

VINEGAR IN QURANIC AND PROPHETIC DISCOURSE: AN INQUISITIVE SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF ISLAMIC ETHICAL DIMENSIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Quranic and Prophetic discourse transforms ordinary food references (specifically vinegar (*al-khall*)) into tools of ethical reflection within Islamic dietary ethics. While previous scholarship has emphasized the legal status (*ḥalāl/ḥarām*) or biomedical benefits of vinegar, its semantic and figurative roles as moral pedagogy remain underexplored. To address this gap, this qualitative textual study applies Inquisitive Semantics, a three-tiered model (script, resonance, inquiry), supported by Relevance Theory in the second stage of analysis. The integration of Relevance Theory strengthens the interpretive process by explaining how contextual assumptions, inferential reasoning, and cognitive effects interact to construct deeper moral meanings. The compact corpus comprises the Quranic verse *Surah al-Nahl* (16:67) alongside two key Prophetic reports: the praise of vinegar as an excellent condiment and the parable comparing moral corruption to vinegar spoiling honey. The implicit meanings and ethical implications embedded in these expressions are elucidated through the Inquisitive Semantics framework, which systematically connects textual, cognitive, and ethical dimensions. Findings reveal that vinegar, across Quranic and Prophetic registers, functions not merely as a household condiment but as a symbolic index of moderation, gratitude, and moral integrity. This study contributes to Quranic and Hadith scholarship by demonstrating how Inquisitive Semantics, reinforced with Relevance Theory, can uncover multi-layered moral meanings often overlooked in Islamic dietary ethics research. More broadly, it bridges revelatory texts with contemporary ethical concerns such as sustainability, human well-being, and the cultivation of balanced moral character.

Keywords: Al-Quran, Hadith, Inquisitive Semantics, Islamic Dietary Ethics, Relevance Theory, Vinegar

INTRODUCTION

In the context of Islamic discourse, the art of language is confined merely to linguistic beauty, it also reflects the philosophical, ethical and spiritual dimensions embedded within divine revelation. In both the Quran and Sunnah, the layered eloquence of expression serves as a medium for intellectual cultivation and moral formation. This phenomenon is also evident in the Quranic use of ordinary food items such as bread, milk, honey and vinegar (*al-khall*) which are elevated from their mundane reality to become symbols of spiritual refinement and moral education. Much like the stylistic beauty of Malay literary tradition that harmonizes form, feeling, and moral sensibility. Quranic discourse conveys meanings that are both instructive and edifying its eloquence is not merely ornamental but a guide that shapes the soul towards moderation and gratitude.

According to Bujang and Subet (2022), the Inquisitive Semantic Approach encourages reflective reading and deep textual analysis, opening pathways of interpretation that transcend literal meaning in order to uncover the ethical and philosophical wisdoms of revelation. In this context, the study of Quranic and prophetic texts concerning vinegar goes beyond linguistic inquiry, encompassing philosophical, moral, and spiritual values that underpin the foundation of Islamic dietary ethics.

This study employs the inquisitive semantic approach to analyze three principal texts: surah Nahl (16:67), which presents a contrast between *sakar* (intoxicating drink) and *rizq hasan* (wholesome provision); the hadiths “*Ni‘ma al-idām al-khall*” (“The best condiment is vinegar”); and the moral parable “*Evil conduct ruins deeds just as vinegar spoils honey.*” collectively, these texts demonstrate how divine revelation manifests both the beauty of linguistic structure and the wisdom of meaning, serving as a tool for the purification of the soul (*tazkiyah al-nafs*) and the education of the intellect (*ta’dīb al-‘aql*).

Nevertheless, existing scientific and shariah perspectives indicate that discussions concerning vinegar have largely revolved around its health benefits, halal status, and fermentation processes, while the ethical, philosophical, and Quranic-linguistic dimensions remain underexplored. Previous research by Harahap et al. (2020), examined twenty-five types of vinegar available in the Malaysian market and found that although most were Halal, two did not meet the required conditions due to incomplete fermentation. While such findings are significant from scientific and jurisprudential standpoints, there remains a research gap in understanding the deeper meanings conveyed through divine discourse, particularly how vinegar functions as a symbol of moderation, self-purification and moral balance within Islamic ethical thought.

By employing the Inquisitive Semantic Approach supported by principles of Relevance Theory (RT), this study seeks to bridge the existing gap through a three-tiered reading process (script, resonance and inquiry) that will connect linguistic meaning with the philosophical foundations of Islamic ethics. This approach not only enriches the fields of Quranic exegesis and hadith studies from a theoretical perspective, but also demonstrates how the language of revelation functions as an art of thinking, cultivating human cognition to discern blessings and boundaries while fostering moral discipline in both dietary practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

• The Application of Inquisitive Semantics

The Inquisitive Semantics (IS) framework, introduced by Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin (2014), has increasingly attracted scholarly attention in the fields of linguistics and language education due to its multidisciplinary orientation. Unlike traditional semantic analysis, which largely emphasizes the relationship between language and literal meaning, IS allows researchers to interrogate authentic data by integrating linguistic, contextual, cognitive, cultural, and intellectual dimensions. Consequently, IS enables texts to be analysed beyond their surface meaning, uncovering layers of philosophy and cultural wisdom inherent in the speaker’s worldview.

Empirical evidence from local studies has demonstrated the effectiveness of IS across a variety of textual me-

dia. For instance, Nasir & Subet (2023) applied IS to Malay proverbs, showing that the expression “*Melentur buluh biarlah dari rebungnya*” (Bend the bamboo while it is still a shoot) could be elucidated up to the level of cultural philosophy and intellectual ethos. Similarly, Samaon & Subet (2020), drawing upon Relevance Theory (RT), analysed character development in the novel *Di Sebalik Dinara* and found that the use of Cross-Referencing Frames (RRS) facilitated readers’ comprehension of implicit meanings. In addition, George Romiko Bujang & Mary Fatimah Subet (2021a) kajian ini mendapati makna tersirat yang dihayati dapat dirungkai oleh murid apabila analisis satu persatu pendekatan semantik inkuisitif dilakukan, bermula dengan analisis semantik skrip, semantik resonans dan seterusnya semantik inkuisitif. Pengaplikasian Teori Relevans yang diasaskan oleh Sperber dan Wilson (1986, 1995) illustrated that the integration of IS with Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) enabled students to uncover latent meanings in poetry.

According to Jalaluddin (2014, 2015) and Daud (2018), IS is inherently interdisciplinary. Beyond its foundations in linguistics, it extends into history, culture, religion, science, sociology, and etymology. Owing to this comprehensive nature, IS has been applied not only to literary texts and proverbs but also to contemporary discourse and oral communication. For example, Daud (2017) analysed slang expressions in conversations from coffee shops in Kuala Lumpur and Kota Samarahan, uncovering hidden meanings through attention to the speakers’ social context, cognitive orientation, and cultural setting.

- **Islamic Food Studies and the Ḥadīth on Vinegar**

In the field of Islamic food studies, contemporary scholarship has expanded its focus beyond the binary of *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām* to encompass broader dimensions of philosophy, ethics, and pedagogy. The concept of *ḥalāl-tayyib* has been interpreted as an ethico-linguistic value, shaping the Qur’ānic lexicon while guiding sustainable dietary practices (Saputra et al., 2025). *Al-khall* (vinegar) gains its narrative legitimacy from the Sunnah, and modern research has further highlighted its benefits as both a condiment and a preservative (Khalifa et al., 2024; Ousaaid et al., 2023).

Within the regional corpus, Sempo & Razif (2019) explored the connection between *Ṭibb al-Nabawī* and Malay manuscripts. However, their emphasis remained largely on legal and medicinal aspects rather than linguistic or semantic dimensions. Similarly, Burhanuddin et al. (2021) observed that halal awareness among Muslim consumers is significant in the context of vinegar products. Yet, discussions on vinegar as a rhetorical object in ḥadīth discourse remain strikingly limited.

- **Arabic Islamic Linguistics and the Rhetoric of Ḥadīth**

Within Arabic–Islamic linguistics, the disciplines of semantics and *balāghah* (rhetoric) focus on non-literal interpretation through *kināyah* (metonymy), *tashbīh* (simile), and *isti’ārah* (metaphor). While Naseef (2018) called for a systematic mapping of rhetorical styles in religious texts, underscoring their pedagogical value. Hussin et al. (2025) demonstrated that the Prophet’s Muhammad SAW rhetoric frequently employed concise parables capable of conveying moral messages with profound impact, as seen in the comparison between vinegar and honey.

Abd Alhadi et al. (2023) proposed formal instruments for measuring rhetorical density, while Rahman

et al. (2019) discussed the challenges of translating implicit meanings of ḥadīth into other languages without diminishing their rhetorical force.

- **Synthesis of Previous Studies**

To conclude, the reviewed literature demonstrates that whether in the context of language education or Islamic studies, semantic and rhetorical approaches can guide learners from literal meaning toward deeper philosophical interpretation. Nevertheless, few studies have directly applied the Inquisitive Semantics (IS) approach to Prophetic traditions, particularly concise reports such as those concerning vinegar. This study, therefore, seeks to open new horizons by employing IS in conjunction with Relevance Theory (RT) to analyse al-quran & ḥadīth, thereby enabling the ethical and philosophical messages embedded within them to be systematically harnessed for both pedagogy and Islamic moral scholarship.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach. The first main data included one Quranic verse from Surah al-Nahl (16:67), which contrasts intoxicants (*sakar*) and wholesome provision (*rizq ḥasan*) as an early moral sign of the gradual prohibition of alcohol, and two Prophetic reports about vinegar: “The best condiment is vinegar” and “Bad character corrupts deeds just as vinegar spoils honey.

A documentary analysis method was utilised, examining these Quranic and ḥadīth texts alongside classical exegetical and commentarial sources such as those of Ibn Kathīr, al-Qurṭubī, Ibn al-Munḍir, Ibn Abbas, and al-Munāwī. To ensure systematic interpretation and analytical precision, the study employed two semantic frameworks (Inquisitive Semantics (IS) and Relevance Theory (RT)) as complementary theoretical lenses.

Within the IS framework, the analysis proceeded through three hierarchical tiers: the script level (literal meaning and linguistic form), the resonance level (contextual and intertextual meaning), and the inquisitive level (ethical and philosophical implications). Relevance Theory was applied specifically at the resonance level to map the process of inferential meaning-making between key textual cues (*sakar*, *rizq ḥasan*, and *al-khall*) and their cognitive, moral, and cultural contexts. Through this integration of linguistic analysis and theological reflection, the study constructs a coherent analytical framework for understanding how Quranic and Prophetic discourse articulate moral reasoning and ethical sensibility particularly within the field of Islamic dietary and moral studies.

FINDING & DISCUSSION

Data 1: Surah al-Nahl 16:67

- **Script-Level Stage**

The Quranic verse *al-Nahl* 16:67 was selected for analysis in order to explore its underlying meanings. At the script-level semantic stage, the focus is placed on the explicit and literal dimensions of meaning, as derived

from the verse's translation and classical Arabic lexicons. The interpretative process at this stage is relatively straightforward, as it primarily concerns the identification and comprehension of explicit semantic content that is, the direct, surface meaning conveyed by the text. The verse reads as follows:

And from the fruits of date palms and grapes, you derive intoxicating drinks as well as good and wholesome provision (*rizqan ḥasanan*). Indeed, in that are signs for a people who use reason.”

(al-Quran, Sūrah al-Naḥl 16:67)

When examined at the surface level, the literal interpretation provides only a basic understanding without uncovering the deeper spiritual or pedagogical message. The verse presents an interesting coordinate structure in which one human action (*tattakiḍūn*, “you produce”) gives rise to two opposing outcomes from the same source (*sakar* and *rizq ḥasan*). This contrast is emphasized through the use of a positive qualifier (*ḥasanan*) that is attributed exclusively to *rizq*, thereby creating a lexical and rhetorical opposition rather than a merely logical one.

In other words, from dates and grapes, humankind is capable of producing both intoxicating drinks that cause harm and wholesome provision that brings benefit. This very contrast functions as a divine sign (*āyah*), inviting people to use their intellect (*ya 'qilūn*) to contemplate the hidden message behind it. However, the literal interpretation alone does not fully convey the intended meaning of the Quran in *al-Naḥl* 16:67. Therefore, further analysis at the next semantic level is required to uncover the deeper spiritual and rhetorical insights particularly the contrast between the harmful *sakar* and the beneficial *rizq ḥasan* so that the verse's true message may be more profoundly appreciated.

- **Resonance-Level Stage**

The second stage of analysis within the Inquisitive Semantic Approach applies the framework of Relevance Theory (RT), developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995). This theory posits that meaning is not confined to linguistic form alone but emerges through cognitive processes in which the listener connects an utterance to contextual cues, inferences, and pre-existing assumptions stored in the mind. Optimal relevance occurs when the intended implicit meaning is successfully inferred with maximum cognitive effect and minimum processing effort.

In the context of Surah al-Naḥl (16:67), the researcher examines how the Prophet's Companions and early exegetes comprehended and processed this verse based on their empirical experiences and the socio-cultural environment of seventh-century Arabia. At that time, Arab society was deeply familiar with the various products derived from dates and grapes. Some were consumed as nutritious foods and beverages such as dried dates, sweet juices, and vinegar while others were fermented into intoxicating drinks. This dual awareness of both benefit and harm had long been embedded within their cultural memory.

The practice of consuming wine was a deeply entrenched aspect of pre-Islamic Arab life. They

possessed advanced knowledge of fermentation and the production of alcoholic beverages, making it a central element of their social gatherings and festivities. Evidence of this cultural tradition can be traced through South Arabian inscriptions, the city of Palmyra in ancient Syria (first century CE), and Nabataean civilization in Petra, Jordan, as well as pre-Islamic Arabic poetry and other written records. In his *Kitāb al-Mukhassas*, Ibn Sīda (d. 1066) lists nearly one hundred Arabic synonyms for *khamr* (wine), while al-Fīrūzābādī (d. 1415) expanded the lexicon to as many as 357 terms in his “Catalogue of Wine.” The sheer linguistic variety reflects how profoundly the culture of wine permeated Arab life at the time.

In several authentic narrations, it is recorded that some of the Prophet’s Companions (RA), among them Ḥamzah ibn ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib and Anas ibn Mālīk, were once in a state of intoxication prior to the complete prohibition of alcohol. The incident involving Ḥamzah (RA) is narrated in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Kitāb al-Maghāzī, ḥadīth no. 4003, 4043, 4044) and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Kitāb al-Ashriba, ḥadīth no. 1979). The account of Anas ibn Mālīk (RA) is narrated by himself in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Kitāb al-Ashriba, Bāb Taḥrīm al-Khamr, ḥadīth no. 5583) and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Kitāb al-Ashriba, ḥadīth no. 1980), and is further corroborated in *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* and *Sunan al-Nasā’ī*. Its chain of transmission is reliable (*thiqah*), transmitted through Thābit al-Bunānī from Anas (RA). In this narration, Anas explains that he once served intoxicating drinks to his family prior to the revelation of the prohibition. Other reports mention that some of the Companions consumed wine on the morning of the Battle of Uḥud and were later martyred in that same battle. This occurred before the prohibition of *khamr*, as recorded in *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* (3/160) through the narration of Jābir ibn ‘Abd Allāh (RA). Collectively, these narrations demonstrate that during the early phase of Islam, the consumption of wine was socially accepted and not yet prohibited in absolute terms.

Ibn ‘Abbās (RA) affirmed that this verse was revealed prior to the prohibition of alcohol. He interpreted *sakar* as wine (*khamr*), while *rizq ḥasan* referred to all lawful produce derived from dates and grapes. This interpretation is supported by Ibn Jubayr, al-Nakha‘ī, al-Sha‘bī, and Abū Thawr, who viewed the verse as describing two distinct outcomes derived from the same source one beneficial and the other harmful (al-Qurṭubī, 1964).

Nevertheless, several scholars have offered more linguistically nuanced and contextually sensitive interpretations. Some explained that *sakar*, in the Abyssinian (Habashī) language, signifies vinegar, whereas *rizq ḥasan* denotes food. Ibn ‘Abbās also stated, “The Abyssinians refer to vinegar as *sakar*.” Another view suggests that *sakar* refers to a sweet, lawful extract that becomes prohibited once fermentation occurs and intoxication ensues (al-Qurṭubī, 1964).

Ibn al-‘Arabī consolidated these various opinions and judged the view of Ibn ‘Abbās to be the most sound (al-Qurṭubī, 1964). He proposed two possible interpretations:

1. The verse describes a condition that existed prior to the prohibition of wine; or
2. God affirms that humankind employs the same agricultural produce (dates and grapes) to generate both lawful and unlawful outcomes.

He concluded that the first interpretation is more accurate, as the verse is *Makkiyyah* while the prohibition of wine occurred later in Madinah. Al-Qurṭubī further clarified that if *sakar* is understood as wine or

sweet juice, the verse remains *muḥkamah* (unabrogated), since its import is moral and epistemic rather than legal. Indeed, the syntactic structure “*tatakhidhūna minhu sakaran wa rizqan ḥasanan*” may also be read as a rhetorical reproach (*istifhām inkārī*): “Do you then make from it something intoxicating, while you abandon the wholesome provision such as vinegar and raisins?”

This interpretation is reinforced by Abū ‘Ubaydah, who explained *sakar* as *al-ṭa‘m* (taste or flavour). He cited a line of pre-Islamic verse: “You have turned the honour of noble men into a mere taste (*sakar*). The reproach in this verse, therefore, is expressed as though the act being censured were something pleasurable. This interpretation was adopted by *al-Ṭabarī*, who held that *sakar* refers to all lawful foods and drinks derived from dates and grapes that is, *rizq ḥasan* itself. Thus, although the expressions differ, their semantic import is one and the same, as reflected in surah Yusuf 12:86 Allah said: “Indeed, I only complain of my suffering and sorrow to Allah.” Al-Quran.

Within the framework of Relevance Theory, the decoding of meaning relies on three interrelated components which are linguistic coding, inferential reasoning, and cognitive assumptions. These elements enable the analyst to explain how meaning is derived through cognitive engagement with revelation, thereby illuminating the intended message of the verse (Sperber & Wilson, 1996). Verse 67 presents two contrasting outcomes from the same raw material: *sakar* (intoxicating drink) and *rizq ḥasan* (wholesome provision). The distinction is not merely descriptive but conveys a moral-cognitive message that God is affirming the ethical boundary between the rightful use of blessings and their wrongful misuse.

In this theory, context encompasses the mental assumptions and environmental cues that guide the hearer or reader in interpreting divine speech. In the case of this verse, background information such as the social conditions of pre-Islamic Arabia, the practice of fruit fermentation, and existing religious knowledge of lawful and unlawful substances forms the foundational cognitive environment that shapes interpretation. Analytically, the researcher organizes these processes through an interpretive matrix comprising three sequential stages:

1. Identification of key linguistic codes (lexical items or phrases in the text);
2. Generation of inferences based on literal meaning and contextual relations; and
3. Formulation of cognitive assumptions that lead to an ethical and pedagogical understanding of the verse.

Table 1: Identification of Codes, Inferences, and Assumptions Based on Surah al-Naḥl 16:67

Code	Inference	Assumption
1. <i>sakar</i> 2. <i>rizq ḥasan</i>	1. Dates and grapes contain two potentials: to produce intoxicating drinks or wholesome sustenance. 2. Human choice determines the moral value of these outcomes.	1. God emphasizes the role of the intellect (‘aql) in discerning the benefit and harm of creation. 2. The distinction between <i>sakar</i> and <i>rizq ḥasan</i> signifies the ethics of consumption and moderation.

Following the identification of linguistic codes, inferential construction, and the establishment of assumption sets (see Table 1), the next step involves determining which assumption yields the highest relevance for achieving optimal comprehension of the verse's meaning. Within the framework of Relevance Theory, this process depends on the cognitive capacity of the hearer or reader to select information that produces the greatest cognitive effect with the least processing effort.

Accordingly, the most relevant assumption is the verse invites humankind to employ intellect (*'aql*) as the foundation of moral discernment in appreciating divine blessings. This interpretation requires minimal cognitive effort, since the early Arabs possessed direct experiential knowledge of both forms of produce. They could thus achieve an optimal cognitive effect, namely, the realization that every blessing may become either a source of benefit or harm depending on how it is used.

The historical context reinforces this resonance as the verse was revealed during the *Makkiyyah* period, it does not function as a legal prohibition but as an early moral cue aimed at cultivating intellectual awareness and ethical responsibility toward God's creation. The direction of cognitive resonance emerges as the Companions and early exegetes connected the verse's literal expression to their social experiences and spiritual consciousness that reason must be safeguarded.

Through this process, it becomes evident that understanding *sakar* and *rizq ḥasan* extends beyond linguistic interpretation to encompass ethical, spiritual, and rational (*'aqlī*) dimensions. Selecting the most relevant assumption ultimately leads to the conclusion that the verse articulates a principle of moral responsibility toward divine blessings to utilize natural resources in a manner that is good, balanced, and guided by revelation.

In conclusion, the Resonance-Level Semantic Stage of verse 67 demonstrates how implicit meaning is constructed through the activation of empirical context, moral inference, and cognitive awareness. The verse does not merely describe the fruits of nature but serves as a didactic reminder, urging humanity to think, discern, and choose what is good. Thereby embodying the Quranic ethic underlying the prohibition of intoxicants and the preservation of intellect. Nevertheless, to uncover its deeper wisdom and philosophical dimensions, the subsequent Inquisitive Semantic Stage must be undertaken to reveal the ultimate intent of revelation.

- **Inquisitive Semantic Stage**

At this stage, the analysis uncovers the philosophical, ethical, and intellectual dimensions embedded within Quranic discourse following the resonance-level exploration. The researcher now moves beyond linguistic form and textual history toward a deeper reflection, asking why a particular utterance is used, why a semantic contrast is chosen, and why revelation emphasizes the moral message that underlies it. This stage is reflective and multidisciplinary, intersecting the fields of *tafsīr*, linguistics, Islamic ethics, and nutritional science, in line with the principles of the Prophetic Dietary paradigm, which harmonizes intellect, body, and spirit.

In the context of *Surah al-Naḥl* (16:67), the inquisitive semantic analysis seeks to understand the philosophy underlying the deliberate pairing of two key terms *sakar* and *rizq ḥasan*. Both terms represent

profound moral contrasts: one signifies the misuse of divine blessing that clouds the intellect, while the other symbolizes gratitude, balance, and spiritual blessing. Here lies the elegance of Quranic pedagogy, which educates humanity not merely through literal obedience but through moral consciousness and reflective choice.

This stage opens a series of *why-questions*: Why does the verse highlight two outcomes from the same source? Why does God name one *sakar* and the other *rizq ḥasan*? Why was prohibition not declared immediately? The answers to these questions reveal the wisdom of gradual moral education (*tadarruj*) and the *i'tibārī* dimension discussed by exegetes such as Ibn al-Munḍir.

He interprets the verse as both a cosmic sign (*āyah kauniyyah*) and a moral lesson (*li-l-i'tibār*), not merely a legal injunction. Allah SWT had created the same raw materials (dates and grapes) demonstrates His wisdom by enabling two different outcomes: beneficial products such as vinegar, juice, and dried dates (*rizq ḥasan*), or harmful ones such as wine (*sakar*). This interpretation manifests divine wisdom in guiding humanity to recognize the dual potential within creation and to use intellect to choose what is good (al-Qurṭubī, 1964)

Ibn al-Munḍir also connects this verse to *al-Baqarah* 2:219 and *al-Mā'idah* 5:90–91, revealing a continuum of Quranic pedagogy that progresses from social awareness (“in them is benefit and sin”) to moral awareness (“their avoidance is better”) and finally to legal prohibition. This approach reflects the philosophy of Islamic education that cultivates understanding through awareness and reflection before enforcing law training the intellect prior to establishing command.

The reasoning here evolves from description and resonance to the sphere of *hikmah* and ethics that inform practical conduct. Within the framework of the Prophetic Dietary ethic, the message of this verse aligns with the Prophet's saying: “*Ni'ma al-idām al-khall*” (“The best condiment is vinegar”). Both emphasize moderation, gratitude, and self-restraint in consumption. Vinegar produced from a substance that can also yield wine embodies moral transformation: from potential harm to benefit, from intoxicating fermentation to purifying refinement. It symbolizes the purification of intellect and soul; just as wine transforms into vinegar, so too the human *nafs* can be refined when governed by intellect and faith. Hence, this verse transcends a mere distinction between lawful and unlawful. It instructs humanity to use reason as a moral compass in evaluating divine blessings every gift can become mercy or harm depending on intention and use.

Accordingly, the Inquisitive Semantic Stage of 16:67 reveals three principal insights:

1. Ethical awareness of blessing utilization - choosing what is good and avoiding what is harmful.
2. Theological and reflective awareness (*i'tibār*) - acknowledging God's wisdom and sovereignty in every creation.
3. Spiritual and moral equilibrium - recognizing that every blessing, like vinegar (*al-khall*), can serve as a means of purification for both mind and soul.

In essence, the inquisitive approach to *al-Nahl* 16:67 not only addresses the question of “why” behind the contrast between *sakar* and *rizq ḥasan* but also unveils the Quranic philosophy of dietary ethics grounded in balance, gratitude, and self-discipline. The verse exemplifies a moral transformation from a substance with

intoxicating potential to one that nourishes and purifies symbolizing the cleansing of intellect and restraint of desire. This analytical approach, therefore, discloses the wisdom (*hikmah*), ethics, and moral intellect of revelation, affirming that the preservation of reason (*hifz al-‘aql*) and the cultured use of blessings form the foundation of human well-being (physical, intellectual, and spiritual alike).

Data 2: Ni‘ma al-idām al-khall

- Script-Level Stage

The second dataset is drawn from the following Prophetic report:

حَدَّثَنِي عَبْدُ اللَّهِ بْنُ عَبْدِ الرَّحْمَنِ الدَّارِمِيُّ. أَخْبَرَنَا يَحْيَى ابْنُ حَسَانَ. أَخْبَرَنَا سَلِيمَانُ ابْنُ بِلَالٍ عَنْ هِشَامِ بْنِ عُرْوَةَ، عَنْ أَبِيهِ، عَنْ عَائِشَ؛ إِنَّ النَّبِيَّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ: نَعْمُ الْأَدَمُ، أَوْ الْإِدَامُ، الْخَلُّ ((رواه مسلم))
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Aisyah reported Rasulallah (SAW) as said: The best of condiments or condiment is vinegar.

Hadith. Imām Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj. <i>Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim</i> . Kitāb al-Ashriba, Bāb Faḍīlat al-Khall wa al-Ta‘addum bih. Juz’ 3, p. 1622, #2051a.
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The utterance “*Ni‘ma al-idām al-khall*” is selected for analysis at the script-level semantic stage to explore its explicit linguistic meaning. At this level, the analysis focuses on literal or surface meaning based on classical Arabic–Malay dictionaries and verified translations. The search for meaning at this stage is direct, involving only the explicit interpretation of the expression in which vinegar (*al-khall*) is identified as a type of side dish (*idām*) mentioned by the Prophet (SAW), without engaging with symbolic or ethical implications.

When examined at the surface level, the meaning obtained remains purely literal. It does not yet convey the deeper intent or moral significance implied by the Prophet’s statement. The literal interpretation *Ni‘ma* = “excellent,” *idām* = “side dish served with bread,” and *al-khall* = “vinegar” produces the basic translation “The best condiment is vinegar.” At this stage, the utterance remains confined to its explicit sense: a simple praise of a particular food. It does not yet reveal the ethical, pedagogical, or symbolic wisdom underlying the saying. Hence, further analytical stages are required to uncover the deeper layers of meaning embedded within this brief yet profound Prophetic utterance.

- Resonance-Level Stage

At the resonance stage, the analysis focuses on uncovering deeper meaning through the framework of Relevance Theory (RT), as outlined in Data 1 the literal interpretation merely presents a statement of praise for vinegar as a condiment. However, through resonance analysis, interpretation expands to examine why the Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) selected vinegar as an example particularly given its modest and inexpensive nature.

At this level, the inferential assumptions proposed by RT are employed to approach the ethical core of the ḥadīth. In the social context of early Arab society, *idām* (side dishes) were regarded as markers of social status, reflecting the quality and value of a meal. Against this background, the Prophet’s praise for vinegar

functions as a pedagogical device that redefines moral value, promoting humility (*qanā'ah*) and gratitude (*shukr*) toward simple provisions. By constructing inferences grounded in lived experience, social history, and Islamic moral tradition, it becomes evident that this ḥadīth does not merely acknowledge vinegar as food but conveys a moral principle that one should never belittle simple blessings, nor indulge in excess or vanity when enjoying sustenance. The inferential synthesis of these meanings within the RT framework is summarized in Table 4 below.

Table 2: Identification of Code, Inference, and Assumptions

Relevance Theory Analysis		
Data (2): Ni'ma al-idām al-khall		
Code	Inference	Assumptions
al-khall	A simple and inexpensive food	1. Appreciate even the smallest of blessings. 2. Cultivate humility (<i>qanā'ah</i>) and gratitude (<i>shukr</i>). 3. Reject extravagance (<i>isrāf</i>)

After identifying linguistic codes, developing inferences, and constructing sets of assumptions (as summarized in Table 2), the next step is to determine the most relevant assumption. This understanding derives from experiential and pre-existing knowledge of Islamic dietary principles, which emphasize moderation and gratitude for divine sustenance. Accordingly, the Prophet Muḥammad's (SAW) praise of vinegar is not confined to its taste or function as a condiment; rather, it conveys an ethical message and advocates a life of simplicity and mindful appreciation. The analysis at this stage demonstrates how context, inference, and assumption interact cohesively to unveil the deeper meaning behind the utterance transcending the limits of literal interpretation and revealing its enduring moral resonance.

- **Inquisitive Semantic Stage**

Despite the interpretive insights gained from the script-level and resonance-level analyses, the full philosophical and moral significance of the utterance "*Ni'ma al-idām al-khall*" remains to be uncovered. A deeper level of reflection is required to probe the prophetic intellect, culture, and ethical worldview embodied in the statement. At this stage, inquiry shifts from descriptive meaning to reflective reasoning, guided by the recurrent "why" questions that stimulate higher-order thinking and reveal the ḥadīth's underlying wisdom.

Why, then, did the Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) choose *al-khall* (vinegar) rather than other foods more commonly associated with luxury and social prestige? Classical commentaries provide rich intertextual responses. *Al-Nawawī*, in his *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, explains that the commendatory term *ni'ma* signifies an affirmation of vinegar's accepted culinary value as a simple yet sufficient *idām* (condiment) that complements bread. This literal appraisal aligns with modern discussions of the vinegar ḥadīth, which emphasize its practical dietary utility and relevance in daily nutrition (Sempo & Razif, 2019).

Meanwhile, Abū Sulaymān al-Khaṭṭābī - 388 AH, (1932) and al-Qāḍī 'Iyād - d. 544 AH / 1149 CE (1998) emphasized the pedagogical dimension of the Prophet's praise. The saying inculcates *qanā'ah* (con-

tentment) and acceptance of what is available, while discouraging excessive pursuit of luxury that undermines both spiritual and physical well-being. Thus, the statement “*The best condiment is vinegar*” functions on two interrelated levels:

1. A literal commendation of vinegar as a wholesome and beneficial food; and
2. A moral and pedagogical indication that “the best” provision is not an absolute ranking but whatever sustenance is received with gratitude, moderation, and sincerity of heart (Yurika & Riyani, 2021).

From a philological-juristic perspective, al-Munāwī in *Fayḍ al-Qadīr* noted that *ni‘ma* functions as a verb of praise, while *idām* refers broadly to any accompaniment to bread. The definite article *al-* in *al-khall* conveys a generic rather than particular reference. He further highlighted vinegar’s health benefits, including its balancing effect on excess bile (*ṣafrā’*), thereby justifying its suitability as a simple condiment that “completes” a meal (Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf al-Manāwī - d. 1031 AH / 1622 CE, 1356 AH). Al-Munāwī also transmitted supplementary reports, such as the use of *sakanjabīn* (a vinegar–honey mixture) known among physicians, and references to vinegar being the staple condiment in the Prophet’s Muhammad SAW household after his passing. These narrations, while sometimes weak in transmission, broaden the socio-medical horizon, functioning as cultural background rather than as binding legal proofs.

On a socio-cultural plane, early Arab society often regarded condiments as status markers. The Prophet’s Muhammad SAW deliberate choice of vinegar a readily available, inexpensive, and “lowly” food operates rhetorically to redirect taste, discipline desire, and normalise moderation as an ethic of dining. In this sense, *al-khall* becomes a value-signifier, denoting ethical orientations such as gratitude, *qanā‘ah*, and rejection of *isrāf* (extravagance). This moral horizon is further reinforced by contemporary halal-science discourse, where debates on *tahawwul* (substantial transformation) and ethanol levels in fermentation distinguish between lawful and unlawful vinegar (Harahap et al., 2020).

From the perspective of Islamic dietary philosophy, the Prophet’s praise of an ordinary food such as vinegar may be understood as a subtle affirmation of the principle of equity in sustenance that what appears insignificant in human eyes can hold great value in the sight of Allah when perceived through the lens of gratitude. Hence, the meaning of the utterance “*Ni‘ma al-idām al-khall*” can be explored to the level of philosophical and ethical consciousness within the Islamic worldview. It aligns with the prophetic objective of cultivating the human soul to appreciate simplicity, reject excessive luxury, and internalize spiritual mindfulness in everyday life.

Data 3: “Bad Character Corrupts Deeds”

- **Script-Level Semantics**

The third dataset is derived from the following Prophetic report:

وَأَنَّ سُوءَ الْخُلُقِ لَيُفْسِدُ الْعَمَلَ كَمَا يُفْسِدُ الْخَلُّ الْعَسَلَ ((خلاصة حكم المحدث : صحيح))
“Indeed, bad character corrupts deeds just as vinegar spoils honey”
Hadith. al-Albānī, Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn. <i>Silsilah al-Aḥādīth al-Ṣaḥīḥah wa Shay’un min Fiqihā wa Fawā’idihā</i> . Juz’ 2: p.575. #906.

At the script-level semantic stage, each lexical item within the expression “corrupts deeds” (*yufsidu al-‘amal*) is identified using authoritative Arabic linguistic references, such as Hans Wehr’s *Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*. In the Inquisitive Semantic Approach, this stage constitutes the most basic level of analysis, focusing solely on the surface or literal meaning before engaging with deeper interpretive layers.

This level of analysis demonstrates that the literal meaning is easily accessible, as the linguistic elements of this report have direct semantic connections to the previous datasets (particularly *al-khall*, “vinegar”). However, in the script level is regarded as the foundational tier limited to explicit description without exploring the implicit moral, spiritual, or philosophical implications of the utterance. The literal findings at this level are summarized in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Literal Meanings of “Bad Character Corrupts Deeds”

Data	Expression	Word	Literal Meaning
3	<i>yufsidu al-‘amal</i>	<i>yufsidu</i>	to spoil, to ruin, to destroy
		<i>al-‘amal</i>	action, deed, work
		<i>al-khall</i>	vinegar, acidic substance
		<i>al-‘asal</i>	honey, sweetness, something precious/valuable

The combined expression therefore reads: “Bad character can corrupt one’s deeds, just as the sourness of vinegar destroys the sweetness of honey.”

Although the literal sense of the words can be clearly determined, this stage of analysis still falls short of capturing the full import of the ḥadīth. The literal reading merely presents a comparison between vinegar and honey, without yet uncovering the moral and philosophical implications intended by the Prophet Muhammad SAW. Consequently, the analysis must proceed to the subsequent stages in order to excavate the deeper ethical and spiritual meanings embedded within the text.

- **Resonance-Level Stage**

At the resonance stage, this analysis connects the ḥadīth’s semantic content with the cognitive knowledge shared between speaker and listener. The contextual activation here extends beyond the literal meanings of “vinegar” and “honey” to encompass the human experiential schema already associated with these substances: honey connotes sweetness, value, and nourishment, while vinegar evokes sourness, sharpness, and the potential to spoil sweetness when combined.

This background knowledge resides in human cognitive memory. an intuitive understanding that something valuable, like honey, can lose its goodness when mixed with a corrosive element such as vinegar. Through this associative process, the resonance stage generates the cognitive effects anticipated by Relevance Theory, linking the phrase “*corruption of deeds*” to the moral reality that negative traits such as arrogance, anger, and envy erode the value of righteous actions, even when those actions are originally pure and virtuous.

Thus, the resonance-level analysis reveals that this ḥadīth does more than compare two food substances; it employs a familiar sensory metaphor to cultivate deeper ethical cognition. The imagery of taste sweetness turning sour translates an abstract moral warning into a tangible, embodied experience accessible to every believer.

Table 4: Identification of Code, Inference, and Assumptions

Data	Code	Inference	Set of Assumptions
3	<i>Corruption of deeds</i>	Bad character can destroy the value of virtuous acts.	1. Good deeds lose their spiritual worth when accompanied by immoral traits. 2. The metaphor of vinegar spoiling honey reflects how <i>akhlāq madhmūmah</i> (vices such as ego, anger, and envy) weaken the blessing (<i>barakah</i>) of righteous actions.

Following the identification of linguistic codes, inferential construction, and the establishment of assumption sets as shown in Table 4, the next step is to determine the most relevant assumption for uncovering the deeper meaning of this ḥadīth.

Based on the interpretive discussion, two primary assumptions emerge:

1. Even righteous deeds lose their spiritual worth when tainted by bad character.
2. Vices such as arrogance, envy, and anger (*sū' al-khuluq*) can nullify the blessing (*barakah*) and reward of good deeds.

This understanding arises from established Islamic ethical knowledge, which teaches the value of a deed is not measured solely by its outward form but also by the inward qualities that accompany it sincerity (*ikhhlāṣ*), moral conduct (*akhlāq*), and righteous intention (*niyyah*). This interpretation is further supported by classical sources in *tafsīr*, *sharḥ*, and *ḥadīth* literature.

The ḥadīth “Evil character corrupts deeds just as vinegar spoils honey” is recorded by *al-Suyūṭī* in *al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḡhīr* (no. 4722) and corroborated by *al-Ḥārith ibn Abī Usāmah*, *al-Ḥākim*, *Abū Nu'aym*, and *al-Daylamī*. Although many of its transmission chains are classified as weak (*ḍa'īf*), commentators such as *al-Munāwī* in *Fayḍ al-Qadīr* (vol. 4, p. 113) affirm that the intended meaning of “*yufsidu al-'amal*” (corrupts deeds) refers to *iḥbāt* (the nullification of reward). In other words, a good deed polluted by poor character ceases to yield spiritual merit.

Al-‘Askarī further elucidates this metaphor with a concrete example: a person who gives charity yet reproaches or hurts the recipient’s feelings loses the merit of that act. This interpretation echoes the Quranic warning: “O you who believe! Do not render void your charities by reminders of your generosity or by injury to the feelings of the recipient)”

(al-Quran. al-Baqarah 2:264)

Intertextual evidence from both the Qur’ān and the Sunnah reinforces the central message of this ḥadīth: acts of devotion must be accompanied by noble character in order to be accepted. Commentaries by al-Munāwī and others concur that the phrase “*yufsidu al-‘amal*” in this context refers to the nullification of reward or the loss of the spiritual benefit of a deed, rather than the legal invalidation of the act in jurisprudential terms. As al-Munāwī explains:

“The term corruption (*fasād*), as in the aforementioned weak report, is used to mean the nullification of reward and the disappearance of its benefit.” He further added: “Bad character corrupts deeds just as vinegar spoils honey, meaning it rebounds upon the doer with nullification of reward; such as one who gives charity but follows it with reproach and injury.”

(*al-Manāwī, al-Taysīr bi-sharḥ al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaghīr, 2/61*).

Therefore, corruption (*fasād*) in this context is best understood as *iḥbāt al-‘amal* (the nullification of a deed’s reward). Nevertheless, scholars of Ahl al-Sunnah caution that, as a matter of principle, no sin other than unbelief (*kufr*) annuls all of a person’s good deeds. Bad character is indeed a sin, but it only effaces the reward of particular acts or renders them spiritually worthless before God; it does not invalidate every deed wholesale. As Ibn Taymiyyah rahimatullah states:

(Deeds are not nullified except by unbelief; for whoever dies upon faith will inevitably enter Paradise and will depart from the Fire if he enters it. Were all his deeds to be nullified, he would never enter Paradise at all. Deeds are only nullified by that which contradicts them, and nothing contradicts righteous deeds absolutely except unbelief. This is well known among the principles of Ahl al-Sunnah.)

(Ibn Taymiyyah, *al-Ṣārim al-Maslūl, 2/114*)

In conclusion, although this ḥadīth is weak (*da‘īf*) in its isnād, it nonetheless functions within the register of *targhīb wa tarhīb*, it exhorts the purification of character to safeguard the reward of one’s deeds while issuing a stern warning about the spiritual consequences of bad character that can erode the value of deeds before Allah SWT.

Within the framework of Relevance Theory (RT), the hadith’s message is readily intelligible to readers. At the script-semantic tier, its literal meaning is transparent; at the resonance tier, the parable is mapped onto familiar experience sweetness (righteous deeds) loses its value when adulterated by sourness (bad character). These findings further indicate that the contextual effects activated by plausible assumptions are achieved at a low cognitive processing cost. Respondents readily aligned the report with their prior religious knowledge concerning the primacy of virtuous character in preserving deeds.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding these demonstrated cognitive gains, a third tier of analysis remains necessary in the Inquisitive Semantics approach namely, the inquisitive-semantic tier to probe more deeply the ḥadīth's intended philosophical and spiritual import.

- **Inquisitive Semantic Stage**

The analysis at this stage reveals the philosophical and moral intellect of Islam embodied in the sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad (SAW). The literal and resonance levels alone are insufficient to convey the ḥadīth's true intent. At this point, interpretation becomes interdisciplinary, engaging deeper inquiry that connects the ḥadīth with the domains of Islamic ethics, psychology, and moral education.

At this stage, the repeated questions of “why, why, and why” guide the reflection. For instance: Why did the Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) use the metaphor of vinegar and honey? Why is bad character compared to something that spoils sweetness by its very nature? Why does the corruption of deeds stem from moral defects rather than from other causes?

From the perspective of Islamic moral philosophy, this ḥadīth signifies that righteous deeds are not judged solely by their external form; rather, their inner quality determines their true worth. A good deed is likened to honey (sweet and valuable) while immoral traits such as arrogance, anger, envy, or malice are compared to vinegar, which can ruin all its sweetness. Here, the Prophet's wisdom is evident in his use of familiar food imagery from everyday Arab life to convey a profound spiritual concept.

This is also affirmed in another authentic ḥadīth narrated by Aḥmad, al-Ḥākim, Ibn Ḥibbān, and al-Bayhaqī. Abū Hurayrah reported that a man once said, “O Messenger of Allah, there is a woman known for her many prayers, fasting, and charity, but she harms her neighbor with her tongue.” The Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) replied, “She is in Hell.” The man then asked, “Another woman performs few prayers, fasts, and gives little charity, but she gives pieces of dried cheese (*al-athwār min al-aqīṭ*) in charity and does not harm her neighbor.” The Prophet (SAW) said, “She is in Paradise.” (*Ṣaḥīḥ*, authenticated by al-Albānī; *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 9675).

This ḥadīth demonstrates that the true measure of goodness does not lie in the quantity of ritual worship but in the quality of one's character. The first woman's abundant acts of devotion lost their worth before Allah because she harmed her neighbor, whereas the second woman, though performing fewer acts of worship, was honored with Paradise for her noble conduct. As al-Qārī explains in *al-Mirqāt*, the foundation of religion rests upon fulfilling obligations and avoiding prohibitions; performing numerous supererogatory acts while neglecting moral restraint only leads to loss.

Within Islamic moral philosophy, this principle accords with the views of scholars such as al-Ghazālī, who asserted that the outward form of worship constitutes its body, while sincerity and character form its soul. Without this spiritual essence, worship becomes an empty shell devoid of value *al-Ghazālī* (1937). Thus, the saying “there is no good in a woman who prays often but harms her neighbor with her tongue” conveys a profound moral philosophy: that *substance* takes precedence over *form* that character is more fundamental than the mere outward performance of rituals.

From psychological and sociological perspectives, the meaning of this ḥadīth can be related to role theory (Parsons, 1942; George, 1990). Immoral behavior not only tarnishes a person's self-image but also undermines the social function of their good deeds. Virtuous character acts as the safeguard of deeds, while bad character is a destructive element that nullifies the moral efficacy of actions both in society's eyes and before God.

As noted by Jalaluddin (2014a), the inquisitive approach seeks to uncover the hidden meanings behind expressions. Hence, this ḥadīth answers the question of why good deeds are not always accepted it depends on the moral integrity underlying them. For instance, one who gives charity but does so with pride or ostentation spoils the act itself, for the "vinegar" of bad character has corrupted the "honey" of their deed.

In conclusion, the inquisitive semantic analysis highlights that this ḥadīth embodies a profound philosophy of spiritual education: righteous deeds must be preserved through good character. Without ethical integrity, actions lose both their spiritual value and divine blessing. The analysis thus reveals a deep connection between the outward and inward dimensions of faith, affirming that in Islam, character is the essential core that safeguards the integrity of deeds.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to uncover how the quran and sunnah transform simple, every foods like vineger into tools of moral reflection and spiritual education. The analysis of verse 67 in surah *Nahl* and two hadiths revealed that food in revelation is never merely physical but it is a language of ethics teaches moderation, gratitude and moral awareness. Using the Inquisitive Semantics framework, illustrate how human beings are called to use reason and restraint in transforming natural gifts into moral choices. These findings remind us Quranic discourse connects nourishment with responsibility. Going forward, this semantic-ethical approach could be extended to other quranic and prophetic references, opening new pathways for understanding islamic perspective on health, sustainability and spiritual well-being. Ultimately, this study reaffirms is islam, eating is not only an act of sustenance but an act of meaning one that refines the soul and nurtures balance in both body and spirit.

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