

Can Muslims Drink? Rumi Vodka, Persianate Ideals, and the Anthropology of Islam

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INTRODUCTION

A little more than ten years ago, Nasr Abu Zayd (1943–2010 CE), the late Egyptian Muslim reformer who found refuge in the Netherlands, spoke with two exiled Iranian intellectuals about Islamic thought. They listened to his hermeneutical approach to the Qur’ān, interpreting the text using historical methods while salvaging its universal ethical truths. “But what about wine?” his interlocutors quipped, as if the attitude toward drinking could unmask the scholar as narrowminded after all. Abu Zayd began with a clear answer: “It is forbidden.” Then he added, “... not because of its properties in themselves, only due to an intoxicating effect.” He started smiling and went a step further, “But I love red wine!” The ensuing laughter, the late polyglot Shahab Ahmed argued, evidenced Abu Zayd’s wisdom. Comedy made the impossible possible, the forbidden permissible, commendable, and even necessary for the etiquette and ethics that protected these exiles’ dignity (cf. Ahmed 2016: 317–21, 499). The two Iranians applauded the Muslim scholar *because* of their Islamic background. One of them, Ammar,¹ recalled the story and clarified: “I am a misunderstood *musalmān*,” those who burst into laughter when reading the wine-praising Sufi poet, Ḥāfiẓ (1315–1390 CE). Ammar is a rationalist believer who regularly turns to prayer, whispering back to the One closer than his jugular vein (Qur’ān 50: 16). Living in exile since his thirties due to Iranian theological-political persecution, he sympathized with the tragic fate of Abu Zayd, banished by

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¹ The real first names of interlocutors are used throughout this article.

fellow Egyptian believers to the Low Lands. Years passed in which Ammar and I occasionally drank, also during the holy month of Ramadan. We laughed at statistics such as the World Health Organization's, according to which Iran's population is 99.6 percent Muslim with almost zero percent recorded consumption of alcohol (e.g., WHO 2018). The caveat in the seemingly totalizing numbers lies in the wordings "Muslim" and "recorded." Who is a Muslim anyway? Witnesses to the comical, ubiquitous, desperate drunkenness of Iranians know of young and old's praise of intoxication, accompanied by centuries-old Muslim-Dionysian poetry. No wonder, then, that the arguments presented in Ahmed's posthumous *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (2016) sounded familiar to Ammar.

Ahmed's tome builds on comparative, historical, and ethnographic approaches to the very idea of the Islamic across the humanities and the social sciences.² The work is indebted to such anthropologists as Clifford Geertz, whose comparison of Indonesian and Moroccan Islam sketched an image of contrasting yet meaningfully cohering Islamic ways of life. From Talal Asad, Ahmed takes a critical perspective on the applicability to Islam of concepts such as religion and the importance of understanding being Islamic as being part of a particular tradition with its own styles of reasoning. That said, he challenges readers to ask if the anthropology of Islam's overall approach to Muslim worlds is too sober. In this article, I respond to Ahmed's plea, which I interpret as an invitation to include the category of drinking in the anthropology of Islam, alongside other essential practices such as praying, fasting, and healing. I undertake this task through a case study of Wine Shop the Philosopher (Wijnhandel de Filosoof), owned by an acquaintance of Ammar and mine and visited by likeminded spirits in The Hague, the Netherlands. Ofran, the Afghan-born owner, studied philosophy in the Netherlands and loves reciting the Persian poetry of Rūmī (1207–1273 CE) and Ḥāfīz. The objects, texts, and compartments that form Ofran's *habitus* play a central role in *What Is Islam?* Standing in a plural European setting, the store became a place from which to compare perspectives on what Islam is and what is at stake when posing the question and to engage in participatory philosophizing in the spirit of Platonic feasting, debating, and drinking in concert (*sympinein*).

Ahmed defends a mode of being Islamic against the reduction of Islam to the Qur'ān, Hadith, and Law alone: against the "legal-supremacist trap" (2016: 167). He scrutinizes normative and orthodox theological preconceptions—reducing Islam to piety—built into widely cited anthropological scholarship today (Asad 2009[1986]; Mahmood 2005; Schielke 2009), by emically theorizing the *explorative cosmopolitanism of Islam* and thus going beyond

² Ahmed's book has been widely reviewed and (critically) engaged with. See, for example, Doostdar 2017; Sulaiman 2018; Dressler, Salvatore, and Wohlrab-Sahr 2019; Ghazi 2019; Shatanawi 2019; Zaman 2020; and Tamimi Arab 2021.

projects of Islamic reformation like Abu Zayd's. Ahmed's hermeneutical critique is simultaneously a methodology and a way of approaching Islam, sinfulness, and the centrality of "orthodoxy"—understood with Talal Asad as a relation of power, of an authority figure giving prescriptions and instructions for the correct way to live a Muslim life. Sufis and philosophers, in particular, shaped the cosmopolitan mode of existence Ahmed describes. They lived in the Balkan toward Bengal complex, a world stretching from Sarajevo to Delhi in the period between 1350 and 1850 CE, where mystical and rational thinking transcended Islam as scripturalist correctness and distinctions of belief (*dīn*) and unbelief (*kufī*). Ahmed writes, approvingly, that "for philosophy and Sufism the Qur'ān is of essence and nature and being *not* the highest (accessible) form of truth" (2016: 257, his emphasis). His thesis is grounded in Islam as a *human and historical phenomenon* in which Ottomans, Persians, Mughals, and others strove to move from the visible world to the divine Unseen (*al-ghayb*) through shared Islamic understandings and practices. In Ahmed's account, they did so mainly through poetry and philosophy, a Sufi-philosophical amalgam and its wine-drinking, dancing, and musical aesthetics. These become "Islamic" thanks to a premodern hierarchical epistemology, which saw philosophical reason and Sufi aesthetics as Qur'ān-transcending bridges *to the divine*, to Allāh (ibid.: chs. 5–6).

Central to Ahmed's reevaluation is the *Dīvān*, the collected poems, of Ḥāfiẓ, "in the period between the fifteenth and the late nineteenth centuries, a pervasive poetical, conceptual, and lexical presence in the discourse of educated Muslims in the vast geographical region extending from the Balkans through Anatolia, Iran, and Central Asia down and across Afghanistan and North India to the Bay of Bengal that was home to the absolute demographic majority of Muslims on the planet" (ibid.: 32). According to Ahmed, readers of Ḥāfiẓ, a pen name indicating the poet's memorization of the Qur'ān, employed a shared field of Islamic references. The poems rise above the Revelation as "Text" by appealing to the "Pre-Text," the universal Truth in which the Qur'an is grounded, as well as to "Con-Text," the historically accumulated meanings processed through Muslim hermeneutics. The drinker thus exceeds the Qur'an in his poetic explorations:

*Ḥāfiẓ, drink wine, live in non-conforming-libertinage [rindī],
be happy, but do not like others, make the Qur'ān a snare of
deception*³

Ahmed's interpretation of Ḥāfiẓ's advice to "drink wine" coincides with anthropological theories that understand religions in general as dependent on the use of media to make a beyond tangible and experienced as immediate (Eisenlohr 2012; Meyer 2012). Both emic and etic perspectives blur the distinction between

³ Ḥāfiẓā may khwūr va rindī kun va khwush bāsh valī / dām-i tazvīr makun chun digarān Qur'ān rā (trans. Ahmed 2016: 37).

real wine drinking and metaphorical, divine intoxication. The amalgam Ahmed writes about fuses the “physical and imaginal senses” (2016: 32). It is “Sufi-philosophical-*aesthetical*,” belonging to “Ḥāfiẓ-reciting *aesthetes*” (ibid.: 44, 263, my emphases), for whom “wine is a means to meaning” (423). Recovering one element without the other leads to semantic impoverishment. The anthropology of Islam should, therefore, focus on specific material-types, both “discursive and physical artifacts” (514), things that function as a “physical metaphor” (535). The methodological beauty of Ahmed’s approach, analyzing miniature paintings and wine bowls, lies in the unique entangling of materiality and embodiment with textuality and belief. The objects handled by my interlocutors, too, are wine and vodka bottles decorated with the poetry of Khayyām (1048–1131 CE) and Rūmī, sold at Wine Shop the Philosopher.

Analyzing drinking helps Ahmed conceptualize the adjective Islamic capaciously. The differentiated, modern categories of secularity, culture, and religion, he argues, fail to capture the Islamic. But what if we anthropologists were to apply Ahmed’s approach today? What might our findings be? In Ahmed’s understanding, a shared world of Islamic references, including wine symbolism, was largely lost with the rise of modern, nationalist, ethnolinguistic boundaries. Nevertheless, in countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan, millions remain attached to Sufi poetry, while Ḥāfiẓ and especially Rūmī have simultaneously gained international prominence as *world heritage*.

Ahmed’s work evokes a mourning sentiment vis-à-vis abstainers’ popularity. Should the truth of practice recount otherwise—since Muslims everywhere consume alcoholic drinks (Badri 1978; Cochrane and Bal 1990; Michalak and Trocki 2006; AlMarri and Oei 2009; Matthee 2014; Mauseth et al. 2016; WHO 2018)—non-consumption arguably remains the ideal in much of theology, law, and believers’ hearts. Intoxication is, therefore, the most central practice and poetic metaphor Ahmed uses to distinguish his normative ideal from modernist, reformist, conservative-traditionalist, and orthodox trends, which agree on the legally *and* ethically forbidden nature of drinking. Those who steadfastly drink *because* of an Islamic tradition are no more than “pockets of resistance” (2016: 518). The contrast with tales of golden ages and cosmopolitan pasts, mostly before the nineteenth century, can appear romanticized in comparison with the anthropology of Islam that focuses on colonial and postcolonial times from the 1800s on. *What Is Islam?*, though, is written as part of contemporary academic and political polemics, emerging in museological reflections on Islamic art after 9/11 (Winegar 2008; Shaw 2019; Shatanawi 2019; Tamimi Arab 2021). In this unique political context, asking whether “pockets of resistance” is an apt description can unpack the anthropology of Islam and wine drinking in comparative perspectives on settings in which diverse national and transnational ties motivate clashes over Islam and alcohol consumption.

I draw from a decade of ethnographic work as an anthropologist studying the Dutch context (2011–2020), in particular material Islam—mosques,

amplified calls to prayer, visual culture, and contestations over food (Tamimi Arab 2017; 2021). My first observations of drinking relevant to the present study, however, go back to the period 2008–2014, when I lived with and visited Iranians of different ages and backgrounds in New York City, Toronto, Amsterdam, and Kuala Lumpur. It was a time of mass upheavals in Iran and migration waves to Europe and America, through competitive and expensive legal channels as well as on torturous flight trajectories. Having absorbed philosophy's longstanding appraisal of drinking parties, I could not help noticing the "gross inebriation," in the words of anthropologist David Mandelbaum, said to characterize cultures of severe, even authoritarian, alcohol temperance (1965: 285). My experiences in Shiraz and Tehran, in 2013, were similar: men and women of various social strata that highly valued drinking and dancing took them to ecstatic extremes as if something profound depended on drunkenness. About wine-drinking youth, the sociologist Asef Bayat already observed, "God existed but did not prevent them from drinking alcohol or dating the opposite sex. The globalizing Iranian youth reinvented their religiosity, blending the transcendental with the secular, faith with freedom, divine with diversion" (2007: 444). To dance and drink was to refuse becoming what the Islamic Republic wanted them to be.

Back in the Netherlands, I drank with citizens of Islamic Somali, Turkish, and Moroccan origins, believers and unbelievers. We exchanged views and experiences in numerous informal conversations about the topic before and after a public controversy about a Muslim woman who opened a wine bar in the city of Rotterdam, becoming a token of "integration" into the drinking culture of the Netherlands. I also met Ammar and Ofran at the time, between 2010–2013, shortly before the latter opened Wine Shop the Philosopher in 2015. For this article, I chose a hermeneutic engagement between the overarching framework offered by Shahab Ahmed, which stresses the Islamic, and Ofran's ideas and store products, which prioritize Persianate culture as the true spirit behind Muslim drinking. Five conversation visits in 2019–2020, including three structured interviews with Ofran, and informal drinking and conversing with visitors accompanying me and with customers, turned the wine shop into an ethnographic laboratory. The published work of my key interlocutor himself—Dutch and Persian written opinions, poetry, and singing—deepened our dialogue. Along with engaging with Ofran, I studied the shop's bottle labels, booklet, website, and social media activities. I also gathered information from national newspaper articles focusing on Islam, Muslims, and drinking in the Netherlands, as well as from letters from Dutch and Turkish diplomats and politicians after the latter accused Ofran of dishonoring Rūmī by selling a vodka named after him.

The following pages begin, however, by bringing together the interdisciplinary literature on Islam, intoxication, and drinking in different cultures. In line with recent ethnographies of gastro-nationalistic identity politics, I argue that wine drinking in the Netherlands has become a medium for the *culturalization of citizenship*, which takes an imagined homogenous

national culture as a model to form migrants and refugees. This thinking style, however, can implicitly stress Islam as orthodox piety, implicitly conceptualize drinking as un-Islamic, and fail to recognize the interacting nature of nationalisms—Turkish, Dutch, pan-Persian—involved in the case of Wine Shop the Philosopher. The suggested move towards studying drinking and intoxication is, I should emphasize, not a negation of the importance of piety in Islam. The point is to prevent the collapse of the anthropology of Islam into anthropologies of piety, and to avoid seeing imaginings of Islam as logically contrasting with everyday ambiguities and with European national cultures (cf. Tayob 2017: 22). I then proceed with three sections covering cultural, national, and existential levels of thinking and experience. First, I expound on the wine shop's products and the question of whether drinking belongs to Islam or Persianate culture. Second, I analyze how ways of drinking become part of competing, mutually threatening, gastro-nationalisms. My ethnography ends with a portrait of Ofran as an exiled philosopher who employs comedy only on the surface in an otherwise tragic quest for existential freedom.

DIVERSE DRINKING CULTURES AND THE STUDY OF ISLAM

In the twentieth century, anthropologists invested much research in social-cultural differentiation, food, and human relations. Drinking is no exception, and it was not reduced to pathological behavior. In a general analysis of alcohol and culture, David Mandelbaum succinctly described cultural variations and marked similarities in drinking: “There have been very few, if any, societies whose people knew the use of alcohol and yet paid little attention to it. Alcohol may be tabooed; it is not ignored” (1965: 281; cf. Withington and McShane 2014). This pattern coheres with the history of Islam, known for banning intoxicating drinks. Notwithstanding disputes about what an intoxicating drink is, the four schools of law did not praise intoxication (Siddiqui 2012: 90–105; Haider 2013) but allowed diverse ways of regulating drinking boundaries, the most recent form being the “scientization of ḥalāl,” which utilizes modern chemical techniques to measure alcohol percentages (Armanios and Ergene 2018: 177–89). Yet, Islam is also the religion of a rich poetic tradition centering on wine. Depending on the context, people of Muslim backgrounds may develop ambiguous or outright contradictory attitudes and practices regarding drinks. Their “cultural expectations regulate the emotional consequences of drink” (Mandelbaum 1965: 282). Not only is drinking determined by a *habitus*, but anthropologists also recorded the near-universal fact of alcohol consumption as a rule-governed activity that heightens social emotions and, more than other kinds of beverages, is consumed with others, often in specifically designated environments for doing so (SIRC 1998; Dietler 2006).

Similarly, Ammar and I knew what to expect when we headed for Wine Shop the Philosopher and the wine bottles inscribed with Khayyām's poems. Our laughter began before arrival at the curious wine shop. The social imagination of

drinking had greater, more decisive power than the tasting and connoisseurship of the drinks themselves, which were made in Bulgaria and Italy like other wines sold in the Netherlands. The *label, discourse, and comportments*, primarily, conferred meaning on the wine for the various Iranian, Afghan, Pakistani, and other customers (see [image 1](#)). Should we reach drunkenness, on any occasion,



IMAGE 1: Parsi wine bottles. Author's photo, The Hague, 2021.

this too is highly ritualized, learned, and expressed differently in diverse cultures. Drinking constructs meaningful worlds, as Mary Douglas put it, delineating boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, by structuring economic activities of diverse individuals such as an Afghan-Dutch wine-seller and his diverse clientele. Most importantly, drinks constitute an “ideal world” (Douglas 2003: 8; cf. MacAndrew and Edgerton 1969; Heath 2000; Tapper 2001). Douglas’ observation rings true, especially for Ammar, Ofran, and I, who share a background of finding refuge in the Netherlands. Drinking makes “an intelligible, bearable world which is much more how an ideal world should be than the painful chaos threatening all the time” (Douglas 2003: 11).

Shahab Ahmed theorized such an ideal world as a continent of meaning, citing Islamic philosophers, physicians, and artists from the Balkan-to-Bengal complex. He relied mostly on Islamic Studies’ longstanding interest in Sufism and wine poetry. The latter is made evident in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*’s entries on wine, intoxication, and drinks (Sadan 2012; Wensinck and Sadan 2012; Saab 2018). The names of Khayyām and Ḥāfiẓ recur most often, and various publications discuss the Islamic prohibition of drinking in contrast with vineyard traditions in Morocco, Jordan, and Iran (Khalil and al-Nammari 2000; Kueny 2001; Clément 2014). As an article in the *Journal of Wine Research* asserts, Iran in particular is known for its ancient wine production, persisting in cities such as Ḥāfiẓ’s Shiraz until the twentieth century (Saeidi and Unwin 2004; Matthee 2005; 2014; Charters 2006: 14; Borbor 2014). In history publications, wine poetry and drinking signal a “cosmopolitan” mindset, as in a recent volume titled *Cosmopolitanisms in Muslim Contexts: Perspectives from the Past*, including a chapter on Iranian wine consumption in the nineteenth century (Maclean and Ahmed 2012). Other works focus on the exclusion of minorities (Constable 2013; Mina 2019) or how religious legal traditions construct otherness based on what “foreigners” were believed to eat or drink (Scholliers 2001; Freidenreich 2011) and on shifting Islamic justifications for punishments geared toward making communities of abstention (Opwis 2011).

Despite scholarly attention to drinking, also in worlds inhabited by Muslims, the anthropology of Islam has not seriously studied Muslim drinking. The fact is often mentioned as a cultural exception to the religious rule, or as an everyday contradiction of Islamic bans. Ahmed, however, challenges us to ask, “Can Muslims drink as Muslims?” My interlocutor, Ammar, saw his drinking as violating Islamic law but not as a moral failure, praising physician-philosophers such as Naṣīr-ud-Dīn Tūṣī (1201–1274 CE), the author of a chapter on the “Manners of Wine Drinking” (Ahmed 2016: 63). Even if we consider Islamic prohibitions, why not study contemporary Muslim drinking practices outside health and addiction perspectives? What does this omission say about how Muslims are conceptualized in the anthropology of Islam? Even studies focusing on moral failure, such as *Straying from the Straight Path* (Kloos and Beekers 2018), examine pious failures to pray, fast, or follow

religious authorities. Little to no attention is devoted to drinking, let alone subversive sartorial practices such as Sufis wearing hats in a tilted fashion to distinguish themselves from the narrow-mindedness of the straight-hatted (Ahmed 2016: 202–11).

In other words, a selection of anthropological literature captures a consistent image: alcohol consumption is not the main subject of analysis and is seen as transgressing Islamic law or as a local cultural exception to the religious rule. There are many such instances. Mecca itself is no exception: the Dutch orientalist Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje described enslaved African musicians as “fanatical” Muslims who *would* get drunk from *būzah*, a barley beer (2007[1889]: 15–16). Fieldwork in the twentieth century corroborates the de facto consumption of fermented drinks. The Berti of Sudan accepted drinking beer (Holy 1991: 39–40, 219), Polish Tatar Muslims regarded a blanket prohibition excessive (Tarlo and Moors 2013: 102), and Bosnian Muslims sometimes interpreted the Qur’ān as prohibiting wine but not brandy (Mandelbaum 1965: 288). Even if considered *ḥarām*, drinking can also be a way to postpone piety, as documented in Burkina Faso, and which resonates with transnationally circulating stories of men who overcome alcoholism through Islam (Debevec 2012). Drinking is also associated with canceling Islamic practice (Marranci 2008: 130), so that alcohol should not blend with the sacred, for instance, when listening to vocal music or *anāshīd*. These admonishments hint, though, *that it does happen* (Marranci 2014: 141). No one forbids what no one is tempted to do. Due to the long tradition of prohibition, going back to the Qur’ān and the Hadith, drinking can also turn into an anti-Islamic act, as recorded in Amazigh activism (Silverstein 2012: 340–41). Another effect of alcoholic drinks’ contemporary prestige is the manufacture of *ḥalāl* alternatives, such as a non-alcoholic wine wrapped in a 24-carat edible gold leaf in Dubai.⁴ None of these anthropological studies mention wine drinking as Islamic in the sense of Shahab Ahmed; that is, as an act made meaningful by a world of Islamic beliefs, symbols, and a real intoxication spilling over to metaphorical intoxication granting access to the Unseen.⁵

⁴ Lussory’s 24-Karat-Gold, Alcohol-Free Wine Is all the Rage In Dubai. *Forbes.com*, 18 Sept. 2014.

⁵ Drinking is not specifically theorized in volumes used for teaching, which do focus on other Islamic practices such as praying, fasting, and healing (Bowen 2012; Kreinath 2012). Geertz’s *Islam Observed* (1968) makes no mention of intoxicating drinks, while Gilson’s *Recognizing Islam*, presents alcohol consumption as an example of the contrast between pious appearances and anthropological realities (2013[1982]: 10). In recent ethnographies, wine drinking becomes part of what can be tolerated, avoided, or desired to be banned in projects of cultivating pious selves (Mahmood 2005: 90–91; cf. Hirschkind 2009: 109–10). Schielke documents Muslims’ drinking and using drugs (2015a), but understands these practices as part of *everyday life*, and not *everyday Islam* or *Islam* (2015b). A different perspective can be found in Magnus Marsden’s *Living Islam*, in which he recalls observing wine drinking among Pakistani Muslims (2006: 77, 173) and their harassment by

In the past decade, anthropologists of Western Islam have focused on gastro-nationalism and identity politics as modalities of wine drinking. What and how people consume, and the time and place and with whom they consume, are structured by *drink regimes/ways of drinking*. Cuisines project nations, rather than nations simply “having” culinary cultures (Appadurai 1988). In a pluralist setting formed by ever smaller groups of different ethnolinguistic backgrounds—for example, the Netherlands since the end of the Cold War (Jennissen et al. 2018; Scholten, Crul, and van Laar 2019)—drink regimes coexist and at times clash. “Transacting and consuming food,” as anthropologist Peter Berger explains for the Indian context, “involves risk” (2018). In Europe, the risk is of a nationalist bent. Muslims who pass up drinking remind the Dutch of religious behaviors they have progressively left behind since the Swinging Sixties. Abstaining Muslims are viewed as enemies of pleasure (cf. van der Veer 2006); they refuse “cultural integration” in the secular Dutch nation. These narratives essentialize the Dutch drinking culture as non-temperate. Truth be told, alcoholic drinks contributed to Dutch life for centuries, but drinking behaviors changed, and consumption rose steeply in the 1960s, even in comparison with other European countries.

Why did drinking increase? Garretsen and van de Goor name unparalleled mass production of alcoholic drinks, economic growth, and the diminishing influence of “Calvinist attitudes” (in Heath 1995: 192), and we can add more generally the globalization of alcohol as a status symbol after World War II. In the 1990s, these Dutch authors suggested that the population exhibits no strong feelings toward consumption-restricting measures. The matter changes when abstaining becomes associated with Muslims. Ethnographies of Islam in the Western world attest to exclusionary nationalist symbolism overlapping with food and drinks. Muslims of North African backgrounds in Canada and France, for example, face the stereotypical prejudice that one cannot be a good citizen without (claiming the habit of) consuming and celebrating wine (Brown 2017). John Bowen recorded the same in Great Britain:

Even well-informed commentators draw lines between “conservative” Islam and its “liberal” counterparts, considering the former as dangerously close to the Taliban, and only the latter as truly integrated, particularly when these liberal Muslims dance at nightclubs, offer red wine to guests, and profess their love for the queen. These cultural preferences are understandable, but they may keep us from

young men who use religious education to assert the un-Islamic nature of drinking. Considering wine un-Islamic and demanding that others abstain, Marsden notes, introduced a “new Islamic standard” into households. Ahmed likewise sees drinking as a traditional option. In more recent work, Marsden and Henig use Ahmed’s framework against the peripheralization of “West Asia” in studies of Islam (2019).

attending to the ways even conservative British Muslims can adapt to conditions of life in Britain, including how they have construed and applied shari'a: without the red wine but within the law (2016: 4).

However, by associating words such as "liberal" with integration, nationalism, and majoritarian preferences, Afghan Europeans who *did* live under the Taliban, for whom wine drinking *is* a liberating practice, are largely left out of such analyses. The academic literature on cultural integration discourses that are part and parcel of institutional and everyday forms of racism in Dutch politics and society likewise focus on minority-majority relations (Geschiere 2009; Verkaaik 2009; Duyvendak 2011; Essed and Hoving 2014; Van den Hemel 2018). Attending to those who live "within the law," not only British or Dutch law but also Islamic law, then, is a politicized research act. By adding the entanglements with Islamic history and the multiple meanings of drinking wine today, we can further analyze the politics of pleasure. By unpacking and comparing conflicts and tensions within and between people of diverse ethno-religious, linguistic, and political backgrounds, we avoid paying too-exclusive attention to European gastro-nationalisms. The gain is a better understanding of transnational power asymmetries, taking time to unsettle the limits of our understanding by appreciating the genuine misapprehensions that practices such as wine drinking evoke.

The Netherlands also overlaps with Brown and Bowen's observations. When a Moroccan woman opened a wine bar in Rotterdam in 2014, a Dutch newspaper celebrated her as "integrated." In 2017, the municipality tried to compel a Turkish restaurant owner to sell alcohol to keep the neighborhood "diverse."⁶ The contrast with Iranian restaurants is striking and consistent with perceptions of the Iranian-Dutch as secularized and therefore well-integrated into Dutch society (Maliapaard and Gijsberts 2012; Roodsaz and Jansen 2018); the ostentatious display of whiskey bottles and "'araq sagī," a stiff drink freely translated as "dog's drink"⁷ is hard to miss in these "Persian restaurants." The wine shop described below shows ideological resemblances to these restaurants, but with unique intellectual aspirations, beginning with the fact that it is run by a man of Afghan descent who regards himself as Iranian and Persian.

⁶ Van Es, Margaretha, "Halal Dining in Rotterdam," presentation at NGG conference, University of Groningen, 30 Oct. 2019.

⁷ These highly alcoholic, smelly drinks' bottle logo initially showed a picture of a dog. "'Araq" has the dual connotation of being an extract and a common word for sweat. Prior to the Islamic Revolution, 'araq sagī was associated with working-class status, seen as a drink for the lowest of the low who toil and sweat under the sun.



IMAGE 2: Ofran Badakhshani in Wine Shop the Philosopher. Author's photo, The Hague, 2019.

WHAT IS PĀRSĪ?

Wine Shop the Philosopher stands in a bustling street near the Dutch parliament. Upon entering, Ammar and I received a warm welcome from Ofran and his Persian cat, Socrates.⁸ I marveled at the pictures of European philosophers on the wall—Nietzsche in the middle and another painting of the philosopher with the hammer in the back—combined with framed calligraphy of Khayyām's attributed quatrains or *Rubā'iyāt* (see image 2). "Once, I was sitting here behind a desk," Ofran recalled, "thinking of writing a poem or a story, and I said to myself: 'the souls of so many grapes (*rūḥ-i īn hamah angūr*), living in the bottles in this shop, are watching me.'" Ammar and I cracked up and our host began pouring wine. After more pleasantries, the conversation tone changed: "To the day we drink freely in our own land (*sarzamīn-i khudamān*)," Ofran said before taking a sip and a sigh. "If I can have a drink in Iran in such a shop, I'm done," I added. Ammar and Ofran concurred: "An accomplished life." "Exactly, by God, it'll all be over."

On that occasion, the power of drinking in Dutch society was an auxiliary phenomenon for the three of us. In our hands, we held *wines in exile*. Ofran

⁸ Visit and interview, 1 May 2019.

wanted to “put nostalgia into a bottle,” albeit not only as a bittersweet recollection of the past. The shop also oriented itself toward an ideal that surpassed our individual libertine yearnings. One of the bottles from the Pārsi series, named after the city of Balkh in Afghanistan, hinted at the work they achieved. Ofran selected a quatrain by Khayyām for the label in reference to wine-sellers; that is, to himself:

*'Til Moon and Venus appear in the sky,
None shall see a thing better than pure wine!
I am perplexed by these wine-sellers;
what can they buy better than the goods they sell?*⁹

We can answer the poem’s question by considering the Pārsi bottles together. Their names are Balkh, Badakhshan, Espahan, and Samarqand, all cities and territories in Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Iran, and Uzbekistan. These names conjured a cultural geography of a Persianate world. Ofran’s question, then, was incurious about identifying Islam, as Shahab Ahmed would have it. Nor was he interested in the borders of modern states such as Iran, which, by calling itself Iran, per definition excluded Persian-speaking Afghans such as Ofran from being the true, Iranian, heirs of a Persian literary tradition. By producing and labeling wines with poetry, Ofran intended to fit an “entire Pārsī geography into a single bottle,” to occasionally enjoy “a glass of history.”

The wine-seller’s chosen geography and emphasis on philosophy and Persian poetry remarkably materialize the world depicted by Ahmed in *What Is Islam?* as a philosophical-Sufi amalgam of the Balkan-to-Bengal complex. Ofran agreed that extensive cultural geographies supported a cosmopolitan attitude of “*farāmarzī*,” looking beyond restricting borderings. Unlike Ahmed, though, his central concern pivoted around the territory of historical Khurāsān across modern lines. In a song he composed himself and uploaded on the Internet, Ofran complements his bottles by singing and playing the *sih ‘tār* in praise of Khurāsān’s cities as Persianate (Audio 1).¹⁰ He thus re-membered himself as Iranian through music, wine, and poetry, which together formed a broad conception of Iran found among speakers of languages such as Lurish, Kurdish, and Pashto, along with Persian. Ahmed, however, theorized a vaster and more multilingual continent spanning Sarajevo to Delhi. Can we view Irān/Pārsī, then, as a subset of the Balkan-to-Bengal complex? Ofran thought so, but his immediate ambition was to couple Western and Central Asian ethnolinguistic identities by facilitating pluralistic coexistence in a shop in The Hague:

⁹ *tā zuhrah va mah dar āsimān gasht padīd / bihtar zi may-i nāb kasī hīch nadīd / man dar ‘ajabam zi mayfurūshān ki ‘īshān / bih z ‘ānkah furūshand chih khwāhand kharīd* (my translation).

¹⁰ See supplementary materials at <http://doi.org/10.1017/S001041752200007X>.

I occasionally bring up these topics. Customers ask in response to my being Pārsī which part of Iran I am from, which I answer with Afghanistan. Some of them get what I am trying to achieve. “You are from Eastern Iran,” they clarify; the current national borders were drawn artificially. Others say they never thought about the matter before visiting the shop. Some bring their Dutch friends to the shop, beaming with pride. They are Afghans and Tajiks eager to show how rich our culture is in philosophy. People from every different group you can think of visit the shop. Even Iranian or Afghan Muslims who never touched a drink, were willing to come here with their unbelieving friends and watch the Iranian soccer team. They drank their tea and the others drank their wine. I am aware of these different cultures, have seen them, drank with them, and when Nawrūz arrives [Persian New Year], I decorate a Haft Shīn [a traditional display consisting of seven symbolic items whose names begin with the letter *shīn*, comparable to the Haft Sīn, starting with the letter *sīn*]. Why? With what ideas? For me, Zoroastrianism and Islam show no fundamental difference in their fanaticisms. But [I appreciate] the fact that in cities such as Balkh, families once guarded the [Zoroastrian] ancient fires against extinguishing. Just this, that generation upon generation protects the flame, there is something poetic, something artistic in that, independent of questions about religion. The entire meaning (*ma‘nī*) can be captured by the beauty of asking why this fire should keep going.¹¹

Ofran’s account corresponds with Ahmed’s plea for tolerance and open-mindedness, as well as valuing the ethics and aesthetics of a region’s heritage. But was Ahmed right to use “Islam” instead of historian Marshall Hodgson’s “Islamicate” (1974, 1: 57–59), which points to *culture* akin to the “Persianate” (ibid., 2: 293)? Ofran found the question tedious. Did Islam transform Persian culture, or did Persian culture change Islam? Hesitantly, he concluded the veracity of both. He worried that these concepts straitjacket complex peoples and their histories: “The idea of the Persianate itself, to mention Gramsci, is a hegemonic concept. We should not reduce it all to Fārs [province in Iran, from which the word Persia derives]. Who is a Persian? We did not decide. Different peoples came to these lands and dissolved into the Persianate themselves.” That may be so, I thought, but it evades explaining what constitutes the Islamic. “What

¹¹ The quotation is from another interview conducted on 22 February 2020, integrated here for readability.

about these bottles, are they related to Islam, can wine drinking be Islamic as Ahmed argues?" Nudged in this direction, Ofran's answer grew contradictory:

These bottles are not related to Islam. Why not? Look, we are Muslims, but in a province such as Khurāsān, there exists a local understanding of Islam, Islām-i Khurāsānī. We have jurists like Abū Ḥanīfah [founder of one of the four Islamic schools of jurisprudence] in this tradition, who issued a *fatwā* that adding salt to wine turns it into vinegar, making it *ḥalāl*. But he meant salt for each cup of wine and look what people in Khurāsān did! [After the establishment of Hanafism,] they would bring a barrel, pour one spoon of salt, and declare the wine *ḥalāl!*¹² Who can determine what Islam is? I do not want to carry the burden of determining the correct interpretation of Islam or the Islamic.

Despite his strong familiarity with Islam, as a child educated in Afghan mosque settings, Ofran preferred the words culture and the Persianate to Islam and Islamic. Each time Shahab Ahmed tried to make his conception of *the Islamic* wide, explorative, and inclusive, criticizing the idea of multiple *Islams*, Ofran stepped out to defend the Persianate (cf. Ahmed 2016: 83–85, 129–75): “Look, in a prison called Afghanistan, I cannot explain my work as cultural [*yik kār-i farhangīst*]. My sales won't turn me into a millionaire, and that is also not my goal. I care about the entangling of poets like Rūmī with the Persian language. *What Is Pārsī?* is the question I seek to address.” In the same breath when asking the question, Ofran ensured its meaning as cultural preservation and development in response to an experience of loss:

Until recently, Afghanistan produced different alcoholic drinks. There was a liquor made of peaches, sour cherry wine, and gin, and rum; there was a white wine in Kandahar. During the reign of Zahir Shah, the Afghan export of brandy made millions of dollars. All of these existed, and the entire world knew of our culture because of its poems. Khayyām and Rūmī are international bestsellers. In

¹² Ofran learned about this story after listening to an Afghan cleric who had suggested alcohol-free beer to youngsters but was interpreted as allowing for drinking regular beers as well. The youngsters, in other words, pulled an old trick on him as happened to Abū Ḥanīfah, who was indeed known to be more lenient than the other great jurists of early Islam with regard to intoxicating drinks (Haider 2013). Although this story is a comical invention, the idea that throwing salt into wine can make it lawful can be found in “The Guidance” (*Al-Hidayah*), a compendium of Hanafī jurisprudence written in the twelfth century CE (al-Marghīnānī 1870: 622). Other accounts can be found, for example, in Ibn Nujaym (Egypt, sixteenth century CE), discussing who owns a vinegar if it was made after putting salt in a wine (1997, vol. 16, p. 439).

our culture, there always existed a reason for drinking, before and after the advent of Islam.

Ofran did not disavow the Islamic history of Persian-speaking peoples. He said, for instance, that he “obviously” felt a closer connection to Shi’ism than to Sunni Islam, but only in so far as Shi’ism was *Khurāsānī*, a Perso-Shi’ite *cultural* union absent in Ahmed’s work. Ofran’s ambivalence towards Islam drew from narratives of the Islamic conquest of Iran, producing Muslims who may favor ethnolinguistic and cultural identifications over Ahmed’s subtitle, *The Importance of Being Islamic*.

At this point in our conversation, two Afghan women, customers, entered the store. Ofran greeted them and continued: “The issue of religion (*dīn*) remains unresolved for us. Who is a Muslim and what belongs to God are not clear.” The customers found the heavy conversation tone amusing and kindly said they were shopping for wines in support of the store. Then we all started drinking Balkh. Ofran mused about different types of grapes and the traditional Afghan ways of producing wine, which he sought to imitate. Our drinking pleasure derived, in part, from an adversarial stance toward the all-too-pious. I tried to associate that emotion with Ahmed’s motivation to save the Islamic from reduction to orthodoxy. Ofran, however, problematized the capacious use of the adjective “Islamic.” His reason became evident when the customers intervened in the conversation with a reference to Khomeini. To them, the Ayatollah stood for the monstrous growth of the Islamic. For Ofran, likewise, naming the philosophical-Sufi tradition Islamic, including its art forms and practices, smacked of domination. He quickly made the connection with Ali Shariati, the Iranian Revolution’s ideologue who also tried to include all aspects of life under the banner of the Islamic. A conceptual separation of the cultural and the Islamic, thus, fulfilled a political function of making Islam manageable after the lived experience of theocratic totalitarianism.

Despite their differences, Shahab Ahmed and Ofran Badakhshani agreed on the importance of a West and South Asian tradition that challenges legal supremacism. The Qur’ān, Hadith, and Law are surpassed in a hierarchical epistemology ordered by the Pre-Text, which precedes Revelation as Text and which philosophers and Sufis believed they could access directly through reason and existential experiences, respectively (Ahmed 2016: ch. 5). For Ofran, culture, or *farhang*, motivates *aesthetic resistance* to entrapment by Revelation as Text. *Farhang* is historically tied to the liberal nineteenth-century literary critic Matthew Arnold’s conception of culture, which was indebted to knowledge of such classics as the Persian epic, *The Book of Kings* (*Shāhnāmah*). Culture, in this sense, is not a descriptive anthropological concept

that explains humanity's diversity, nor is it simply following "tradition,"¹³ but "a moral and aesthetic ideal, which found expression in art and literature and music and philosophy" (Appiah 2018: 189–90). The wine store's booklet, in English, explicates such a stance in the section "Why do we call our wine Pārsi?" asserting the Persian language as a historical "symbol of poetic and aesthetic resistance to any kind of fanaticism." The resemblance of the booklet's description to Hamid Dabashi's work in comparative literature can clarify Ofran's intention, building not on an isolated Persian tradition, but on Persian reinvented as global literature through interactions with modern Europe: "The presence of Persophilia in thinkers ranging from Montesquieu through Goethe, Hegel, and Nietzsche to Arnold was not a result of the European will to dominate or further the cause of imperialism, but, quite to the contrary, was the sign of the will to resist domination, totality, and absolutism" (Dabashi 2011: 159).

Based in the Netherlands and sending bottles of wine to various European countries, Ofran's shop was arguably the outcome of a far older literary and philosophical entanglement. The shop's paintings of Nietzsche, alongside Khayyām's quatrains—which achieved unparalleled fame only after Edward Fitzgerald's English translation in the nineteenth century—belonged to this Euro-Asian history predating Ofran's intellectual and migration trajectory. As Ali Ferdowsi has shown (2008), in the twentieth century, the notion of an Iranian culture or *farhang* was popularized and made to be understood as expressing a national spirit through poetry, epitomized by Ḥāfiz. Ofran, however, subverted such modern nationalism by appealing to the older, wider interpretation of the Persianate.

I pondered, how can a bottle of wine fit these grand histories, refugees' cultural nostalgia, cosmopolitan strivings, and political criticisms of orthodoxy? How can we understand those who enjoy drinking it, like the heterodox Ammar who knows the meaning of pressing his forehead to the ground in prostration? Why was the shop blasphemous to some, and not to him? To answer these questions, we should consider the emic role of offensive humor.

"Even if one does not believe," I suggested, comparing Wine Shop the Philosopher and Ahmed's frameworks, "with our Iranian-Afghan backgrounds, drinking a glass of wine is meaningful through Islamic references. These can be pleasant, poetic, and negative, a psychological reaction to prohibition in the Islamic Republics of Iran and Afghanistan. Our drinking ties us to Islam, whether we like it or not." Ofran grinned, "Yes, drinking wine is a devilish pleasure (*shayṭanat*), a thrill!" More provocations manifested themselves in and around the shop. Ofran once placed in the store window a sheet of paper with an Arabic text describing the wines as "87 percent *ḥalāl*." Another time, he put a

¹³ Ofran said in an interview conducted on 19 August 2020 that even the terms "culture" and "tradition" can entrap the individual. He stressed that their value lies essentially in the "aesthetics" they (re-)produce.



IMAGE 3: Rumi Vodka. Author's photo, The Hague, 2021.

copy of Karl Popper's *The Open Society between the Qur'ān and the Bible, Its Enemies*—although the joke fell on deaf ears. The shop's Rumi Vodka, however, achieved international notoriety (see [image 3](#)).

When I asked why he taunted Muslims, Ofra first denied a provocative intention. "Come on," I rebuked, "when you ostentatiously place Rumi Vodka in

the store display, you *are* stinging those who believe Rūmī and drinking should not be combined!” Everyone laughed and Ofran admitted, “Well, yes, like Ḥāfiz stings the pious, I guess I am a *ḥalāl* son (*ḥalāl-zādah*) of this tradition. I even held back! The verse I selected is the softest form of stinging possible.” Ofran referred to the Persian verse on the bottle, “It makes you more of what you are!” (*ān chinān rā ān chināntar mīkunad*; also discussed by Ahmed 2016: 100–1). In contrast with the reformist Nasr Abu Zayd’s interpretation of alcohol as forbidden due to its intoxicating effect, in this perspective, being intoxicated is harmless in itself, for Rūmī’s esoteric conception of piety does not ultimately hinge on real drinking or not drinking. Alcohol only amplifies virtuous and base characters, and the poetry Ofran cherished repeatedly condemns the rigidity of those who believe virtue and piety can be reduced to “correct” behavior. “The real Rūmī uses much more explicit language than this, as do other poets hailing from the tradition,” Ofran said in defense of his vodka brand. To demonstrate the point, he quickly recited the poet Anvarī (1126–1189 CE), who lived in Balkh until shortly before Rūmī’s birth there. The ghazal (a lyrical poem consisting of monorhyming couplets) begins by announcing the “Pure Wine of Truth” (*bādah-i raḥiq al-ḥaqq*) as “Soul Food” (*ghazāy-i rūḥ*) and ends by affirming its potency, capable of turning a fly into a bird of transcendent paradise (*humāy gardad agar jur‘ah ī biābad baq*). The verses Ofran cited make such transformation contingent on intellectual capacity:

*Ḥalāl found the authority of reason for the wise
Harām found the fatwa of sharī‘ah for the idiot*¹⁴

These lines make use of the common coupling of humor and hierarchy, mocking the unknowing “idiot” who belongs to the multitude, juxtaposed with the “wise,” the few for whom the impossible is possible, suggesting that drinking wine should become *ḥalāl*. This playful yet stern handling of intoxicants is also known as an “antinomian poetic philosophy” that seeks to subvert the dualisms of belief and unbelief, purity and impurity, sacred and profane (Seyed-Gohrab 2018, cf. Ahmed 2016: 45 n114). Echoing Socrates’ question in *Euthyphro* as to “what sort of thing ... the pious and impious are” (Plato 2008: 7, 5c), Ofran’s reference to Anvarī’s poem questioned the very meaning of being pious. Could there be a form of piety, knowledge of and justice toward sacred things, *independent of legal prescriptions*? Similarly, in Ahmed’s account drinking is an Islamic act by virtue of granting access to Revelation or Truth, thereby superseding Islamic law. The philosophers, mystics, and artists, in Ahmed’s account, do not abandon legal frameworks but operate in a different epistemological and concomitant social domain. Clashes, to the point of

¹⁴ *ḥalāl gashtah bih aḥkām-i ‘aql bar dānā / ḥarām gashtah bih fatwa-‘i shar‘ bar aḥmaq* (Anvarī 1961: 667, my translation).

verbal abuse, follow from competing claims to knowledge and authenticity within and beyond the dichotomy between the Islamic and the un-Islamic.

To appreciate the specific tradition of humor Ofran is referring to, Islamic concepts such as *ḥarām* and *al-ḥaqq* should guide one's thinking and acting in seemingly contradictory ways. Simultaneously, Ofran, Ammar, and the customers interpreted these terms with the inhibitions of Dionysian love in mind, in modern Iran and Afghanistan. Wine Shop the Philosopher and the hermeneutical baggage of Ofran's antics did not represent the majority of Moroccan, Turkish, and Surinamese Muslims in the Netherlands, but far more so the perspective of dissenters and other minorities. For unconcerned bystanders of myriad nationalities, it was just a pleasant place to buy the next bottle. Memories of war and theocratic subjugation drove the shop into a fight, however, between impassioned Dutch, Turkish, and pan-Persian nationalisms.

NATIONALIST THREATS

Ofran's shop made headlines when a Turkish newspaper criticized Rumi Vodka.¹⁵ Uğur İbrahim Altay, the mayor of Konya, where Rūmī is buried, on behalf of the ruling nationalist-conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP), sent the wine-seller a letter demanding him to stop causing "great sorrow in Turkey and the world of Islam."¹⁶ Another letter followed, written by Faruk Hemdem Çelebi, respected as Rūmī's twentieth-generation descendant and president of the UNESCO-accredited International Mevlana Foundation (referring to Rūmī's honorific title, Our Master, *Mevlânâ* in Turkish).¹⁷ He demanded that Ofran publicly apologize for commercializing Rūmī in an un-Islamic manner and recall all bottles and destroy his remaining stock. Otherwise, he suggested, the Turkish government could take legal steps. Ofran also received phone threats and faced intimidation in the store. Despite police protection, the pressure necessitated the wine shop's closure for several days at the height of the international row. The situation prompted Dutch newspapers to defend Wine Shop the Philosopher against religious intolerance, including the populist *Telegraaf*, which regularly criticizes Turks for being poorly integrated into the nation. Two Dutch parliamentarians with Turkish roots, Dilan Yeşilgöz on behalf of the ruling Liberal Party, and Sadet Karabulut on behalf of the Socialist Party, publicly condemned the attempts at coercion. A letter from the Netherlands Ambassador to Turkey to the mayor of Konya, underscored their criticisms:

¹⁵ Murat Bardakçı. Böyle bir edepsizlik karşısında hiç çekinmeyin, ağzınıza ne gelirse söyleyip rahatlayın! www.haberturk.com, 8 Mar. 2019.

¹⁶ Turkse intimidatie om Haagse wodka, www.denhaagcentraal.net, 4 Apr. 2019.

¹⁷ Signed letter dated 3 April 2019, Istanbul.

We recognize the value of the ideas of this great philosopher [Rūmī], among which is also the idea of tolerance. Tolerance and freedom of expression are values we hold high in esteem in the Netherlands. In that light, citizens and companies are allowed to express their views and opinions freely. The freedom of expression, including the choice of a brand name, is also applicable if the expression may disturb a part of the population. It can only be limited by law, for example in the case of incitement to violence or hatred. Against this background the Dutch government does not intend to take any action against the company concerned.¹⁸

Alcohol gave shape to the juxtaposition of free, tolerant, Dutch society versus unfree, intolerant, Turkish society, and between freethinkers and conservative Muslims. Critics not only pointed to the commercialization of a Muslim sage and the offensive association with drinking but also decried the bottle's image of a Sufi in Turkish dress performing the whirling *sema* ritual. Support came from Sufis such as the Iranian-Dutch Shervin Nekuee, a left-leaning public intellectual, regular customer of Wine Shop the Philosopher, and organizer of an annual Mystic Festival:

No one and not a single country own Rūmī! The tasteful vodka, the beautiful logo, and the poem make Rumi Vodka one of the more elegant commercial odes to my inspiration, the mystical poet. Whoever visited Turkey, in particular my beloved Konya, would agree: no country has so efficiently exploited the great poet of Persian literature so successfully. Would Our Master be happy with his vodka? Or would he prefer the key chains and other Chinese rubbish branding his name for thousands of tourists in Turkey?¹⁹

I revisited Wine Shop the Philosopher a year later, when the controversy had subsided, with Arash, an Iranian doctoral student in Islamic Studies who was enthusiastic about seeing the store.²⁰ I wanted to ask Ofran about nationalist threats against Rumi Vodka, but also to meditate on the threat within his conception of Pārsī. Shahab Ahmed, after all, criticized a focus on being Persian as being vulnerable to nationalist readings, failing to capture the continuing importance of the Arabic language as well as the Indic/Hindu elements of being Islamic in the Balkan-to-Bengal complex (2016: 84).²¹

¹⁸ Marjanne de Kwaasteniet, signed letter dated 19 April 2019, Ankara.

¹⁹ Public Facebook post. 11 Mar. 2019.

²⁰ Visit and interview, 22 Feb. 2020.

²¹ For studies that emphasize the Persian language as the binding connection rather than mystical Islam, as Ahmed proposes, see Fragner 1999; and Green 2019.

Moreover, argues anthropologist Irfan Ahmad, reciting Persian poems in the European context turns the past cosmopolitanisms into a wholly “other beast.” The poetry serves discrimination against Muslims who deflect from the liberal picture of the good Muslim.²²

PTA: In your small store, a person enters with a Turkish nationalist ideology, another comes in with a nativist Dutch mentality, thinking only wine drinkers genuinely belong, and you seem to be in favor of pan-Persianism. What do you make of these interacting isms?

OB: Yes, my ideas are threatened by exclusivism, too. I am aware of the danger and I fear pan-Persianism. Let me tell you why. My thinking is also prompted by Pashtun identity politics, which strived to separate Afghanistan from Iran and its linguistic heritage. This ideology spread to Kabul, but not everywhere, not in the Badakhshan region or the city of Balkh. I wrote a book in response [in Persian], *I am Iran* (Badakhshani 2013[1392 SH]), a collection of poems with a historical foreword. I wanted the youth of Afghanistan to get away from closed-mindedness and to think beyond borders (*farāmarzī*). Young pan-Iranists interviewed me and wrote about my considerations regarding Iranian culture and language as my heritage and identity. But they left out my critique of pan-Iranism. I wrote an objection, to say they were no different from pan-Turkists. He goes for his Turkish identity and you for your Pārsī status. But I don’t believe that anyone owns the Persian identity and language, which was formed by Turks, Mughals, Baluch, and others, extending as far as China.

Notwithstanding these reservations concerning his invocation of a Persian identity and language, the implication being that Persian is not an ethnicity, when he received threats for selling Rumi Vodka Ofran did not bother to explain himself by writing an opinion piece in Dutch. Visitors to his website wrote supportive messages, in contrast with insulting posts such as, “Rūmī would spit on your face for misusing his name on such filth.” Jayran, a woman in Iran, wrote in Persian: “Mister Badakhshani, please don’t despair at the hands of these Turks. I am myself an Iranian Turk and very happy with your work. If I lived in the Netherlands, I would definitely visit your store and purchase some bottles! The Turks are not even able to read *Mawlānā*’s work! Don’t let them stand in your way.” Husayn, from Afghanistan and now living in Russia, chimed

²² I am indebted to Irfan Ahmed for his comment given at Utrecht University, 22 Mar. 2019.

in: “Don’t even consider those [closed-minded] views which led to our nation’s ruin! Always be victorious!”²³

Ofran did write a reflection in Persian criticizing Iranian and Afghan nationalisms that undermine a cosmopolitan conception of Pārsī.²⁴ To better appreciate his stance, the reader should additionally consider that Afghan refugees, migrants, and their children undergo great injustices in Iran, facing severe institutional discrimination and everyday exclusion (Human Rights Watch 2013). From Ofran’s mouth, to say “I too am Iranian” decries inhumane, nationalist exclusion, and to use Persian poetry for this purpose authenticated his critique by decentering modern Iran (Video 1).²⁵

Each time before replying to my questions about nationalist threats, Ofran began by reciting one or two verses from Rūmī’s *Masnavī*. The invoked authority of Our Master (Persian: *Mawlānā*) drew the conversation into competitive reasonings bound to a particular “discursive tradition” (Asad 2009[1986]: 7). The intended cosmopolitan meanings aligned better, though, with Ahmed’s focus on philosophy and poetry, rather than Asad’s insistence on the Qur’ān and the Hadith. Against ethnocentrism, Ofran recited popular verses from musical performances:

*There are many Hindus and Turks with the same tongue
And oh, many a pair of Turks, strangers to each other
Hence the tongue of intimacy is something else
It is better to be of one heart than of one tongue*²⁶

These verses assisted Ofran in slightly countering his pan-Persianism, by relativizing the importance of a single language and ethnic identity. In contrast, he responded to the Turkish critics of Rumi Vodka in a combative mode echoing Afghan “poetry war” (*shi’r jangī*). Ofran challenged critics who traveled from Turkey to his store in the Netherlands to earn the right to speak by reciting the Master in the Persian original, which he and his defenders boasted they could not. Behind the provocative style, however, the poetry of Rūmī undermined nationalistic antagonisms in favor of a spiritual universalism, being of one heart (*hamdilī*) rather than of one tongue (*hamzabānī*). “Abhorrent identity games,” Ofran hoped, can be overcome by “a thing that transcends all this” (*yak chīz farāy-i īn hamah ‘hā*). In academic parlance: the *experiential* wisdom of the Sufis is actualized to retrieve the humanity that is lost to competing “semiotic ideologies” (Keane 2003). “True Meaning,” as analyzed by Shahab Ahmed, can be found by going beyond the medium of language itself. Musical

²³ At: <https://shop.defilosoof.eu>, 14 Apr. 2019 (accessed June 2020).

²⁴ *zabān-i pārsī va nāsīunālīsm-i īrānī/afghānistānī*. Facebook.com, 2 Sept. 2019.

²⁵ A video of Ofran Badakhshani reciting his poem to the famous Iranian poet Hushang Ebtehaj (b. 1928) can be viewed here: <http://doi.org/10.1017/S001041752200007X>.

²⁶ *iy basā hindū va turk-i hamzabān / iy basā du turk chun bigānīgān / pas zabān-i mahramī khwud dīgarast / hamdilī az hamzabānī bihtarast* (Rūmī, trans. Nasr 2007: 96–97).

performances, Ofran suggested in agreement with Ahmed, are capable of transcending language barriers (Ahmed 2016: 425). Our conversation partner Arash brought in that the heart, or *dil*, also meaning stomach, refers to something ontologically prior to language. In the Sufi tradition, the “heart-stomach” (Sharifian 2008) grants access to the universal Pre-Text, which is epistemologically presupposed by Revelation as Text.

We can nevertheless question these beautiful poems’ role in a xenophobic European political landscape. Ofran, too, had no illusions about entanglements with Dutch nationalism. “Small-minded customers” visited his shop following the Rumi Vodka controversy, whom Ofran described as “enemies of Turks,” and those who think, “If you do not eat pork, and if you do not drink, and if you do not wear short skirts, then you are not free in your mind.” To support the shop, a lady one day came to hand over cartoons of the Prophet having intercourse with a goat. Ofran scoffed at her, “If you judged me an unbeliever, know that I am also no one’s enemy and something like this insults me and my standards. You take these and leave. Don’t think just because some threatened me, just because I don’t agree with them, that I agree with you!” On the other hand, he found “frightening that some claim prerogative power over others’ actions,” referring to threats grounded in ethnoreligious identities, against a Moroccan woman who opened a wine bar in Rotterdam, in 2014, and against his store, in 2019.

JUST POCKETS, NO RESISTANCE

Amid the Coronavirus pandemic, a philosopher appropriately named Sina, after Avicenna (980–1037 CE), fled Iran after participating in a protest. Security agents had arrested and imprisoned him in Kurdistan. He fortunately made it to the Netherlands after being released on bail to await a prison and flogging sentence. Of a Sunni-Kurdish minority background, Sina sympathized with Ofran and identified as a “Muslim unbeliever,” someone molded by the Qur’ān and mosques and by Islamic philosophers and Sufi poets. We drank a small bottle of Socrates Dry Gin that bore a picture of Ofran’s Persian cat, Socrates, on the label (image 4), and reminisced about Plato’s great dialogue, *Symposium*. The barefoot and ugly Socrates appears comical on the outside, Sina agreed, but for those invited to know the mysteries and fate of the philosopher, he is a tragic, brave figure who must be opened up to show his inner, divine contents. This Platonic perspective allowed us to make sense of Ofran’s pranks and preference for the liberal philosophy of “self-sufficiency,” for which he used the Dutch *zelfredzaamheid*—the capacity to save oneself.²⁷

²⁷ Ofran confirmed my interpretation in an interview conducted on 4 July 2020. I should also comment that Plato’s dialogue *Symposium* was known among Islamic philosophers. Al-Kindī (ninth



IMAGE 4: Socrates Dry Gin. Author's photo, The Hague, 2021.

Ofran admitted that Muslims can indeed associate Rumi Vodka humor with Islamophobic discrimination. He also suggested that the offensive power of

century CE) made the dialogue accessible to the next generation of Islamic philosophers, and Ibn Sīnā wrote a Neoplatonic treatise on love (Gutas 2000: 36–60).

comedy should be curtailed by decency. The problem is, though, that no agreement exists on what is decent or offensive. As for the vodka bottles, a human impulse produced them, “derived from experiences so black and so bitter, that they can only find expression in comic texts and acts . . . [and] because I am from an ensnaring tradition, in which jokes were always already used to protest religious prohibitions and commands.”²⁸ Should Ofran evaluate the Dutch context by the standards of his traumatic Afghan experience? Suppressing such memories would prove illusory anyway. Ofran was eleven years old when he fled Afghanistan on his own, without family or friends. It took him two years to reach the Netherlands in 1997. A year prior, the Taliban captured Kabul and cut the telephone lines he badly needed to stay in touch with his parents. Puberty was then spent with other minors in a shared house in Amsterdam, without foster parents. He first succeeded in calling and speaking to his mother a decade later, in 2007.

Ofran’s solitary existence is vivid in the Dutch poems compiled in his book *The Outcast (De Banneling)*, dedicated to Nietzsche:

*Alone
I tread the life path
here roads do not cross
here
roads are crucified*²⁹

In his poems, something of the experiences of a former refugee is conveyed to a reading public. In the politicized Dutch-European context of “Islam debates,” however, communicating emotions at crossroads can be jarring. For one person, wine drinking and Rumi Vodka offend, but for another, they are essential metaphors of liberation and heritage. At play is a real lack of a shared, gastropolitical style of reasoning (cf. Appadurai 1981). That wine and much more remain forbidden in Iran and Afghanistan aggravates these feelings, constantly pricking migrants, refugees, and exiles like me, Ofran, Ammar, and Sina, who came to the Netherlands in the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2020s, respectively. As Leor Halevi, a historian of Islamic law, argues (2020), one’s political stance strongly influences one’s position in contestations over alcohol, purity, and power, in our case resulting in an opposition to Islamic law itself. The facts of enduring ties with and longing for one’s country of birth, whether imagined or material or both, additionally explain the popularity of Wine Shop the Philosopher’s wine bottles, which ship to Austria, Germany, Sweden, and France. The bottles even make appearances in Afghanistan. The

²⁸ In contemporary Persian, the negative use of “black” is, unfortunately, ubiquitous.

²⁹ *Alleen / bewandel ik het pad der leven / hier kruisen de wegen niet / hier / worden de wegen gekruisigd* (Badakhshani 2015: 23, my translation).

Taliban's recapture of Kabul in the summer of 2021 now threatens even those modest gains.

The thirst for exiled wines is also stimulated by material culture making its way to the Netherlands. Merely looking at a copy of the *Dīvān* of Ḥāfiẓ, for example, purchased for me in Tehran in 2017, revives sentiments of loss and

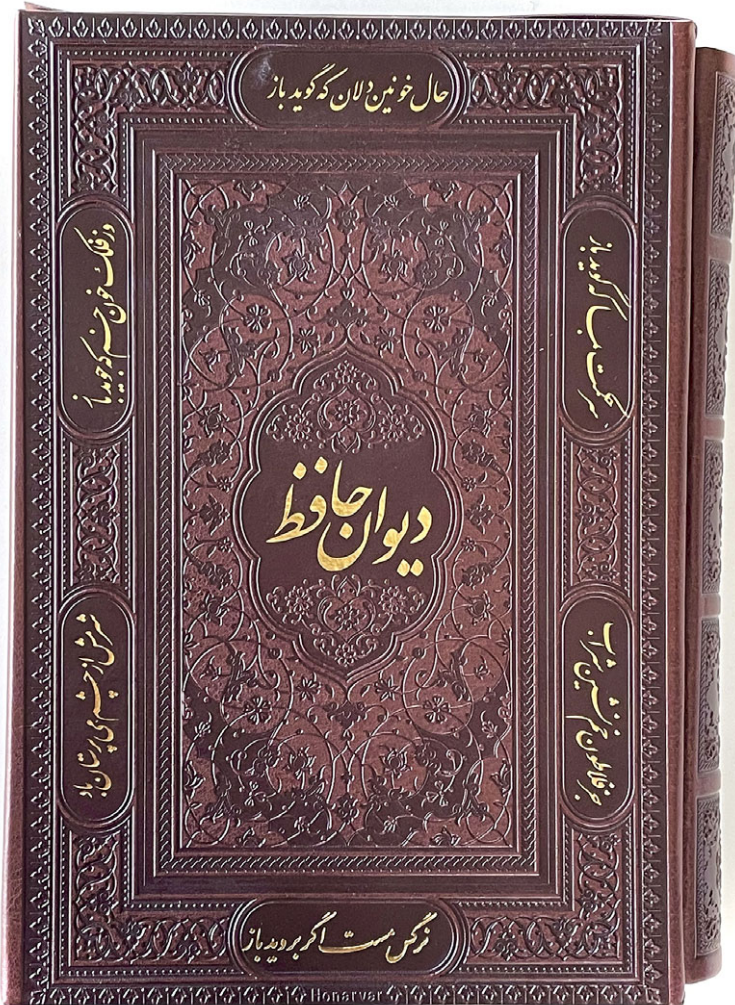


IMAGE 5: Cover of a *Dīvān* of Ḥāfiẓ, published in Tehran in 2016. Author's photo, Amsterdam 2021.

beauty (see [image 5](#)). The fourteenth-century poem decorating the cover is a symptom of the Iranian and Afghan status quo. The verses speak of a fanatic rule, during which the wine shops were ordered to close and jugs broken to bleed red wine. What now, the poet lamented.

*Who shall spell out the state of bloodied hearts,
And ask of the heavens the blood of the vat?*

...

*Apart from the wine-vat keeping Plato,
Who else can retail the mystery of wisdom?*³⁰

Explaining such verses, Ahmed points out that Sufi poets like Ḥāfiẓ lived and thought in a world where Plato was known as a divine sage, *aflāṭūn-i ilāhī*. An object made in Iran today still refers directly to the philosopher as a matter of common sense, given the nationwide popularity of Ḥāfiẓ. The poem, which starts with tragedy, ends with humor by glorifying the wine vat as worthy of circumambulation like the Ka‘bah. This image of the poet circling himself, mumbling about Plato, may strike the reader as a kind of mad behavior. It resonates, in fact, deeply with the Platonic perspective, in which divinely inspired madness (*mania*) elevates the wise above the clever.³¹ Thus, in his intoxicated state, Ḥāfiẓ, a title for someone who memorized the Qur‘ān, employed a shared field of Islamic references, learning from and going beyond the revealed text he otherwise revered. In the twenty-first century, the Platonic-Ḥāfiẓian or philosophical-Sufi amalgam criticizes the Islamic Republic’s prohibitions, for all to see in Tehran’s bookstores and to remind those in the diaspora of an unjust rule.

In the constellation I have been describing, wine functions as an existential medium. Drinking, as Ofran explained, is tantamount to “saying no” to what the ayatollahs or the Taliban want their people to be. A normative conception of culture secures freedom from authority, comparable to Nietzsche’s “sacred nay” (*ein heiliges Nein*) to Christian morality in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*; that is, a precondition for playful and artistic affirmation of earthly existence through poetry, drinking, and music. The divergence between Ofran’s appeal to culture and Shahab Ahmed’s wish to retain the Islamic is marked at this existential juncture. Both agree, however, that the tradition they praise and value, be it Islamic or Persianate, places justice (*‘adālat*) above the distinction between belief and unbelief and does so in reference to a context of Muslim rulers such as in the Mughal Empire (Ahmed 2016: 479).

³⁰ *hāl-i khūnīn dilān kih guyad bāz / va az falak khūn-i khum kih jūyad bāz / ... / juz fallāṭūn-i khum ‘nishūn-i sharāb / sirr-i ḥikmat bih mā kih gūyad bāz* (trans. in Ḥāfiẓ 2007: 324).

³¹ The value of madness is theorized in Plato’s later dialogue *Phaedrus*.

Still, the question remains as to whether Muslims can have a conceptually coherent relation to drinking which does not necessarily exile them, as it were, from Islam along with their countries of birth. Zooming out of the peculiarities of Iran and Afghanistan, Shahab Ahmed detected a broader development in which the traditional Islam of the Balkan-to-Bengal complex is fading away and losing ground to conservative ways of being Islamic. What remains, in Ahmed's words, are "pockets of resistance" (ibid.: 518). Ahmed thus conjures a romantic image of a glorious past in contrast with the pessimistic image of a reformist Islam spreading from Saudi Arabia to Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. What about the wine shop in the Netherlands, I asked Ofran. Was it a space of resistance?

OB: Ahmed's "pockets of resistance" hits the mark. In my childhood, I was educated [in the Persian literary tradition] in a mosque by a mullah. In Badakhshan, there still are places where if you say "Ḥāfiẓ" to an old man, he will slap you so hard in the face that you'll lose your tongue! It is His Holiness the Master Ḥāfiẓ! "Who gave you the right to utter 'Ḥāfiẓ,'" he might demand. Or someone may say, "Dog-child (*sag bachchah*), who are you to dare saying 'Ḥāfiẓ'?" Ḥāfiẓ was held in great esteem, always. For example, in Tajikistan, people would place the *Dīvān* below the pillow of a child instead of the Qur'ān. Sure, the Qur'ān may be stored high in a bookcase, but it is this copy of Ḥāfiẓ underneath their child's pillow that is the source of divination and clasped for performing the right intentions [before God].

These ways of living are under pressure now. The Soviet Union suppressed *Khurāsānī* Islam for sixty years [in Tajikistan], and the subsequent generations now reject the Islam in which you could dance, sing, and drink. It was an Islam of *lakum dīnukum wa-liya dīn* [recited by OB in Arabic: "For you is your religion, and for me is my religion," Qur'ān 109: 6]. The wine house, the gambling house, and the mosque coexisted without prying into each other's affairs. So, Ahmed is right to say that mere pockets of resistance remain. His view can be confirmed in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. *Nawrūz*, for instance, is still celebrated but there are people now, inspired by Wahhabism, who blast "*Nawrūz is ḥarām*" from [mosque] loudspeakers. They shrewdly cite Hadith against playing music, singing, and loud laughing. In contrast with my youth, in those places in Badakhshan where the Wahhabis entered the mosques,

reading the drinker Ḥāfiẓ became equivalent to unbelief (*kufī*).

But, alas, what is imprecise in Ahmed's phrase is the so-called resistance, which does not exist. The people ... are turned into ... nothing ... just pockets.

PTA: And your shop here in the Netherlands, is it a pocket of resistance?

OB: I am talking about living inside the prison, my dear. Resistance here means nothing. All the freedoms are available to us here. What am I resisting in The Hague? Yes, there are attempts [such as from Turkey] to stretch their arms all the way to here, to grab us by the throat. But there is a difference. Here they can make all the ruckus they want and I can simply say no. But in Afghanistan, or Tajikistan, one cannot joke around such matters. Crushed and lethargic, many think to themselves, "So much overcame me, let this pass as well."³²

CONCLUSION

Ofran opened a second wine shop in Amsterdam and a wine bar close to the first shop in The Hague in 2020. Each table in the latter is provided with a book, the walls decorated with images of Karl Marx and al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), Wittgenstein, and Hannah Arendt. For lovers of poetry and philosophy, Wine Bar the Philosopher and its shops construct an alternative reality that is as much a part of everyday life in the Netherlands as it is a unique home to migrants, refugees, and exiles who can use a drink. At the time of writing, Ofran started working with an artist to make a new image for his Rumi Vodka label, in his words to "capture the mystic's exuberance." Meanwhile, anti-Islamophobia activists gathering under the Twitter hashtag "#rumiwasmuslim" criticized the drink for "native betrayal," "selling out," and "twisting the legacy" of Rūmī for "worldly financial gain."³³ They compared the bottles to the New Age spiritual internet memes that indeed erase Islam in English translations of Rūmī. But Ofran, claiming Persianate culture and linguistic authenticity, ironically also detested these memes for their textual inaccuracy. The study of wine and intoxication, with its layered connections to Islamic history, law, philosophy, medicine, and the arts, can help elucidate these different perspectives. Adding drinking to the anthropology of Islam, then, provides an alternative entry point to

³² Visit and interview, 22 Feb. 2020.

³³ Also see Rozina Ali, "The Erasure of Islam from the Poetry of Rumi," *New Yorker*, 5 Jan. 2017.

pluralist settings, showing deep tensions such as between Islamic and Persianate ideals, which inform competing political arguments about identity and heritage. The question “Can Muslims drink?” is by no means answered with a simple affirmative or negative, depending on context. Given the fragmented demographics of Muslims in immigration nations such as the Netherlands, wine and drinking show more of smaller groups’ worlds, such as those of Iranians and Afghans, usually glossed over in research on topics such as mosque construction or the hijab. Thus far, many studies have sought to critically investigate Muslims’ relation to non-Muslim majority societies but succeed less in coming to terms with idiosyncrasies elided by stark categorizations of sober Muslims and European drinkers, African and Asian believers and European unbelievers, refugees and citizens, existential vulnerability and fortune. From a philosophical perspective, it is to that common humanity that Ofran’s bottles ultimately bear witness.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S001041752200007X>.

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Abstract: Shahab Ahmed's *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (2016) challenges Islamic Studies scholars, (art) historians, and anthropologists to reconsider theoretical frameworks underpinning historical and ethnographic research. This article addresses Ahmed's concerns that studies of Islam often conceptually privilege orthodoxy, by including drinking and intoxication as worthy of close attention in examining the history and the anthropology of Islam. The case of Wine Shop the Philosopher, run by a former Afghan refugee in The Hague and Amsterdam, is presented after establishing the comparative and interdisciplinary relevance of alcohol consumption in studies of Islam and Muslims. Ahmed's conceptual framework is used and assessed in comparison with the wine shops' contemporary pluralist reality by exploring the idealized boundaries of Persianate culture and Islam in dialogues between Persian-speaking interlocutors. It is argued that alcoholic drinks lend themselves to competing gastro-nationalisms and prompt ethnolinguistic tensions between and within groups with Turkish, Moroccan, Iranian, and Afghan backgrounds in the Netherlands. The focus on diverse, coexisting and clashing drink regimes, in conclusion, allows us to deconstruct dichotomies between sober Muslims and European drinkers, African and Asian believers and European unbelievers, and refugees and citizens.

Key words: Islam, Persian, anthropology, drink regimes, alcohol, refugees, nationalism, pluralism, the Netherlands