages consumed in various income groups also indicate that there do not seem to be a particular type of alcoholic beverage that would be typical for the poorest. Also, the more often beer, wine and distilled beverages are all drunk and in larger quantities, the better off the person is in economic terms.

Among the Chinese, drinking is found to be most common among the fishermen. Most of them are drinkers. Drinking is also quite common among Chinese trade personnel and unskilled workers. Among the Indians, drinking is most common among the service personnel (particularly among the drivers!) where two thirds are drinkers. Drinking also seems to be common among the professionals and those involved in agricultural activities.

In sum, according to the presently available data, most drinking in a small town setting in Peninsular Malaysia would seem to be taking place among the lower social strata and in agriculture (including fishing) although trade, which is mainly an urban activity, is also well represented. Middle class (professional) drinking mostly seems to take place among the Indians. In the survey, middle class Malay drinking was not detected. The findings imply that consumption levels of alcohol in Malaysia, in average terms, are still moderate. Even among the *drinking* Indian population, with heavy consumption in Malaysian standards, the consumption figures only reach the average consumption of the *whole* population in the heavier drinking nations in the West.

The data would suggest that, in the Malaysian society, there is a tendency for the new middle classes to consume more alcohol. The higher level of alcohol intake among the wealthier Indian population exemplifies this although no such thing was discovered among the Malays interviewed who were all Muslim. However, it is good to remember that Kuala Selangor is a small town where neighbourhood social control still reaches most spheres of everyday life. Probably, alcohol consumption reaches higher levels in Kuala Lumpur and other large cities where it is easier to find spaces beyond this control where religiously banned and socially unacceptable drinking may take place.

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES RELATED TO ALCOHOL IN KUALA SELANGOR AND SARAWAK

Data on the experiences related to alcohol indicates that drinking in Malaysia may be quite a happening in many occasions although there are differences between East and West Malaysia (Tables 5 and 6). A superficial comparison with similar data on the Finnish population (Mäkelä & Mustonen 1988) seems to indicate that the positive as well as the negative experiences related to alcohol are felt more strongly among the respondents of this study than among the Finns although consumption levels in Malaysia are much lower.

TABLE 5. Overall Incidence of Experiences Related to Drinking in the Drinking Population during the Past 12 Months, Kuala Selangor 1996/97 (in per cent)

	Chinese	Indians
Behavioural concomitants of drinking and consequences of single drinking occasions		
Quarrel or argument	9.1	11.8
Scuffle or fight	2.3	0.0
Accident or injury	6.8	23.5
Loss of money or valuables	0.0	11.8
Damage to objects or clothing	2.3	5.9
Victimized by cheating	0.0	5.9
Drunken driving	11.4	17.6
Regretted something said or done	11.4	17.6
Loud-voiced and boisterous	36.4	58.8
Conditions related to prolonged drinking		
Health problems	11.8	17.6
Positive effects of alcohol		
Sort out family problems	11.4	29.4
More optimistic about life	20.5	23.5
Express feelings	15.9	58.8
Get closer to opposite sex	0.0	17.6
Sort out job problems	7.0	35.3
Be funnier and wittier	39.5	11.8
Be more social	23.3	41.2
Learn to know someone better	14.0	35.3
Social reactions to drinking		
Arrested by police	8.9	10.0
Criticized by family	20.0	33.3
Warned by a doctor	20.0	71.4
Criticized at work	15.6	45.5
Warned by friends	15.6	91.7

TABLE 6: Overall Incidence of Experiences Related to Drinking in the Drinking Population During the Past 12 Months, Sarawak 1999 (in per cent).

	Malay	Chinese	Iban	Bidayuh
Behavioural concomitants of drinking and consequences of single drinking occasions				
Quarrel or argument	-	9.5	-	2.5
Scuffle or fight	-	-	-	-
Accident or injury	-	-	10.0	10.0
Loss of money or valuables	-	-	2.9	2.5
Damage to objects or clothing	-	-	1.4	7.5
Victimized by cheating	-	4.8	7.1	5.0
Drunken driving	-	4.8	8.6	15.0
Regretted something said or done	-	4.8	11.4	27.5
Loud-voiced and boisterous	-	19.0	35.7	25.0
Conditions related to prolonged drinking				
Health problems	33.3	4.8	45.7	20.0
Positive effects of alcohol				
Sort out family problems	-	19.0	10.0	10.0
More optimistic about life	66.7	9.5	11.4	10.0
Express feelings	33.3	23.8	4.3	22.5
Get closer to opposite sex	33.3	14.3	2.9	17.5
Sort out job problems	33.3	4.8	2.9	7.5
Be funnier and wittier	33.3	33.3	51.2	42.5
Be more social	33.3	9.5	28.6	52.5
Learn to know someone better	33.3	14.3	24.3	55.0
Social reactions to drinking				
Arrested by police	-	-	-	2.5
Criticized by family	-	14.3	42.9	22.5
Warned by a doctor	-	4.8	14.3	22.5
Criticized at work	-	-	4.3	12.5
Warned by friends	-	19.0	35.7	52.5

The positive effects of alcohol are felt very strongly particularly among the Indians in Peninsular Malaysia as well as between the Bidayuh and the Iban in Sarawak. Similar feelings are also experienced among the Chinese in all of Malaysia. One striking difference between the Malaysian and the Finnish population is that sorting out job problems with the help of alcohol seems to be very common, particularly for the Indians in Peninsular Malaysia. Alcohol is also often seen to help with domestic problems, relationships with other people and the general attitude towards life.

In Malaysia, the cultural norm is not to express disagreements with other people but always be polite and courteous. In line with this, the respondents, particularly in Sarawak, report that they more seldom have quarrels or arguments scuffles or fights and also more seldom regret something said or done, which is the case with the Finns. But, on the other hand, drinking seems to be more dangerous for (particularly, the physical safety of) the drinker himself as is indicated by the comparatively high percentages (in view of the Malaysian consumption levels) of respondents having been involved in accidents, having suffered injuries, loss of money and valuables, damage to objects and clothing, victimized by cheating. Drunken driving is much more common than in Finland, too. Although, in Sarawak, the average level of consumption is lower than in Peninsular Malaysia, the alcohol-related health problems experienced by the interviewees there are at a higher level than in Peninsular Malaysia.

The high frequencies of both Indians and Chinese in Peninsular Malaysia that report having experienced various social reactions to their drinking reflect the nature of the Malaysian society. With a comparatively small population within a comparatively small geographical area and the central role of religion (particularly Islam) in all spheres of life, it is feasible for the Malay-led government to exert control throughout the society. In the case of Kuala Selangor, the small town environment further contributes to this. In Sarawak, the social reactions to drinking seem to be less frequent. This may be due to the less prominent role of Islam within the State.

Particularly, the Indians seem to be the target of various social reactions to their drinking. This may be due to several reasons. Most of the Indians interviewed live and work in a comparatively separate and confined estate environment where social control is exerted by the headmen and the directors of the estates as well as doctors who, in many cases, are Malay, whose attitude towards drinking is, by definition, negative. However, also the more well-to-do Chinese experience social reactions to drinking far more often than, for example, the Finns do. This may also be due to the predominantly Malay/Muslim environment. In Sarawak, the issue of alcohol is not very central in public debate, obviously due to the different ethno-religious environment.

ALCOHOL AS A MARKER OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

Shamsul (1996) has argued that identity formation of people takes place in a 'two social reality' context. First, there is the 'authority-defined' social reality, one that is authoritatively defined by people who are a part of the dominant power structure. Second, there is the 'everyday-defined' social reality, which is experienced by the people in the course of their everyday life. Although intricately linked and constantly influencing and shaping each other they may or may not be identical. In fact, they are rarely identical because the 'everyday-defined'

social reality is experienced and the 'authority-defined' social reality is only observed and interpreted. Both are mediated through the social class position of those who observe and interpret social reality and those who experience it. Woven and embedded in the fabric of these two social realities is social power articulated in various forms (ibid: 9-10).

Shamsul also argues … these two social realities exist side by side at any given time… (1996:9). Be this as it may, it is obvious that the distinction is at least applicable to the centrally led present-day Malaysia as a strategy for research or for collection of information. The Malaysian social reality is characterised by a clear distinction between government policies and the everyday life of people of different races (see for example. Guinness 1992).

It may also be argued that, in Malaysia, respondents to a brief interview based on a structured questionnaire would more or less provide their answers within the context of the 'authority-defined' social reality. There are several reasons for this. The interview situation in this case necessarily is quite formal. Also, the respondents are used to various ventures of information collection by the local, state, and federal authorities and they might not be willing or able to make a distinction between those and that of an academic study like the present one where the interviewees' anonymity is secured. Hence, it is probably safer for the interviewees to stick with the answers more or less within the 'authority-defined' social reality.

As opposed to the quantitative data obtained with the surveys, the research process also produced some qualitative information on alcohol consumption in Malaysia that clarify the distinction between the 'authority-defined' and 'everyday-defined' social realities, at least as far as the alcohol issue is concerned. It is not difficult to find bars or pubs serving alcoholic beverages owned by Malays or persons confessing to Islam. The clientele of these outlets is, naturally, mixed in ethnic terms consisting of Malays, Chinese, Indians and others. In the face of severe punishments (fine, jail or even whipping) Malays are known to frequent these establishments and consume alcoholic beverages and others as well (see for example *The Sunday Times* April 18, 2004). The purchase and usage of breathalysers in the State of Selangor to check the nature of the drinks consumed by Muslims at bars, which was already discussed above, serves as an indicator of confessing to this fact.

According to my research assistant in Peninsular Malaysia, many of her young Malay friends do consume alcohol in pubs, bars and discos. By the looks of the drinks, it is hard to tell whether or not they contain alcohol. A common practise among Malay youngsters is to mix alcohol in a can of Coke and consume the drink, in a public place in the companion of friends who do not drink alcohol. Drinking alcohol does not seem to be disapproved by Malay friends but rather tolerated quite well. Or, they purchase orange juice or something similar with alcohol added to it and nobody knows the difference. This is something that is very hard to catch using survey methods and which, as a result, is not reflected

in the overall consumption figures. This is also a good example of the way the more liberal attitudes brought along with the so-called modernization of the Malaysian society tends to erode, within the 'everyday-defined' social reality of particularly the children of the new middle classes.

In Kuala Selangor, when interviewing the Chinese fishermen who, naturally, were more than willing to admit to drinking themselves, also told the researcher something about Malay drinking in the small town. Economically, a very lucrative business for these fishermen is to cultivate certain specie of shrimp in the Kuala Selangor river leading to the Straits of Malacca and along which they have their dwellings. This shrimp is cultivated within a fenced area of about an acre in the river. However, to be able to do this, you have to apply for a licence from the town officials who are all Malays since the town is governed by UMNO. Officially, the licence only costs a few *ringgit*. However, paying this fee is not sufficient to obtain the licence. According to the fishermen interviewed, the only way to obtain the much needed licence is to take the Malay town official, during office hours, to one of the restaurants in the centre of Kuala Selangor and serve him alcoholic beverages, mostly beer. Perhaps ironically, Malay Muslim drinking thus seems to take place in the daytime, during working hours. The Chinese fishermen, themselves, on the other hand, admit to drinking only after work, i.e. after they have returned from the sea with their catch in the early afternoon.

Obviously, in the 'everyday-defined' social reality, the role of alcoholic beverages takes a different role in the lives of people from all races compared to the way alcohol is seen within the 'authority-defined' social reality. In the latter, alcohol is regarded as an issue of Muslim purity and, in this sense, Malay Muslim superiority over the other races, particularly the Chinese. One could also imagine the fact that Chinese who drink less than Indians would comment on the stereotyped image of Chinese as good moneymakers. A similar approach could be applied to the *Orang Asli*. The phrase "drunk like the Indians!" seems to have been partially replaced by the phrase "drunk like the *Orang Asli*!" This, naturally, refers to the notion that alcoholism would be on the increase among the *Orang Asli*. However, no serious research has been carried out to support this claim. It is easily felt, within the 'authority-defined' social reality, that Islam is something that could solve this problem among the *Orang Asli*. As such Islam is used as a controlling factor on alcohol consumption, even among the non-Muslims, thus expanding the importance of Islam beyond those groups of the Malaysian population who do not confess to it.

The Malaysian "national culture" is an ethnicised construct built on a base that was ostensibly a multicultural past civilization and is wrought with problems when posed against the ongoing interactive and fluid multiethnic cultures in Malaysia and the globalising forces of diversity and pluralism. A conspicuous manifestation of this is the ongoing production and consumption of youth cultures in the 'everyday-defined' social reality among the various racial categories (Zawawi Ibrahim 2000) that has little to do with the official policy of

producing and consuming the tri-racial model of the Malaysian society. Within the 'authority-defined' context, the *bumiputera*–based national identity is being challenged by various groups, too (Shamsul 1996: 24). The Chinese consumption of ethnicity also seems long to have been different from the official perception of Chinese ethnicity (Heng 1998).

In sum, despite the low level of consumption in international terms, the alcohol issue in Malaysia is being used to construct boundaries between the races as well as to negotiate them. This obviously takes place both in the public sphere, supported by government policies and government-controlled media, and on the grass root level but in a different manner. While, within the 'authority-defined' social reality, alcohol is used as a criteria to separate races, within the 'everyday-defined' social reality, alcohol consumption is, along with the modernisation and Westernisation of the society, more and more spread among all the races, The Chinese, the Indians and the Malays as well. On the one hand, there seems to be a tendency to define the *bangsa* Malaysia, the Malaysian people, more and more using the norms and ideals of Islam. On the other hand, in the everyday-life of people from all races, at least as far as alcohol is concerned, straying from the stipulations of Islam is more and more common.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The research and writing of this article was funded by the Academy of Finland in the context of the research project on 'Managing Cultural Diversity - Construction of Ethnicity in Malaysia and Sri Lanka' (2005-2010).

NOTES

1 Racial groups need to be separated from ethnic groups. The British colonialists did not make this distinction. Both among the Malays and Chinese (Hakka, Teochew, and Cantonese) in Malaya there were different ethnic groups with different cultures and dialects. These groups did not necessarily communicate with each other. The British, however, ignored these differences and only saw a Malay 'race' and a Chinese 'race'.

2 The term *bumiputera* (sons of the soil) refers to indigenous Malaysian peoples with inherited historical rights to inhabit the area. In the Peninsula, they are mostly Malays, which, there, is identical with being a Moslem.

3 Presently, one Ringgit (RM) is equal to, roughly, • 0,20.

4 As for Sarawak, no overall data on the general population has been available.

5 The under-representation of the Chinese is due to their occasional unwillingness to grant interviews. The most common argument for refusal was that there was not enough time for these kinds of activities since all day is taken by business activities.

6 'Availability', as a concept, needs to be separated from the concept of 'consumption'. Availability is determined in the following manner: domestic production + exports – imports. The general level of alcohol availability may come close to the actual level of consumption but it is not identical with it. There is, for example, always an

amount of alcoholic beverages stored for future consumption. These amounts are not reflected in the actual consumption levels but are, however, available for consumption. The term ´consumption' is to be used on the individual level while the term 'availability' is an aggregate level concept.

7 This is a valuable opening. Before, no efforts have been made to inquire Malays about their drinking. So far, this has been regarded an impossible task that it, however, necessarily is not.

8 In Sarawak, income differentials among the population interviewed were quite insignificant (see Table 1. in the Appendix). In Sarawak, mean monthly income of the surveyed population was RM 2030 (in 1999) whereas the mean income of all of the Malaysian population was RM 9800 in 1995 (Malaysia 1996, 36). This is one more indication of the fact that the Sarawakian society is still at a very different level of 'development' compared to that of Peninsular Malaysia. In other words, society is still organized in a different manner in East and West Malaysia.

REFERENCES

Abdul Rahman Embong. 1996. Social Transformation, the State and the Middle Classes in Post-Independence Malaysia. In: Zawawi Ibrahim (ed.). Mediating Identities in A Changing Malaysia. *Southeast Asian Studies*. Special Issue. 34(3): 56-79. Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University: Kyoto.

Abraham, Collin E.R. 1997. *Divide and Rule: The Roots of Race Relations in Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: INSAN.

Andaya, B.W. & Andaya, L.Y. 1982. *A History of Malaysia*. Hong Kong: Macmillan.

Annual Statistical Bulletin Sarawak 1988.

FAO Food Balance Sheets 1972-1996.

Financial Times. November 30, 1998.

Gomez, E.T. & Jomo, K.S. 1997. *Malaysia's Political Economy. Politics, Patronage and Profits*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Guinness, P. 1992. *On the Margin of Capitalism: People and Development in Mukim Plentong, Johor, Malaysia.* Singapore: Oxford UP.

Heng, Pek Koon. 1998. Chinese Responses to Malay Hegemony in Peninsular Malaysia. In: Zawawi Ibrahim (ed.). *Cultural Contestations. Mediating Identities in A Changing Malaysian Society*. London: ASEAN Academic Press. Pp. 51-82.

Jernigan, D.H. 1997 *Thirsting for Markets: The Global Impact of Corporate Alcohol.* The Marin Institute for the Prevention of Alcohol and Other Drug Problems: San Rafael.

Kortteinen, Timo. 1989. Agricultural Alcohol and Social Change in the Third world. *The Finnish Foundation for Alcohol Studies*. Volume 38. Helsinki.

_____. 1999. *Urban Peasants and Rural Workers - Making A Living in the Third World.* Finnish Anthropological Society TAFAS 43, Rauma.

_____. 1999. Alcohol in Malaysia: The Impact of Social Transition. *Contemporary Drug Problems: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*. 26(3) Fall: 391-411.

Mäkelä Klaus & Mustonen Heli. 1988. Positive and Negative Experiences Related to Drinking as a Function of Annual Alcohol Intake. *British Journal of Addiction.* 83: 403-408.

Roth, Henry Ling. 1980. *The Natives of Sarawak and British North Borneo.* Volume I. Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press.

Shamsul, A.B. 1996. Debating about Identity in Malaysia: A Discourse Analysis. In Zawawi Ibrahim (ed.). Mediating Identities in A Changing Malaysia. *Southeast Asian Studies*. Special Issue. 34(3): 8-31. Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University: Kyoto.

The Sunday Times. April 18, 2004.

Zawawi Ibrahim. 2000. Anthropologising "National Culture" in Malaysia: Representing and Contesting Culture in the Age of Fragmentation. In Kortteinen, Timo & Kaartinen, Timo (eds.). Southeast Asian National Culures in a Fragmenting Global System. *Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society*. Special Issue. 25(2) June: 50-61.

Timo Kortteinen, Ph.D
Docent
Academy Research Fellow
University of Helsinki
Department of Sociology
Research Unit
P.O.Box 10 (Snellmaninkatu 12)
FIN-00014 University of Helsinki

Telephone: +358-9-19124221
Fax: +358-9-19124621
email: tkorttei@mappi.helsinki.fi