

*Toddy, Race, and Urban Space in Colonial Singapore, 1900–59**

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Abstract

British Malaya's toddy industry features in history as a problem that plagued the plantation economy, when the city toddy shop was no less important in contributing to a racialized discourse of modernity in Singapore. Although colonial policy served to engender the racialization of toddy drinking as a peculiarly Tamil vice, toddy's social life in Singapore demonstrates that it became the poor man's beer regardless of race. The alcoholic drink gave rise to new adaptations, enterprises, and innovations in colonial Singapore, thus carving out a unique place for itself in the city's cultural landscape. Yet, Singapore's toddy industry dominated the public spotlight for less palatable reasons, which rendered it the subject of numerous demands for increased government regulation. The colonial government responded with a slew of measures that often differed from the federation's toddy policy. Singapore's toddy industry yielded divergent imaginaries of modernity, particularly in the aftermath of the Second World War. Some reformers sought its abolition or relocation away from city spaces, whilst others demanded its modernization on the grounds that this meagre establishment was the labourer's sole source of recreation. In light of recent developments that have prompted the government's intervention in limiting migrant labourers' access to alcohol, this article will examine the considerations that informed the colonial establishment's urban toddy policy and its corresponding impact on Singapore society as it sped towards decolonization. Through an exploration of toddy's treatment in the English-language press, oral histories, and colonial office records, this article seeks to contribute perspectives on an aspect of Singapore's social history that remains largely unexplored.

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Introduction

Toddy consumption in British Malaya features as a plantation problem in most historical works on the subject. According to Arasaratnam, toddy drinking amongst estate labourers had long been ‘a social evil’, the magnitude of which could have been greater in British Malaya than even South India owing to the colonial government’s patronage of the industry.¹ Kernial Singh Sandhu’s attention to the appearance of the toddy shop in rural Malaya provides insights into the localization of the toddy trade, whilst Andrew Willford’s work has contributed further anthropological perspectives on toddy drinking in contemporary Malaysia.² In contrast, the colonial government’s administration of the toddy trade in the Straits Settlements and the contestations that it engendered have been hitherto neglected areas of historical enquiry. In particular, toddy’s social life in Singapore surfaced a unique set of concerns and tensions about the regulation of urban space in the port city. The historical association of South Asian labourers with alcohol consumption and potentially dangerous behaviour was evident in the aftermath of the Little India riot of 2013 as well. The riot spurred the government into action in regulating migrant workers’ access to alcohol in certain designated recreational spaces—a political response that appeared to stem from racialized understandings of deviance.³

¹ Sinnappah Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 70–71.

² Kernial Singh Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: some aspects of their immigration and settlement 1786–1957* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 235; Andrew C. Willford, *Cage of freedom: Tamil identity and the ethnic fetish in Malaysia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), p. 18. For perspectives on the implications of toddy consumption for Indian political representation in Malaya, see Michael Stenson, *Class, race, and colonialism in West Malaysia* (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1980), pp. 136–137, 150. See also Parameswari Krishnan, Azharudin Mohd Dali, Abdullah Zakaria Ghazali, and Shriharan Subramanian, ‘The history of toddy drinking and its effects on Indian labourers in colonial Malaya, 1900–1957’, *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 42:3/4, for recent perspectives on the toddy industry’s social impact in rural Malaya.

³ Kirsten Han has argued that the stereotype of the ‘drunken Indian’ influenced the government’s choice of policy for the deterrence of future riots in the area. The riot spawned nothing short of a media frenzy out of which emerged important theorisations of the riot’s treatment by authorities. It has been argued that stereotypes of the ‘drunken India’ influenced the government’s choice of policy. See, for example, ‘Comment: we still don’t know what really happened on Sunday night’, <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/blogs/singaporescene/still-don-t-know-really-happened-sunday-night-173537714.html> (accessed 2

The intellectual landscape of Singapore's social history for the pre-war and war periods is rich and varied. Some of these works have studied key developments in the city's history, while others have positioned the urban physical environment itself as a canvass of social change.⁴ Several works have focused specifically on working-class sociability and the colonial government's attempts to regulate the recreational impulses of this class.⁵ The built environment, working-class sociability, and political ferment have not been treated as hermetically sealed categories in the most notable of these works, which have instead sought to forge critical connections between these areas of inquiry.⁶ In so doing, historians have probed the lives of some subaltern groups on whose blood and toil the modern city-state was forged.

However, the current body of scholarship surfaces two distinct limitations. The first is a general dearth of non-elite Indian perspectives. Although some contemporary studies have sought to trace the impact of migrant labourers' recreational spaces on Singapore's physical, political, and cultural landscapes, social history writing has generally been cleaved along the lines of the plural society model, wherein various ethnic perspectives continue to co-exist without really mingling.⁷ This

February 2019) and <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/blogs/singaporescene/comment-public-disorder-exercise-in-singapore-raises-071227334.html> (accessed 2 February 2019).

⁴ Paul H. Kratoska, *The Japanese Occupation of Malaya: a social and economic history, 1941–1945* (London: C. Hurst, 1998); Loh Kah Seng, 'Beyond rubber prices: negotiating the Great Depression in Singapore', *South East Asia Research*, 14:1 (2006). For works that have examined the impact of social change on the physical environment, see, for example, Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Contesting space in colonial Singapore: power relations and the urban built environment*, 2nd edn (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003); Stephen Dobbs, *The Singapore River: a social history, 1819–2002* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003).

⁵ James Francis Warren, *Rickshaw coolie: a people's history of Singapore, 1880–1940* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003); James Warren, *Ah Kū and Karayuki-san: prostitution in Singapore, 1870–1940* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003); Katherine Yeo Lian Bee, 'Hawkers and the state in colonial Singapore: mid-nineteenth century to 1939' (M.A. Thesis, Department of History, Monash University, 1989).

⁶ Carl Trocki, *Opium and empire: Chinese society in colonial Singapore, 1800–1910* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1990); Lai Ah Eng, 'The Kopitiam in Singapore: an evolving story of migration and cultural diversity', Working Paper Series No. 132, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore; Khairuddin Aljunied, 'Coffee-shops in colonial Singapore: domains of contentious publics', *History Workshop Journal*, 77:1 (2014), 64–85.

⁷ See, for example, Wajihah Hamid, 'Seen but unheard—a case-study of low-waged Tamil migrant workers in Singapore', Asia Research Institute, Working Paper No. 73 (April 2014); Vijay Devadas, 'Rethinking screen encounters: cinema and Tamil migrant workers in Singapore', *Screening the Past* (2011).

discernible lack of dialogue between ‘mainstream’ and ‘ethnic’ histories has inspired a scholarly turn towards the exploration of ‘Singapore’s social and cultural history from the bi-cultural perspective’, although this approach is still at a nascent stage where working-class histories are concerned.⁸ While various social experiences have been explained with reference to Chinese experiences, working-class Indian realities and perspectives remain largely relegated to the purview of diaspora studies. With their emphasis on the minority community’s politics of representation, these studies typically run in parallel to representations of Singapore’s social history. John Solomon’s recent book is commendable for the insights it provides into the everyday lives of subaltern Indian groups, although here, too, wider social issues are overshadowed by parochial concerns; alcoholism, for instance, features as a concern for the Tamil labouring community and the Indian leadership primarily as it evoked uncomfortable associations of caste backwardness.⁹ While these were indeed very legitimate concerns, it would be productive to locate them within a broader conceptualization of social anxieties. The Indian leadership’s reformist impulses intersected with the colonial government’s modernizing project in important and interesting ways where toddy provision was concerned. Toddy’s stigmatization as an affliction of the blue-collar Tamil labourer or toddy *mama*¹⁰ notwithstanding, the debate about the alcohol transcended the racial divide to include non-Indians who contributed to the controversy surrounding it either as its consumers or as its critics.

Secondly, studying the provision and consumption of a contentious commodity would shed new light on processes of social change and how these were negotiated by different groups. While coffee shops or *kopitiams* have received significant scholarly attention as sites of sociability, the toddy shop has been rendered conspicuous by its absence in representations of Singapore’s past. This scholarly neglect derives perhaps from toddy’s association with the plantation economy. At any rate, the neglect carries echoes of the government toddy shop’s actual marginalization as the cursed bar of the South Indian bacchante.

⁸ Derek Thiam Soon Heng and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied (eds.), *Reframing Singapore: memory, identity, trans-regionalism*, ICAS Publication Series (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), p. 34.

⁹ John Solomon, *A subaltern history of the Indian diaspora in Singapore: gradual disappearance of untouchability 1872–1965* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 117, 121.

¹⁰ *Mama* refers to maternal uncle in Tamil and Hindi.

The racialization of alcoholism, and more generally of vice, has been the subject of numerous scholarly works.¹¹ After all, the trope of the original drunk 'Injun' emerged in connection with an alcohol excise policy that facilitated colonial control over native Americans whose subsequent confinement in reserves far removed from white society was justified in moral as well as medical terms.¹² Alcohol provision has also been shown to intersect with class distinctions in significant ways in the context of colonialism.¹³ The demonization of certain plebeian drinking establishments and behaviours directly owed to paternalistic government policies and social attitudes. Toddy's treatment as the Tamil's alcohol of choice gave rise to demands to isolate the toddy shop from 'respectable' urban spaces. The increased visibility of the government-controlled industry in the open world of the port city rendered it the subject of strident criticism. Demands for increased attention to working-class welfare intensified as the tide of modernization picked up pace after the Second World War. Toddy provision and consumption thus became central to numerous, often competing imaginaries of modernity. Toddy can still be enjoyed in neighbouring Malaysia while the industry was phased out in Singapore in the late 1970s, which begs the question of why an imported cultural institution that thrived all over British Malaya in its heyday followed such different trajectories eventually.

The reason has to do partly with colonial toddy policy in Singapore, which underwent critical shifts between 1900 and 1959. Following decolonization, a string of problems plagued the industry, culminating in its eventual demise. While the opium trade was abolished in 1943 and other types of alcohol were distributed according to market demand—a 'curious relic of the liquor monopoly' persisted with the

¹¹ See, for example, Trocki, *Opium and empire* for an overview of the colonial government's treatment of opium and its repercussions for the Chinese community. I also refer to Lynn Pan, *Alcohol in colonial Africa* (Helsinki: Finnish Foundation for Alcohol Studies, 1975); and Charles Ambler, 'Alcohol, racial segregation and popular politics in northern Rhodesia', *Journal for Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 31:3 (1990), 295–313, for perspectives on colonial policy and the racialization of native drinking habits in the African continent.

¹² Gilberto Quintero, 'Making the Indian: colonial knowledge, alcohol and native Americans', *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 25:4 (2001), 57–71.

¹³ William R. Jankowiak and Daniel Bradburd (eds.), *Drugs, labor, and colonial expansion* (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2003). See also Nikhil Menon, 'Battling the bottle: experiments in regulating drink in late colonial Madras', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 52:1 (2015), 29–51.

provision of toddy.¹⁴ Toddy production and distribution in the Straits Settlements, which had previously been leased out to the highest bidders, were gradually brought under government control in the 1930s. These changes enabled the industry's continuation, albeit with the colonial government's direct and active involvement as its moderator.¹⁵ This article will examine the intersections between working-class sociability, contestations of urban modernity, and control of the built environment. Its intent is not to trace political change through alcohol control, but rather to probe the considerations that underpinned colonial toddy policy in Singapore from the beginning of the twentieth century and to evaluate toddy's role in informing notions of modernity at different points over the colony's transition to full internal self-governance. In so doing, it hopes to draw attention to an aspect of Singapore's working-class history through the lens of toddy provision and consumption. Of the sources used, which include colonial office records, oral histories, and newspaper articles, the latter two sets of historical evidence are particularly valuable, as they offer insights into the polarizing emotions and opinions that the toddy issue often surfaced amongst different segments of society.

The colonial government, toddy provision, and the social world of Tamil labourers in Singapore

Toddy's cultural impact on Singapore society was perhaps matched only by its indelible physical imprint. The city's Ord Bridge, for instance, was also referred to as Toddy Bridge as it was flanked by shops hawking the drink.¹⁶ In the late nineteenth century, the competing uses to which toddy was put rendered it the site of a bitter dispute between Singapore's toddy farmers and bakers, the latter of whom used it as a substitute for yeast in their manufacture.¹⁷ Whilst toddy sellers insisted that all toddy should be procured from them, the bakers demanded that they should be used to allowed to use toddy directly obtained from their trees. The resulting standoff led to a compromise wherein the

¹⁴ Derek Mackay, *Eastern customs: the customs service in British Malaya and the opium trade* (London and New York: Radcliffe Press, 2005), p. 193.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 36, 195.

¹⁶ Victor R. Savage and Brenda Yeoh, *Singapore street names: a study of toponymics* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2013), p. 10.

¹⁷ *Straits Times*, 11 June 1870, p. 4.

bakers were allowed to take the toddy they required from their own trees after paying the farmers a tax of 15 cents per tree per month.¹⁸ Toddy's utility in the making of 'bludder cake'—a confection that graced Eurasian tables at Christmas time—meant that it had to be procured from toddy shops.¹⁹ Whilst toddy thus seeped into different cultural spaces in Singapore, it was foremost a poor man's cheap drink.

The centrality of toddy to Tamil social life was first established in the Madras Presidency, India, wherein the widespread use of the drink informed colonial knowledge of toddy as an indispensable aspect of the Tamilian's culture and constitution. Whilst toddy had had an important place in Tamil social history,²⁰ it was with colonial rule that its consumption was organized, collated, and reified into an irreducible (South) Indian difference. The notion that toddy was the Tamilian's poison of choice led to novel experimentations with temperance and teetotalism in the Madras Presidency, such as with the establishment in 1920 of a labourers' social club with the declared aim of providing a 'counter-attraction to toddy and liquor shops'.²¹ Colonial discourse assigned a place for toddy in Indian society that was ambiguous to begin with. While it was a type of alcohol, toddy was also considered a less harmful alternative to other types of alcohol, especially the distilled varieties, hence prompting the colonial government to differentiate between 'toddy and liquor'. At the height of temperance agitation in Madras, some Legislative Council representatives of business interests argued that as labourers had to have some kind of alcohol to ensure productivity, that alcohol might as well be toddy as it caused the smallest amount of physical harm.²² Alongside the widely held official

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Or blooder cake. Oral History Interview of De Conceicao, Aloysius, Accession No. 002057, Oral History Centre, Singapore. See also *Straits Times*, 17 December 1989. The article discusses several aspects of Eurasian celebrations, including the 'blooder' cake—a staple at Christmas and one that, owing to its use of toddy along with brandy and whisky, 'whets the spirit for the beer and the other drinks'.

²⁰ N. Subramanian, Shu Hikoshaka, G. John Samuel, and P. Thiagarajan (eds.), *Tamil social history*, vol. 1 (Chennai: Institute of Asian Studies, 1997), pp. 221–222.

²¹ *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 9 June 1920. For an overview of temperance and liquor control initiatives in South India, refer to B. S. Baliga, *A compendium on temperance and prohibition in the Madras Presidency* (Madras: Government Press, 1960).

²² IOR V/26/323/11, *Report of the excise advisory committee appointed by the Government of Madras* (1924), pp. 6–10, British Library. M. C. Madurai Pillai, a labour contractor, was especially insistent on this point, arguing that labourers simply could not withstand the strenuous pressure of their work without the calming effects of toddy or arrack.

opinion that the continued provision of toddy would militate against the consumption of more deleterious local liquors like arrack or samsu, the colonial government experimented with measures to counteract intoxication by providing labourers with sobering hot drinks instead.²³

Although toddy entered colonial knowledge as food *par excellence* of Tamilians in the Madras Presidency, it was developed into a systematic tool for the management of the Indian migrant labour force in Malaya.²⁴ The habit of consuming alcohol crossed the dreaded *kalapani* and entered Malaya as part of the cultural inheritance of Tamil labourers toiling abroad.²⁵ Toddy thus accompanied Tamil labour immigration into Malaya, wherein the notion that the infantile Tamil coolie was biologically addicted to it became firmly entrenched in colonial society largely as a consequence of planters' observations. Toddy contracts and licences, along with the right to farm cannabis, or *bhang*, were invited from Indian Tamils.²⁶ In fact, several wealthy Indian Tamil entrepreneurs, crowned 'toddy kings' in local society, owed their fortunes to the thriving trade in toddy.²⁷ Profits from the toddy trade were even donated to support Britain's war effort during the Second World War.²⁸ In fact, Singapore's first foreign minister, S. Rajaratnam, was the son of Sabapathy Pillai Sinnathamby, an enterprising Tamil

²³ Menon, 'Battling the bottle', pp. 29–51.

²⁴ Arasaratnam and Stenson have both argued that toddy provision was aimed at keeping the labour population in a state of docile servility on the plantations. I refer also to Arunima Datta's talk entitled 'Tolerated Nuisance: Toddy Issues in Colonial Malayan Plantation Society', presented at the 15th Annual Southeast Asian Studies Graduate Conference. Datta argued that, despite the many social ills wrought by the provision of toddy, it was still considered to be a healthier alternative to *samsu*.

²⁵ The literal meaning of the Hindi word *kalapani* is black water. Upper-caste Hindus considered migration to be a highly polluting activity. David G. Mandelbaum, 'Alcohol and culture', *Current Anthropology*, 6:3 (1965), 281–288, 289–293. Mandelbaum has argued that Hindu scripture neither required nor demanded abstinence from alcohol from the lowest Hindu castes, to which the vast majority of the Indian labourers in Malaya belonged.

²⁶ C. M. Turnbull, *A history of modern Singapore, 1819–2005*, 3rd edn (Singapore: NUS Press, 2009), p. 67.

²⁷ Lam Bee Goh (ed.), *Pioneers of Singapore: a catalogue of oral history interviews* (Singapore: Archives and Oral History Department, 1984), p. 30. Rasoo Shanmugam, a toddy tycoon from Singapore, had formerly been a mechanic, while Singapore's last 'Toddy King', G. Sathasivam, lived in a comfortable bungalow and reportedly never drank toddy because of its stench.

²⁸ See, for example, *Straits Times*, 1 August 1940, p. 8; and *Straits Times*, 12 July 1941, p. 10.

man who had 'flourished as a toddy contractor and (who had) shared this growing business with several relatives who also took up toddy contracts'.²⁹ These wealthy toddy merchants and their equation with the government were often worlds removed from that of the humble toddy drinker.

Compared to the situation on Malayan plantations, where toddy was often the only real legally sanctioned recourse that existed within walking distance for the tired labourer, a tippler could purchase any kind of alcoholic beverage he wanted in Singapore, limited only by his spending power. As an agent of sociability and recreation, toddy was as preferred by urban blue-collar workers as it was by plantation labourers. It ranked amongst the cheapest alcoholic beverages, and hence offered unskilled and semi-skilled city labourers a good compromise between the cheap, but often deadly *samsu* and costly beer.³⁰ Moreover, toddy was often more accessible to the coolie in the port city as compared to the plantation frontier, which tended to isolate the toddy drinker and the related problem of toddy dependence within the estates.³¹ The city toddy shop served as a prime meeting place for urban labourers, who used its premises to share news pertaining to the homeland or to just unwind and catch up after putting in a hard day's work. Although toddy shops in Singapore were patronized largely by South Indian labourers, it was not unusual to find Punjabi, Chinese, and occasionally even Malay men interacting within its premises, often in racially segregated groups.³² Up until the abolition of Singapore's toddy industry, some working- and even middle-class South Indian families regularly presented small quantities of the alcohol as an offering to the warrior deity, Madurai Veeran, in their homes or in local shrines.³³ Toddy drinking appears to have been prevalent amongst

²⁹ Irene Ng, *The Singapore lion: a biography of S. Rajaratnam* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2010), pp. 12–13.

³⁰ Oral History Interview of Ramasamy Narayanasamy, Accession No. 001194, Oral History Centre, Singapore. See also Lenore Manderson, *Sickness and the state: health and illness in colonial Malaya, 1870–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 141.

³¹ Manderson, however, has argued that estate managers generally assumed that labourers would walk long distances to get their daily toddy fix. Manderson, *Sickness and the state*, p. 141.

³² Author's email correspondence interview with Gailsingh Massasingh, 22–23 June 2014. See also Oral History Interview of Singh Mohinder, Oral History Centre, Singapore.

³³ Author's email correspondence interview with Gejapathy Radhakrishnan and Gailsingh Massasingh, 22–23 June 2014.

bachelors and married men alike, some of whom apparently frequented government toddy shops every evening.³⁴

Indeed, toddy shops were deliberately located in close quarters to labour lines to make them accessible to Tamil labourers.³⁵ Several oral histories surface the notion that toddy was an Indian industry through and through, with one of these accounts stating that the supply of toddy and the related activity of coconut picking, along with cattle-rearing, constituted the main occupations of Singapore's Indian population.³⁶ Toddy shops were staffed with Tamil toddy servers—an occupation that was apparently detested by all other ethnic groups owing to the 'kind of smell' the drink emitted.³⁷ The industry's racialization was reinforced with the sale of complementary goods, especially *kajang* and curry, near toddy shops.³⁸ In fact, the sale of curry near these shops reinforced the view that toddy shops were breeding grounds for a myriad ailments from dysentery to cholera. A press commentary noted in 1931 that 'the rowdy and bacchanalian scenes enacted in front of toddy shops (are) due to Tamil women who sit near such places and sell to their "revellers" their over-spiced curry stuffs'.³⁹ Recounting his impressions of the Ord Road shop, Pakirisamy recalled that the establishment was approximately 60 by 70 feet wide and could accommodate 20 to 30 tables.⁴⁰ The toddy was contained in large drums

³⁴ Oral History Interview of Kannusamy s/o Pakirisamy, Accession No. 000081, Oral History Centre, Singapore.

³⁵ Oral History Interview of Aloysius Leo De Conceicao, Accession No. 002057, Oral History Centre, Singapore. De Conceicao recounted that a toddy was located close to the Municipal labourers' quarters at Joo Chiat. The perspective that toddy shops were deliberately located close to workers' quarters is supported by other oral history interviews, especially that of Ramasamy Narayansamy.

³⁶ See, for example, Oral History Interview of Foo Kee Seng, Accession No. 002017, Oral History Centre, Singapore.

³⁷ See, for example, Oral History Interview of Kannusamy s/o Pakirisamy, Accession No. 000081, Oral History Centre, Singapore; and Oral History Interview of Rasoo Shanmugam @ Mr. Samy Shanmugam, Accession No. 000861, Oral History Centre, Singapore.

³⁸ Oral History Interview of Kannusamy s/o Pakirisamy, Accession No. 000081, Oral History Centre, Singapore.

³⁹ *Singapore Free Press*, 17 October 1931, p. 7. From personal interviews, it appears that other complementary 'Indian' snacks were also available for the drinkers' enjoyment in the toddy shops. These included *kajang* (fried peanuts) and the savoury fried *murukku*. Personal email correspondence with Gejapathy Radhakrishnan, 22–23 June 2014; and Gailsingh Massasingh, 22–23 June 2014.

⁴⁰ Oral History Interview of Kannusamy s/o Pakirisamy, Accession No. 000081, Oral History Centre.

and was served in worn metal or plastic cups.⁴¹ There was a glaring lack of proper sanitation and seating in these establishments, and it was common to see poor labourers standing hunched over their drink or crouched together on the dirty floor in overcrowded spaces.⁴² Despite, or perhaps because of, its alterity in the colonial urban landscape, the toddy shop sometimes inspired the formation of rather favourable impressions about Tamilians. One European observer, whilst passing by the Exeter Road toddy shop, recalled having been pleasantly surprised by the loyalty that a 'large crowd of Tamils' showed to the late King George V upon his demise when they set down their glasses and stood to pay their respects as the first cannons were fired.⁴³

Toddy consumption, Tamil labourers, and the racialization of vice

While opium was perceived to dull the senses of the 'hollow-eyed, emaciated Oriental stretched out on his pallet, pipe in hand', toddy in the colonial gaze was a drink capable of exciting rowdy and fiendish behaviour in an otherwise docile and malleable labour force.⁴⁴ A letter that was addressed to European overseers of Tamil labourers read:

The Tamil, in spite of effort to convert him, is at heart a child, and whether his grievances are real or imaginary let him get them off his chest Put him off, however, and the probability is that he will repair straight to the Toddy Shop, where under the influence of liquor his grievance will to him assume gigantic proportions.⁴⁵

In 1932, a commentary on 'the incomprehensible ebb and flow of Asiatic life and customs' described a Tamil funeral in Singapore in these terms:

The mourners with long black hair flying, dance and joke Smell now the indescribable sour smell of fermenting toddy, see the jet black faces and wild eyes of those South Indian bacchantes who a few hours since were patient toilers in the Municipal Roads Department or coolies at the Wharves.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² See, for example, *Straits Times*, 1 April 1939, p. 14.

⁴³ *Straits Times*, 30 January 1936, p. 12.

⁴⁴ Trocki, *Opium and empire*, p. 1.

⁴⁵ *Straits Times*, 21 June 1926, p. 11.

⁴⁶ *Singapore Free Press*, 22 January 1932, p. 1.

The association between Tamil labourers, alcohol, and violence was concretized by two riots that yielded a discourse not altogether different from how the Little India riot of 2013 was discussed. In 1931, police forces were attacked in a clash involving ‘two rival clans of South Indians’ at a toddy shop in Upper Serangoon Road. In 1936, toddy drinking was blamed for another disturbance that took place among coolies at the Sungei Road toddy shop. In both cases, press reports attributed deviant behaviour to the labourers’ seeming weakness for toddy. The riots served to reinforce the seemingly irreducible difference that distinguished these workers, typified as an inebriated and unruly lot, from a civilized and modern society.

The alcohol’s disruptive potential notwithstanding, the provision of toddy to labourers was justified on the basis that a regulated amount was necessary to ensure productivity. As Arasaratnam argued in his work, the rationale that toddy was the least harmful alternative justified its continued provision to labourers—a situation that closely paralleled that in the Madras Presidency.⁴⁷ An estate toddy-shop manager in Singapore opined that ‘the Tamil drank toddy before the English drank beer or the Scots drank whisky and as a result of over 25 years’ experience of Tamils I know they must have their toddy’.⁴⁸ In fact, a wage reduction was opposed during the Singapore Municipal budget meeting of 1931 on the grounds that it would make it difficult for the South Indian labourer to procure essential food items. Proponents of this view insisted that, as the South Indian labourer could even do without rice but not toddy, as the habit had been acquired from childhood, ‘expense on toddy drinking was, in this country, an inevitable item in the budget of an average South Indian labourer’.⁴⁹ While there were 11 government toddy shops on the island at the beginning of 1932, ‘a heavy decline in consumption’ forced the closure of three of these shops by the end of the year.⁵⁰ For its part, the government insisted that ‘the substitution of Government shops for licensed shops has led to a vast improvement in the quality of the toddy sold for consumption’.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia*, p. 71.

⁴⁸ *Straits Times*, 19 February 1929, p. 11.

⁴⁹ *Singapore Free Press*, 2 November 1931, p. 7.

⁵⁰ *Annual Departmental Reports of the Straits Settlements for the Year 1932* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1932), p. 121.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Moreover, concerns that the adulteration of European liquors or *samsu* by unscrupulous Chinese merchants rendered them not only cheap, but potentially lethal, were rife. During the Singapore Methodist Conference, it was observed that, as the Tamilian was especially susceptible to dysentery 'and one would not care to say how great a percentage of the cases of this malady is directly caused through indulgence in the poisonous liquid sold in the guise of brandy and gin', it was preferable to ensure that he had a steady supply of toddy all the time.⁵² Policing of toddy sales led to numerous arrests of this nature, such as that of May 1933, when a Chinese liquor-shop owner in River Valley Road was charged with having sold *samsu* to Tamil labourers.⁵³ The discipling gaze of the colonial government yielded efforts to criminalize the sales to Tamilians of other types of alcohol, which normalized toddy consumption amongst this group of labourers even further. The question of whether toddy and beer ought to be included in the list of spirituous liquors, the sales of which were forbidden to Tamil coolies, was even raised in the House of Commons.⁵⁴ To this extent, the toddy policy was maintained as a natural and necessary one by the colonial government.

The prominence with which the toddy shop featured in the urban labourer's social world meant that it was never removed from the public spotlight. Alarm about the social ills of toddy consumption and, consequently, demands for a greater degree of state intervention over toddy provision were first raised by representatives of the Indian community. In 1929, the Indian member of the Malayan Legislative Council, Singapore's H. H. Abdoolcader, claimed that toddy was to Indian labourers what beer was to their Western counterparts.⁵⁵ He argued that the regulation of the toddy trade, with reference to such issues as the prevention of adulteration or the protection of women and children from its sinister charms, was much more effectively carried out in the Federated Malay States than in the urban milieu of the Straits Settlements. He demanded therefore that 'the beverage of the working class of people should be under the control and monopoly of the Government, as (was) done in the FMS [Federated Malay States]'.⁵⁶

⁵² *Singapore Free Press*, 19 January 1914, p. 7.

⁵³ *Sunday Times*, 14 May 1933, p. 1.

⁵⁴ *Official Report of the Parliamentary Debates*, Fifth Series Volume LXIV (London: HMS Office, 1914), pp. 1901–1902.

⁵⁵ CO273/560/15, Legislative Council Proceedings, 2 September 1929, The National Archives, United Kingdom.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

According to Derek McKay, who had worked in the Malayan customs service, two-thirds of all toddy shops in British Malaya were administered by the customs by 1934.⁵⁷ Whilst a hotchpotch of systems continued to exist in the FMS, Singapore's toddy trade was eventually brought under the sole control of the government. Even then, Abdoolcader's concerns about lack of regulation continued to plague the administration. The appalling state of the toddy shop notwithstanding, the labourer was left with little choice but to patronize it, as toddy could only be consumed within the premises of these establishments within stipulated business hours. Even though the toddy's physical deterioration was indeed a concern, the legislation constituted—to quote Foucault—'a specific technique of power', which enabled the state to subject the toddy-drinking labourer to a 'normalising gaze, a surveillance that (made) it possible to qualify, to classify, and to punish' when his drinking was contained within toddy-shop premises.⁵⁸

The Japanese Occupation of Singapore marked a watershed in most aspects of local society, including toddy provision. The toddy trade flourished with Japanese encouragement at a time when the dearth of imported liquor alternatives was keenly felt. In wartime Singapore, toddy was even substituted for communion wine in some churches.⁵⁹ Paul Kratoska's work shows that toddy also gave rise to ingenious adaptations and applications; whilst urine and pineapple juice proved to be unsuitable raw-material substitutes for rubber production, toddy proved to be a successful candidate.⁶⁰ Moreover, it was quite commonly used as medicine owing to its purportedly high vitamin B content. Although toddy consumption was often associated with a rise in the incidence of cholera, some observers maintained that the beverage could actually be nourishing to labourers—an observation that gained credibility during the Occupation when the Japanese supposedly

⁵⁷ Mackay, *Eastern customs*, p. 193.

⁵⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison* (translated from the French by Alan Sheridan), (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), pp. 26–27, 184. However, the 'toddy only in toddy shops' legislation appears to have been commonly circumvented as restricted amounts of the drink could be purchased for the purpose of making bread and other confections. For an overview of the official rationale for 'the toddy only in shops' legislation, see Mackay, *Eastern customs*, p. 193.

⁵⁹ Hong Suen Wong, *Wartime kitchen: food and eating in Singapore, 1942–1950* (Singapore: National Museum of Singapore, 2009), p. 48.

⁶⁰ Kratoska, *The Japanese Occupation of Malaya*, p. 229.

encouraged toddy consumption as a cure for *beri-beri*.⁶¹ Toddy thus acquired a degree of social acceptance during the brief interregnum of the Japanese Occupation between 1942 and 1945.

In the postwar period, toddy provision in Singapore—much like the colony itself—was brought under renewed British colonial control. The desirability of increasing the price of toddy was hotly debated, fuelled by concerns that adulterated toddy was being sold in government toddy shops, and the imperative of supporting ‘the postwar policy of increasing yields from indirect taxation to offset costs of social services’.⁶² The Comptroller of Customs pointed out that beer, rather than *samsu*, was the likely and costlier alternative that Tamil labourers would turn to if their toddy supply was rendered more expensive. After all, ‘the sale of *samsu* by liquor shops and retail liquor shops to Tamils (was) illegal, but anyone (could) buy beer in any sundry goods shop at a price four times as great as that proposed for toddy’.⁶³ The Comptroller of Labour, on the other hand, warned that a price hike could have the effect of provoking criticism about the government’s motives and so strengthen the hand of prohibitionists. He pointed out that, whilst Singapore’s Tamil labourers were not the lowest-paid group, their ‘monthly earning would be less than one quarter of the earning of the average (steady) beer drinker. It should be borne in mind that the real wages of Indian labourers on estates are higher than those of the Indian labourer in Singapore’.⁶⁴ To this end, he recommended a moderate and gradual price increase, which could be justified as enabling toddy contractors to pay more to their tappers, whilst reducing the risk of adulteration. He suggested this course of action after testing possible reactions through informal consultation with the trade unions, whose members were ‘likely to be principally affected’ by the emerging black market in toddy.⁶⁵

⁶¹ See, for example, *Straits Times*, 27 October 1945, p. 2; and *Malaya Tribune*, 6 December 1946, p. 4. The notion that toddy was a wartime cure for *beri-beri* in Malaya and Singapore is corroborated by Singapore’s former president, Mr S. R. Nathan, in his memoirs. S. R. Nathan and Timothy Auger, *An unexpected journey: path to the presidency* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2011), p. 78.

⁶² CO 852/1243/1, Foreign Secretary to Comptroller of Customs, CSO6534/46, 17 March 1949, The National Archives, United Kingdom.

⁶³ CO 852/1243/1, Comptroller of Customs to Foreign Secretary, Toddy Retail Selling Price, 15 March 1949. Tamil domestic servants were, however, exempted from the *samsu* rule.

⁶⁴ CO 852/1243/1, Customs Confidential, 8/49/32, date unspecified.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

Eventually, the price of toddy sold in Singapore was raised from 15 cents to 20 cents per pint. It was bolstered by the explanation that the closure of toddy shops would induce Tamil labourers to consume stout, beer, or spirit, all of which cost three times the price of toddy, and that, even with the proposed increase, the cost of toddy in Singapore and the Straits Settlements was still ‘absurdly cheap’ compared to Federation prices.⁶⁶ A more interesting racial rhetoric also accompanied the increase in price:

For some time now, toddy has been consumed by other than Tamil labourers. A fair proportion of customers at Toddy Shops are Chinese who would not have dreamt of drinking toddy pre-war but do so now being attracted by the extremely low price; incidentally, they are often able to visit the shops earlier than the Tamil labourer is and the labourer often gets there to find the shop sold out.⁶⁷

Singapore’s racialized class hierarchy was thus reinforced through the deliberate manipulation of consumption patterns in this instance. Toddy prices were adjusted as much in defence of Tamil labourers’ welfare as on the grounds that the Chinese could—and should—pay more for their drink. Following the announcement that the price of toddy was to be increased, *The Straits Times* reported an appeal from Singapore’s toddy drinkers to the government asking that the proposed policy be repealed.⁶⁸ Their plea notwithstanding, the (re)production of colonial knowledge crystallized into reality the notion that Tamil labourers could not live without their toddy. Ironically, this reasoning was used to justify the provision to these labourers of more expensive toddy on the grounds that it was still preferable to the other alternatives whose consumption supported the colonial economy.

Toddy, urban space, and the struggle for modernization

Brenda Yeoh has argued that colonial Singapore’s urban-built environment became a ‘medicalizable’ object, moulded as it was by concerns pertaining to health and sanitation.⁶⁹ The built environment became the focus of numerous attempts at intervention that were

⁶⁶ Customs Confidential 8/49, 22 September 1952.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ *Straits Times*, 29 October 1952, p. 5.

⁶⁹ Yeoh, *Contesting space in colonial Singapore*, p. 87.

motivated and backed by 'scientific' claims that were made not only by the state, but also by various segments of civil society.⁷⁰ Spaces where the underclasses of society gather over a drink or two have historically engendered social censure and attempts at control—an argument that has previously been made with respect to the English public house, which was 'subject to social controls of a ferocious kind and not simply licensing constraints'.⁷¹ Likewise, the city toddy shop yielded more negative than positive opinions about Tamilians and modernity in urban Singapore. Government toddy shops became prime sites for processes of 'other'-ing as fears concerning health and sanitation became conflated with social anxieties pertaining to safety and 'respectability'.

Although toddy shops generally had the most rudimentary amenities before, during, and after the Second World War, concerns about their condition became particularly pronounced in the postwar period. The deplorable state of toddy shops was not lost on the colonial government, which undertook efforts to maintain a degree of cleanliness and hygiene in these establishments. The Public Works Department 'redecorated' all the shops in the colony, provided glasses and mugs, and purchased tables and benches for customers' use.⁷² Yet these measures appear to have been a case of too little, too late, as the government toddy shop had by then become the subject of numerous demands for reform, if not outright abolition.

Solomon has argued that 'untouchables were the subject of various stereotypes, focused on their alleged propensity for drunkenness, violence and uncouth behaviour', which in turn yielded elaborate rules of spatial segregation within the Indian community.⁷³ He raises the point that Chinese coffee shopkeepers were also incited by caste Hindus to discriminate against untouchables based on a set of Adi-Dravida attributes that they had learned to identify.⁷⁴ The ostracism that untouchables faced was mirrored in the disdain and disgust that toddy shops frequently elicited. Attempts to discipline the differences that these plebeian drinking establishments represented found expression in demands for their removal or relocation away from respectable spaces.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Michael A. Smith, 'Social usages of the public drinking house: changing aspects of class and leisure', *The British Journal of Sociology* 34:3 (1983), 367–385.

⁷² *Straits Times*, 11 November 1952, p. 9.

⁷³ Solomon, *Subaltern history of the Indian diaspora in Singapore*, p. 110.

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 127–129.

An enraged letter to the press had expressed this sentiment as early as in 1931:

Unlike other liquor shops, Toddy Shops are a source of trouble to the surroundings not only because of the sickening smell of the toddy, but also because of the rabbles frequenting the shop. Such people, the scums of the societies, usually use derogatory and abusive expressions in public. Then what obscene words escape through their lips when under the influence of this intoxicating liquor can best be imagined Since the opening of a Government Toddy Shop in Race Course Road in the midst of a decent set of family people who had for years been leading a quiet life, unmolested there, they are put to considerable difficulties. The ladies cannot come out for shame as they meet with obscene sights and hear filthy words. Their children cannot safely go out to play since the five foot way and the road are always crowded by hawkers and drunken people Will the authorities, therefore, be good enough to take cognisance of these grievances and remove the shop to a more fitting place?⁷⁵

The ‘scums of the earth’ were also called ‘toddy *mamas*’. These were drunken and disorderly Indian men, who, having had one drink too many, ‘terrorized’ the neighbourhood of the toddy shop in a state of frenzied excitement.⁷⁶ In his article on the rationalization of diet, Bryan Turner suggested that ‘the health and dietary practices of the working class are likely to be of interest to the dominant classes only if’ at least one of three preconditions were met. The first of these are the dirt and squalor that are present in urban working-class districts—conditions that are often perceived as constituting a grave public-health threat.⁷⁷ The associations reinforced one another; toddy was the drink of the dirty, the destitute, the underclass of society; the fact that this class of people was especially fond of the alcohol rendered it and the physical establishments in which it could be enjoyed conspicuous blots on a progressive urban social order.

The imperative of ensuring a degree of respectability in toddy shops led to the installation of boards at the entrance of toddy shops explicitly forbidding women and children from entering their premises.⁷⁸ At any rate, it was expected that ‘respectable’ women would be naturally repelled by the gendered space of the toddy shop with its heady mix of

⁷⁵ *Singapore Free Press*, 8 July 1931, p. 10.

⁷⁶ Personal email correspondence with Gailsingh Massasingh, 22–23 June 2014. *Mama* refers to maternal uncle in the Tamil and Hindi languages.

⁷⁷ Bryan S. Turner, ‘The government of the body: medical regimens and the rationalisation of diet’, *The British Journal of Sociology* 33:2 (1982), 254–269, especially p. 266.

⁷⁸ Personal email correspondence with Gejapathy Radhakrishnan. See also *Straits Times*, 9 November 1979, p. 8.

male conversation, sour stench of toddy, and the ill effects of intoxication, although female road sweepers and coolies could sometimes be seen loitering near its premises.⁷⁹

By the 1950s, toddy shops in Singapore were located in places such as St George's Road and Jalan Besar, where the government employees of the daily rated grade (DREs) had their quarters.⁸⁰ The shops were often ramshackle structures constructed of wood or concrete, with zinc roofs—a design element that was responsible for the unpleasant heat that patrons often had to endure.⁸¹ As a precursor to their total abolition, the Government and Labour Union of Singapore asked for these shops to be relocated to 'distant suburbs'—a place from which they would, presumably, no longer be an easy temptation for workers.⁸² In 1954, drunken brawls near the government toddy shop on St George's Road sparked an outcry from frightened residents who petitioned the government 'to move the toddy shop to some other place', whilst trade union leaders echoed these demands on the basis that 'making them (the labourers) walk a little will have a deterrent effect and save residents a lot of nuisance'.⁸³ However, exactly what constituted a more fitting 'other place' for the relocation of city toddy shops was a matter that could never be answered to the satisfaction of everyone involved. The issue of government responsibility was a recurrent theme in these expressions of social protest; it was only right that the onus for the proper regulation of toddy shops rested with the government, since it had taken charge of their administration.

Drawing inspiration from the struggle for prohibition in India that intensified in the late 1920s and 30s, some reformers demanded the

⁷⁹ Author's email correspondence interview with Gailsingh Massasingh, 22–23 June 2014. See also Kannusamy s/o Pakirisamy, National Archives of Singapore, Oral History Archives, Reel No. 11, Accession No. 000081, interview recorded on 11 October 1983. Pakirisamy said that women could never be seen inside the toddy shops. While Massasingh's account corroborates this view, he added that sometimes coolie women could be seen near these establishments.

⁸⁰ Personal email correspondence with Gejapathy Radhakrishnan. Radhakrishnan recounted that there were four grades of government employees: divisions 1, 2, and 3 were all monthly rated, while the DREs had their pay calculated on a daily basis and were generally paid very little. This class of workers was not entitled to most of the perks that the monthly rated ones could claim. Most of the DREs were Indians or Malays.

⁸¹ Author's email correspondence interview with Gejapathy Radhakrishnan, 20 June 2014.

⁸² *Singapore Free Press*, 4 October 1951, p. 5.

⁸³ *Singapore Free Press*, 12 June 1954, p. 7.

complete eradication of the toddy industry in British Malaya as a precursor for heralding a culture of teetotalism for the diaspora. They sought to redeem Malayan society by purging it of what they deemed to be an archaic and regressive institution. The Self-Respect movement's firebrand leader, E. V. Ramasamy 'Periyar', had been requested by the Malayan Indian leadership to talk about the problem of toddy drinking amongst South Indian labourers during his visit in 1929.⁸⁴ Subsequently, toddy drinking, and alcoholism in general, became subsumed within a wider reformist preoccupation of achieving self-respect for Malayan's downtrodden Tamil labourers. These efforts were helmed by several representative bodies that were largely based out of Singapore. At any rate, toddy featured prominently in attempts to reform the state of Hinduism in Malaya. Following a ban initiated by the Tamils' Reform Association (TRA) on such 'superstitious' practices as the sacrifice of live poultry and the offering of toddy at Singapore's South Bridge Road Mariamman temple, a reader wondered whether fire-walking would follow before Hinduism in the city could be properly reformed.⁸⁵ Emboldened by Periyar's visit, the Singapore Indian Association resolved to abolish toddy shops and replace them with night schools through which it sought to 'educate our less fortunate countrymen, instruct them in methods of right thinking and right living'.⁸⁶ Dinesh Sathisan has argued that the Malayan Tamil newspapers *Tamil Murasu* and *Tamil Nesan* carried articles condemning the drink habit, although they were not above publishing Tiger Beer advertisements on their pages.⁸⁷

The strong emotions that the toddy shop provoked about urban space and modernity amongst segments of local society coalesced with the Malayan Indian leadership's politics of representation. Toddy was an important focus of India's diaspora diplomacy, in which the labourer's addiction constituted a powerful symbol of the subjugation that Indians had to endure abroad.⁸⁸ Stenson has pointed out that the prevalence of

⁸⁴ See Dinesh Sathisan, 'The power of print: Tamil newspapers in Malaya and the imagining of Tamil cultural identity, 1930–1940' (unpublished Master's Thesis, National University of Singapore, Singapore, 2008), p. 91.

⁸⁵ *Straits Times*, 26 December 1929, p. 14. For a detailed study of religious reform in Malaya, and its treatment of 'unclean' offerings like toddy and cheroot, refer to Vineeta Sinha, *Religion-state encounters in the Hindu domains: from the Straits Settlements to Singapore* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), p. 203.

⁸⁶ *Straits Times*, 26 December 1929, p. 14.

⁸⁷ Sathisan, 'The power of print', p. 91.

⁸⁸ Stenson, *Class, race, and colonialism*, p. 47.

toddy consumption in Malaya caught Nehru's attention during his Malayan tour of 1937 when the leader spoke about the pressing need to protect labourers from the alcohol's pernicious reach.⁸⁹ The influential Tamil newspaper *Swadeshimitran*, which was published in Madras, similarly lamented that toddy drinking in Malaya was increasing by leaps and bounds owing to the sheer number of toddy shops in the colony.⁹⁰ The colonial government's homogenization of the Indian community in Malaya, with scant regard for the differences between its labourers and the middle class, had already contributed to a heightened sense of anxiety for the Malayan Indian leadership.⁹¹ In spite of the public interest in city toddy shops that found expression in English newspapers, toddy addiction in rural Malaya was a more poignant symbol of backwardness and malaise for the leaders of the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC).⁹² At any rate, the MIC demanded the abolition of the toddy industry throughout Malaya in line with the stance adopted by the Indian National Congress.⁹³ Yet, even the MIC was not unanimous in demanding the end of the toddy trade. V. M. N. Menon, the Indian representative on the Malayan Union Advisory Council, voted against a council motion in 1947 that recommended the abolition of toddy shops—an act that contributed to his subsequent expulsion from the party.⁹⁴

Whilst calls for prohibition were raised by political parties, there were also observers drawn from the ranks of civil society who demanded dietary reform in line with Malayan needs. These proponents of modernization advocated the transformation of toddy shops into sanitary, modern, and, above all, respectable spaces that would accommodate Tamil labourers' social needs. Their demands picked up pace in the 1950s in tandem with the march towards decolonization. A proponent of the toddy shop's retention and modernization in Singapore wrote that he 'would like to see premises in existence, with a few tables and benches, if not chairs, with clean glasses instead of dirty tin mugs, where the poor man could sit over a glass of toddy, like the

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Swadeshimitran*, Madras, 19 April 1926, in April–June NNPR, 1926, pp. 506–507.

⁹¹ Sunil Amrith, 'Tamil diasporas across the Bay of Bengal', *The American Historical Review* 114:3 (2009), 547–572, especially p. 548.

⁹² Stenson, *Class, race and colonialism*, p. 236.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Rajeswary Ampalavanar Brown, *The Indian minority and political change in Malaya 1945–1957* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 93.

Tuan Besars in their hotels'.⁹⁵ Alluding to the illegal private toddy shops in operation, he added that it would be terribly unwise to try and eradicate toddy drinking, which he warned would only force the industry underground. Another commentary, which stated that toddy was sold in 'shops with dark frontages, insanitary interiors ... and out of the way places' that made it an anomaly to city life, argued that, instead of trying to abolish the industry, the leadership of the MIC strive to make toddy drinking more 'fashionable' instead.⁹⁶ It argued that the modernization of city toddy shops would generate more revenue for the country and added that denying labourers their equivalent of the coffee shop would be unfair.⁹⁷ These demands surface alternative notions of modernity and ideas about the labourer's place in the emerging nation. These reformers demanded the toddy shop's modernization on the grounds that an integral aspect of working-class culture ought to be preserved and incorporated within the national framework.

Over the course of the 1950s, fears that government toddy shops could no longer be policed effectively fuelled demands for modernization even further. According to the Comptroller of Customs, egregious malpractices plagued the supply chain; a powerful toddy contractor who operated as 'a virtual monopolist' in the colony had been found guilty of allowing some of his tappers to retain a portion of the toddy that they collected as a supplement to their wages.⁹⁸ The government had its hands tied for fear that taking action against the contractor could lead to reprisals, including its 'being unable to obtain any toddy at all, at least for a time'.⁹⁹ The situation was aggravated by the black market in toddy. By the mid-1950s, Indian and Chinese gangsters had acquired control of this thriving industry. They seized the toddy before the shops opened and sold the adulterated alcohol at private dens or at a steep profit outside the toddy shops themselves—a situation that prompted a representative of the Singapore Government Workers' Union to demand the installation of telephones in the shops in order to ensure effective regulation.¹⁰⁰ Illicit

⁹⁵ *Tuan Besar* translates to 'great master' in Malay, which could refer to the Europeans or wealthy Anglophone Asians. *Straits Times*, 27 October 1951, p. 10.

⁹⁶ *Singapore Free Press*, 1 May 1957, p. 4.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ C. McLaren Reid, Comptroller of Customs to the Financial Secretary, Singapore, 18 July 1949 and 7 September 1951, in Customs Confidential, 8/49.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Straits Times*, 3 May 1954; see also *Straits Times*, 5 December 1955; and *Straits Times*, 7 March 1956.

toddy could be procured with relative ease along a belt spanning ‘Raffles Quay and Colombo Court, behind the Municipal buildings and other busy streets in the city’.¹⁰¹ Alarmed about this matter, a letter to the press exclaimed that ‘with the exposure of the corruption in toddy shops, the statement that nothing can be done about that extra 50 per cent charge on a pint of toddy by a Customs official is really shocking’.¹⁰² Oral historical accounts corroborate the sheer extent of the black-market menace, one of them recounting that, by the mid-1950s, toddy was sold at a profit of 10 cents, and that people with ‘inside connections’ could get their fix without having to queue up at the shops.¹⁰³ By 1957, the Federation customs collected M\$7.5 million from toddy, while the collection from urban Singapore was relatively low, at a little over M\$0.5 million.¹⁰⁴ These statistics prompted McKay to attribute the toddy industry’s continued justification by the state to health—as government regulation prevented adulteration—rather than wealth.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, even in 1959, the government was resolute in maintaining that ‘the Customs Department manages a Government Toddy Monopoly which provides a wholesome beverage at low cost’ in Singapore.¹⁰⁶

At the same time, toddy shops became implicated in wider political contestation. Just as toddy-shop premises became places where labourers could catch up on daily news, it appears that they became sites of political discussion. During the landmark elections of 1955, an observer remarked that the Singapore’s toddy shops were ‘becoming canvassing centres’ and asked ‘if it would not make for a fairer election if all toddy shops in Singapore were closed down till election day?’.¹⁰⁷ In 1962, the Liberal Socialist Party followed in the footsteps of the prohibitionists when it called for the abolition of toddy in Singapore. Yet, instead of being outlawed, toddy continued to inspire new entrepreneurial ventures under the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) government, whose attitude towards the city-state’s toddy shops was predictably pragmatic. It was from Singapore that the beverage tycoon Yeo Hiap Seng pioneered canned toddy in 12-ounce beer cans in the hopes that ‘even those people who wouldn’t be caught dead near a

¹⁰¹ *Straits Times*, 1 April 1951, p. 11.

¹⁰² *Straits Times*, 15 December 1955, p. 6.

¹⁰³ Personal email correspondence with Gailsingh Massasingh, 22–23 June 2014.

¹⁰⁴ Mackay, *Eastern customs*, p. 195.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *State of Singapore: Annual Report* (London: HMS Office, 1959), p. 69.

¹⁰⁷ *Straits Times*, 18 February 1955, p. 6.

toddy shop will have a chance to taste this cool, refreshing drink'.¹⁰⁸ Although canned toddy fizzled out soon thereafter, the idea represented a bold departure from the past, wherein the toddy industry had been administered as a government monopoly.

By 1976, there were four toddy shops in Singapore catering to the needs of 2,000 to 2,500 customers per day.¹⁰⁹ The association of toddy with Tamilians had become so watertight by then that it prompted a survey by medical students who arrived at the rather unsurprising conclusion that 'there was nothing concrete to account for the apparent proneness to alcoholism and other alcohol problems among Indians'.¹¹⁰ By then, Singapore's toddy industry was already on its last legs. Alongside old criticisms, new problems had surfaced in the 1960s. In a context of radical trade unionism, the most serious of these challenges was posed by the Singapore Toddy Tappers' Union—a powerful group that exerted pressure on government toddy contractors for higher wages and improved working conditions.¹¹¹ Ultimately, Singapore's toddy industry fell victim to a dispute in November 1979 that transpired between the customs service, the sole remaining toddy contractor, and the toddy tappers who were working for him. More than this immediate trigger, toddy had become, in the long run, a casualty of the city-state's quest for modernity and development. To borrow the words of Singapore's last Toddy King and contractor, G. Sathasivam: 'Indians nowadays think it is low class to tap toddy.'¹¹² Toddy drinkers were disconsolate that their access to the alcohol had been abruptly stopped; they could neither switch to beer or stout, which were significantly milder, nor drink *samsu* at prices two or three times higher than that which they had previously paid for toddy.¹¹³ The labourers' internalization of the racialized toddy rhetoric rang loud and clear from a letter of appeal that was published in an English newspaper. Protesting the closure of their toddy shops, a group of dock workers wrote: 'We are Port of

¹⁰⁸ A spokesman from Yeo's quoted in *Straits Times*, 28 January 1968, p. 5; see also 'Business: success with sauce', *TIME*, 16 February 1968, pp. 85–86.

¹⁰⁹ *Singapore Medical Journal*, vol. 36 (Singapore: Singapore Medical Association), p. 575.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Information about the pressure exerted by this group on toddy contractors comes to us from several sources; see, for example, Bashir Ahmad Mallal, *The Malayan Law Journal* (Singapore: Malaya Publishing House, 1980), pp. 266–267, for the details of the dispute between the tappers and their contractor, Rasoo Shanmugam. The dispute ended with an agreement to pay the union members higher wages the following year.

¹¹² *Straits Times*, 9 November 1979, p. 9.

¹¹³ *New Nation*, 19 November 1979, p. 5.

Singapore Authority workers working in the hot sun everyday. Drinking toddy is relaxing and is good for our health. All of a sudden our toddy shop was closed and for more than two weeks we have been without toddy.¹¹⁴ The labourers pleaded for the reopening of the shops, even if it meant that toddy prices would have to be raised, as they could never afford beer with their limited means. Their appeal, however, fell on deaf ears as the remnants of the toddy industry were rapidly dismantled.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article has argued that toddy, which was of vital importance to British Malaya's plantation economy, was no less important in the social history of Singapore. The city toddy shop offers a fascinating metaphor for the marginalization that Tamil labourers experienced in colonial Singapore society. The industry yielded the trope of the exploited labourer on the one hand, whilst enabling the rise to riches of enterprising government toddy contractors on the other. Moreover, Singapore's toddy industry followed a trajectory that was markedly different from that in Malaysia. The reason for this rested partly with differences in colonial policy, although it derived in equal measure from the social contestations that toddy drinking engendered in an urban Malayan context. Colonial policy with regard to toddy in Malaya yielded its racialization, although toddy drinking traversed the limiting racial category into which it was slotted as it was the cheapest alcohol that the poor could legally procure in Singapore. Such issues prompted changes in colonial policy that were tailored specifically for Singapore's toddy industry. The physical proximity of Singapore's toddy trade to 'respectable' public spaces was a grave social concern in Singapore. Toddy shops offended urban sensibilities as they could not be ignored as a distant problem of the rural interior. Indeed, toddy and toddy shops became synonymous with degradation, malaise, and disease in the public gaze as the industry was minimally equipped to cater for the needs of the urban poor. Over the course of the 1950s and 60s, Singapore's toddy industry surfaced serious problems of management. These issues led to the intensification of demands for reform, if not outright abolition, and paved the way for the closure of Singapore's toddy shops in the late 1970s.

¹¹⁴ *Straits Times*, 24 November 1979, p. 21.