Drinking Games and Toasting Customs Around the World

Name Date Class

Reading

1 Almost every culture has some version of the same idea: a shared drink, a simple set of rules, and a group of people who become a little closer by the end of the evening. Anthropologists describe drinking games and toasting customs as social **rituals**, repeated, rule-based behaviors that help a group move from formality to informality. The specific rules differ enormously from country to country, but the **underlying** social work they do is strikingly similar.

2 Part of that work is a kind of **leveling**. In South Korea, a university welcome dinner often includes Baskin Robbins 31, in which players count upward in turns, and whoever is forced to say "31" must drink, alongside nunchi games that reward players for reading the room correctly. For the length of the game, a first-year student and a senior follow exactly the same rule, and for a few minutes the usual **seniority** that shapes so much of Korean social life is quietly set aside.

3 In the country of Georgia, the leveling works differently, through structure rather than luck. At a feast called a supra, a **toastmaster** known as the tamada leads dozens of toasts, to parents, to guests, to peace, and everyone must wait for the tamada's toast before raising a glass. A guest may be given an alaverdi, an invitation to add to the toast just given, and certain toasts are drunk bolomde, to the very bottom, as a mark of respect. The rules are strict, but a stranger who is handed an alaverdi has, for a moment, been pulled fully inside the group.

4 Elsewhere, the emphasis falls less on rules and more on **synchrony**. In Vietnam, a table of friends will often count together, "Một, hai, ba, dô!", one, two, three, cheers, before drinking at exactly the same instant. In China, the toast "gānbēi", meaning "dry glass," serves a similar purpose at business banquets built around baijiu, a strong grain spirit, and encouraging a guest to drink more is widely understood as **generosity** rather than pressure, though a foreign guest may experience it quite differently.

5 Some customs, meanwhile, are built almost entirely around **etiquette** rather than games. In mainland Japan, it is traditionally considered impolite to fill your own glass, so guests **attentively** watch each other's cups and pour for one another instead. On Miyako Island in Okinawa, a related but **distinct** custom called otōri turns pouring into a ceremony. A leader called the oya makes a short speech, fills and drains their own glass, pours a round for everyone else in the circle, and then chooses the next oya, so the gathering **resembles** a chain of small speeches more than ordinary table manners. In Germany, by contrast, the outdoor team game Flunkyball turns drinking into something closer to sport: two teams try to knock over a bottle with a thrown ball, and the throwing team may drink only until the other side resets the bottle and shouts "stop."

6 These customs are not without real problems. The same rules that create **belonging** can also create **implicit** pressure that is hard for an outsider, or a shy insider, to resist, and the line between generous encouragement and outright **coercion** is not always obvious in the moment. Some groups have responded by changing the ritual rather than abandoning it. In 2025, The Korea Herald reported that many younger Koreans were treating penalty drinks as optional, and that a dance department at Yongin University had **deliberately** held its group retreat without any alcohol. Habits are shifting elsewhere too: in a 2026 Gallup poll, only half of American adults aged 18 to 34 said they drink at all, down from 58 percent in 2023.

7 What makes these customs worth studying is not really the alcohol itself. Whether it is a Korean counting game, a Georgian toastmaster, a Vietnamese chant, or a German bottle-and-ball contest, each custom answers the same basic human question in a locally specific way: how does a group turn strangers, or unequal ranks, into something closer to equals, at least for one evening? The answer a culture gives hints at how it handles status and trust more broadly, and it suggests a simple test for any of these customs: when one person at the table chooses not to drink, does the ritual still include them?

Vocabulary Matching

Match each word from the reading with its meaning. Write the letter on the line.

1	**rituals**	_____	**A**	forming the hidden basis of something
2	**underlying**	_____	**B**	suggested without being directly stated
3	**leveling**	_____	**C**	forcing someone through pressure or threats
4	**seniority**	_____	**D**	with careful and focused attention
5	**toastmaster**	_____	**E**	the accepted rules of polite behavior
6	**synchrony**	_____	**F**	done on purpose, as a planned choice
7	**generosity**	_____	**G**	a person who leads and announces toasts
8	**etiquette**	_____	**H**	making people more equal in status
9	**attentively**	_____	**I**	willingness to give more than expected
10	**distinct**	_____	**J**	looks or seems similar to something
11	**resembles**	_____	**K**	the feeling of being accepted in a group
12	**belonging**	_____	**L**	higher rank due to age or years of service
13	**implicit**	_____	**M**	the state of happening at exactly the same time
14	**coercion**	_____	**N**	regular, repeated actions with social meaning
15	**deliberately**	_____	**O**	clearly different from something else

Fill in the Blank

Choose a word from the box to complete each sentence. Use each word once. The words are already in the correct form.

attentively	**belonging**	**coercion**	**deliberately**	**distinct**	**etiquette**	**generosity**	**implicit**	**leveling**
resembles	**rituals**	**seniority**	**synchrony**	**toastmaster**	**underlying**			

1 Many families have holiday _____ that repeat every year.

2 There is an _____ reason for her sudden change in mood.

3 Team sports can have a _____ effect between managers and staff.

4 Promotions were based partly on _____ .

5 The _____ asked everyone to raise their glasses.

6 The dancers moved in perfect _____ .

7 The host's _____ impressed every guest.

8 Table _____ differs a great deal between cultures.

9 She listened _____ to every word of the toast.

10 The two dialects are _____ , though related.

11 The new game _____ an older regional tradition.

12 There was an _____ expectation that everyone would join in.

13 Good teamwork depends on cooperation, not _____ .

14 She _____ avoided the topic during dinner.

15 Shared rituals give people a sense of _____ .

Comprehension Questions

Answer in your notebook or discuss with a partner. Questions 10 to 12 are IELTS-style.

1 What common social function do drinking games and toasting customs share, according to the reading?

2 Compare the Korean and Georgian examples. How does each create a leveling effect in a different way?

3 Explain the Vietnamese and Chinese examples. What role does synchrony or generosity play in each?

4 Compare mainland Japanese etiquette with the Okinawan custom of otōri. Why does the reading call them related but distinct?

5 Describe how Flunkyball works. How is it different in style from the other customs described?

6 What real problems does the reading raise about these customs? What has developed as a response?

7 Why does the reading say the alcohol itself is not really the point of studying these customs?

8 Choose two customs from different regions and explain what each might reveal about how that culture treats status or trust.

9 Evaluate the range of examples the reading uses. Which examples feel most concrete and specific, and which feel more general?

IELTS-Style Questions

10 **True, False, or Not Given:** *"Every culture in the reading uses the same drinking game."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

11 **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer suggests that encouraging a guest to drink more is always a form of generosity."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

12 **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer include examples from several different countries rather than focusing on just one? What effect does this have on the reader?

True or False

Circle T (true) or F (false) according to the reading. Write a correction for each false statement on the dotted line.

1 **T / F** Anthropologists describe drinking games and toasting customs as social rituals.

2 **T / F** In Baskin Robbins 31, whoever says the number 31 must drink.

3 **T / F** At a Georgian supra, guests may drink before the tamada gives a toast.

4 **T / F** In Vietnam, friends often count together before drinking at the same instant.

5 **T / F** In China, encouraging a guest to drink more is usually seen as an insult.

6 **T / F** In mainland Japan, it is polite to fill your own glass first.

7 **T / F** In otōri, one person pours a full round of drinks for everyone else in the circle.

8 **T / F** In Flunkyball, a team must stop drinking once the bottle is reset and stop is shouted.

9 **T / F** The reading says the line between encouragement and coercion is always obvious.

10 **T / F** The reading concludes that the customs are worth studying mainly because of the alcohol itself.

Discussion Questions

Talk with a partner or in a small group. The questions move from personal to more abstract.

1. Which custom in the reading did you find most interesting or surprising, and why?
2. The reading says drinking games can create a leveling effect between people of different status. Have you seen this happen, with or without alcohol?
3. Compare the Korean counting game and the Georgian toastmaster tradition. Which style, luck-based or structured, appeals to you more?
4. The Vietnamese and Chinese examples both involve group synchrony or generosity. Are there similar customs in your own culture?
5. In mainland Japan, filling your own glass is considered impolite. Is there a similar unwritten rule in your culture around food or drink?
6. Flunkyball turns drinking into something closer to a sport. Do you think games like this change how people feel about drinking, compared to simply drinking without a game?
7. The reading distinguishes between generous encouragement and coercion. Where would you personally draw that line?
8. Some university groups now hold their retreats without alcohol. Do you think events like these can create the same sense of belonging?
9. If a foreign visitor came to your country, what one social custom around food or drink would you want to explain to them first?
10. The reading says these customs hint at how a culture handles status and trust. Do you agree, or do you think this is too big a claim for a drinking game?
11. Have you ever felt pressure, subtle or direct, to drink more than you wanted? How did you respond?
12. Do you think drinking customs are becoming more similar across the world, or still very different from country to country?
13. Some people say visitors should join local drinking customs out of respect; others say personal choice always comes first. Which view do you find more convincing?
14. If fewer young adults drink, as the Gallup poll in the reading suggests, how might social customs change over the next ten years?

Language Focus: Comparing and Contrasting Across Examples

When comparing several examples, writers use structures such as while, whereas, by contrast, elsewhere, and in the same way to show whether two things work similarly or differently. These words let a reader follow several examples without losing track of how each one relates to the others.

In the reading:

- "In the country of Georgia, the leveling works differently, **through structure rather than luck**."
- "**Elsewhere**, the emphasis falls less on rules and more on synchrony."
- "…so the gathering resembles a chain of small speeches **more than** ordinary table manners. **In Germany, by contrast**, the outdoor team game Flunkyball turns drinking into something closer to sport."

Practice: Combine these two sentences using by contrast: *"In one country, guests fill each other's glasses. In another country, each guest fills their own."*

Activities and speed challenge
englishbridges.com/lessons/drinking-games-and-customs

Notes