DRINKING CRISIS? CHANGE AND CONTINUITY
IN CULTURES OF DRINKING IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a brief historical survey of drinking cultures in Africa, from the nineteenth century to the present. It questions the notion of a pre-colonial past of harmonious ‘integrated’ drinking, and suggests that while there has been substantial change in drinking cultures there are also substantial continuities, notably in ideas of temperance. Striking features of change have been the introduction of large-scale commercial production – which has brought increasingly globalized marketing strategies to Africa; the commoditization of ‘traditional’ beverages; and the growth in consumption of spirits, often produced on an artisanal basis by illicit small-scale distillers. The last decade has also seen the increasing diversion of non-beverage industrial spirits into beverage use. The paper argues that there is no clear evidence of an overall ‘drinking crisis’ affecting the whole of Africa, and that it is not safe to assume that modern drinking is necessarily worse than pre-colonial drinking. But the paper also notes that there are substantial gaps in our knowledge of current drinking cultures in Africa, and that there is clear evidence of ‘risky’ drinking in several parts of Africa. This may not be a completely new phenomenon, but it does present public health challenges.

KEY WORDS: Alcohol, Africa, history, culture

INTRODUCTION

In the past [alcohol] was drunk peacefully ... In the past they drank at home or in a group ... but today it is brought in cars from Buyaga, it is brought to town, people drink there, even if it is not a bar. You can even go to the store and put a straw and start to drink and, in the time you have taken to come here, one is already drunk. Now another thing is that they buy from bars even if you want a bottle or a whole jerrican. And they bring it to the village and we sit from morning and start drinking till next day; and women and children have started drinking.†

Many children do not like farming and instead go to drink beer. This has made people not care about dying, or working like we did, because of beer. If you tell him to work, he is rude.‡

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† Interview with Jospeh Kiiza, Katasiiliha, Uganda, 19 Feb. 1998
‡ Interview with Paul Samuel Mwandembwa, Mpuguso, Tanzania, 10 Feb. 1997
Why I am saying the devil has spread is because nowadays they are drinking beer and when they drink, they are unbalanced, those of the devil. This one we are drinking nowadays is for the devil, that is why I am saying it has changed. Long ago we were drinking clean beer. §

Such dramatic accounts of a modern crisis of drinking are easy enough to elicit in Africa: people readily assert that current consumption of alcohol is greater, and more disorderly, than it once was. Media reports too make much of the problem of drinking: drinking by the wrong kind of people, of the wrong kinds of thing, at the wrong time. ‘Alcoholism has a firm grip on the country’s productive generation’, reported a Kenyan newspaper recently; ‘One in every eight people who drinks alcohol in the country drifts into alcoholism and becomes addicted . . . Alcohol consumption is no longer restricted to senior age-groups or to restricted occasions’.” In less sensational terms, some academic studies have also argued that drinking in sub-Saharan Africa has become increasingly socially problematic, in some societies at least; a phenomenon that is directly connected to the increasing commoditization of beverages, as a result of which ‘traditional sanctions restricting consumption to moderate levels apparently cease to operate effectively’ (Carlson, 1992: 56; idem., 1989; Colson and Scudder, 1988). Even Deborah Bryceson’s recent synthesis, while avoiding any simple picture of crisis, has argued for a change in drinking patterns towards a modern culture in which drinking is defined ‘overwhelmingly by income’ (Bryceson, 2002a: 45).

Whether alcohol consumption per capita has increased in sub-Saharan Africa in recent years is a moot point. The bulk of production and consumption in most of the continent is unrecorded, and this is a field for small surveys and large extrapolations: most of the commentary is entirely impressionistic (Willis, 2002). While scholars writing on Cameroon confidently assert that ‘The consumption and the production of alcohol are likely to have increased by about 400% during the last 20 years’ they offer no evidence to substantiate this; neither does the historian who reports that ‘a characteristic feature of alcohol policy in Namibia during the last two decades has been the rapid increase in the consumption of alcohol beverages’ [sic] (Yguel, 1990, p. 114; Siiskonen, 1994). Such arguments seem to rest simply on the assumption that ‘drinking patterns are going to change with development and sophistication with tendency towards increased consumption of alcohol’ (Acuda, 1985, p. 125).

Nor is there consistent evidence on the larger question of whether drinking really has ‘got worse’ in a public health sense. Some of the most alarming-sounding survey evidence seems methodologically unreliable (NACADA, 2004); and while there is a substantial body of much better-grounded work which identifies significant health issues, there is really no compelling statistical evidence of the increasing ‘riskiness’ of drinking across the continent, though there may be good reason to suspect this in particular instances (Riley and Marshall, 1999; Room et al., 2002). Journalistic assertions about alcoholism aside, the notion of increasing drinking problems draws on two rather different approaches. On the one hand, medical and other professional commentators comment on the apparent prevalence of

** Is drinking now the curse of Kenyans? Daily Nation, 12 October 2005.
‘risky drinking’: patterns of alcohol consumption which in themselves are a physiological threat to health, or are associated with kinds of behaviour which endanger the well-being of the individual and ‘the continuing erosion of family and community life’ (Parry and Bennetts, 1998, p. 7). On the other hand, there are critiques rooted in local cultural values which identify some kinds of consumption as problematic because they challenge established local ideas of propriety and order. In practice these disparate strands of discourse on the nature of intemperance often overlap – as in Albert Moukolo’s suggestion that modern drinking is problematic because of the ‘quasi-absence of norms’ (Moukolo, 1990, p. 130). But the very existence of these local notions of temperance hints at the extent to which there has actually been substantial cultural continuity in some aspects of alcohol consumption in Africa.

This article will suggest that any generalized picture of a continental drinking crisis is probably over-simplified, and that modern drinking patterns are not simply defined by wealth. But it suggests also that there is some clear evidence of ‘risky drinking’ in a public health sense, and that Africa’s recent past has seen the fragmentation of drinking cultures, and the development of new drinking cultures, so that these increasingly overlap geographically and socially. It is this fragmentation which has ensured increasing debate, and uncertainty over temperance, within African societies. That is, Africa does face some new alcohol-related challenges; but the intensity of the debate over alcohol is more generally a reflection of wider moral debates.

The term ‘drinking culture’ is used here in the way that Juha Partanen suggested the term, to describe a set of ideas about proper drinking which is directly associated with wider ideas about propriety, status and authority (Partanen, 1991). This is somewhat in the sense that Bryceson has suggested the term ‘drinking modality’, but with the implication that such cultures are rather more multiple than are her ‘modalities’ (Bryceson, 2002a). Members of a particular community may be aware of more than one drinking culture, and the practice of drinking may anyway challenge the norm. But it is consistently the case that people express ideas about proper drinking which reflect and reinforce particular ideas about proper behaviour more widely: ‘the ceremonials of drinking construct an ideal world’, as Mary Douglas put it (Douglas, 1987, p. 8). The fragmentation of these cultures is not, however, simply a symptom of a grand social disjuncture. Some of these drinking cultures exhibit substantial continuity from earlier notions of proper drinking; others are innovative, in some cases self-consciously so, overtly challenging older ideas of temperance and the patterns of age and gender authority which were associated with these.

**DRINKING IN MERRIE AFRICA?**

Popular arguments on modern drinking have offered a contrast (often explicit) with the halcyon days of pre-colonial Africa, when drinking was unproblematic. Some academic work has accepted this romantic image of a harmonious drinking past (Parry and Bennetts, 1998); though such work risks falling into the genre of romantic and profoundly ahistorical idealizations of a precolonial African past which have been derided as the ‘Merrie Africa’ school. But some recent scholarship – inspired in part by Robin Room’s seminal attack on the idea of drinking in preindustrial societies as unproblematic – has increasingly
questioned this vision of ‘integrated drinking’, and has argued that even before colonial rule, African societies saw debates on drinking and the idea of temperance (Ambler, 1987; Akyeampong, 1996; Room, 1984). Drinking was not simply ‘functional’; people argued over ideas of temperance, some broke the rules which others tried to set on drinking, and cautionary tales about the dangers of the wrong kind of drinking were woven into oral culture (see for example Stanley, 1988). In view of the frequency with which a past of ideal drinking is evoked, it is worth briefly discussing the evidence for a rather more complex pre-colonial history of drinking.

It is customary to preface generalizations about Africa with a cautionary comment on how difficult it is to generalize for such a large and diverse continent. This is, of course, true; but there are some useful general points which may be made about alcohol in pre-colonial Africa. Almost all of the alcohol consumed was locally made, through artisanal production, and it was almost all in a state of continuing fermentation. The material for fermentation came from a range of sources: malted grains (usually varieties of millet), the sap of some palm trees, sugar cane, honey, and fruit were all used. The labour processes and technology were relatively simple, which allowed almost anyone to make alcoholic beverages and set clear limits on the size of any one batch of liquor. When combined with the substantial difficulties of communication across most of the continent, this small-scale production of live liquor meant that most alcohol was consumed very close to its point of production, and that where commerce in alcohol did exist, this was local, and on a limited scale (Willis, 2002). The only partial exception to this was in West and West-central Africa and Cape Colony, where imported spirits had become available with the growth of commerce – especially the slave trade – with Europe. Elsewhere, distillates were almost completely unknown in sub-Saharan Africa before the later nineteenth century.

Several distinct contexts for drinking can be identified in pre-colonial societies right across the continent. Crucially, these were very largely not commercial: alcoholic beverages were generally not made to sell, nor purchased for consumption. Alcohol was widely drunk – and poured – in ritual performances: Eileen Krige’s description of Lobedu society in the early 1930s – ‘in almost all religious rites beer is essential’ – might be applied to many African societies in the nineteenth century (Krige, 1932). This applied to both rites of passage, which marked stages in the life of individuals in society, and what one might call rituals of intercession, which involved some form of communication with ultra-human agencies which were believed to affect well-being (Akyeampong, 1997; Willis, 2002). These might be the spirits of dead ancestors, or the tutelary spirits of particular cults. Such use of alcohol could turn into a sort of extended theatre, as with the rite to appease a possessory spirit observed by the traveller Joseph Thompson in the 1870s: ‘they required to use the most powerful charms they could think of, namely beer, dancing and music. They had now kept this process going on for about twenty-four hours’ (Thomson, 1968). Alcohol was also consumed in the dramatic performance of political power. The king and other prominent men of the Asante drank extravagantly, letting the palm wine flow down their beards in a casual flaunting of excess; they plied their guests with drink; and on grand occasions they quite literally poured out drink for the populace, who were expected to become more drunk than their rulers
Zulu warriors were given beer to make them ‘hard’ (McAllister, 1993). And alcohol was consumed in daily life, in the seasonal round of agricultural and domestic work: beer was supplied to work parties of neighbours and kin who came together to cultivate, harvest or build; beer was drunk by neighbours whenever someone had made it.

There was, then, a good deal of drinking. Accounts differ as to the consequence of this. Richard Burton, a rather jaundiced mid-nineteenth century observer, painted a picture of general and constant intoxication in what is now central Tanzania. The men are idle and debauched, spending their days in unbroken crapulence and drunkenness, whilst the girls and women hoe the fields, and the boys tend the flocks and herds. They mix honey with their pombe, or beer, and each man provides entertainment for his neighbours in turn. After midday it would be difficult to throughout the country to find a chief without the thick voice, fiery eyes and moidered manners, which prove that he is either drinking or drunk (Burton, 1961, p. 309).

Frederick Lugard, observing Ugandan society a few decades later, was less disparaging in his comments on the ubiquity of drink:

The people are very much addicted to the banana wine (pombe). Even on the march a man carries a kitoma with a tube in it, and sucks; when talking, he sucks at intervals. He sucks, apparently, ‘from early morn till dewy eve’ . . . The liquor, however, appears to be very harmless, and I have not seen anyone visibly the worse for drink, or boisterous and quarrelsome (Lugard, 1968, p. 367)

Another European commented of Uganda that ‘I have never seen drunken men here as I have in Europe’ (Schweinfurth, 1888, pp. 76-77). Such differences no doubt result partly from the differing prejudices and preconceptions of the observers – how else can one reconcile Lugard’s account with the roughly contemporaneous one from a missionary who wrote of the ‘constant drivelling inebriation’ of people in Uganda, and the ‘cantankerous, quarrelsome’ behaviour that resulted (Purvis, 1909, p. 340)? But it is also no doubt true that there was great variation in drinking practice between different African societies, and that within one society different contexts might be associated with different cultures of drinking. In Asante, the pouring of a few libatory drops to the ancestors, a routine practice in quotidian drinking, reflected an ideal of drinking which implicitly asserted the social power of elder men – dead, as well as living – whose good will was necessary to well-being. But the tumultuous drinking encouraged by the king and the behaviour of his inebriate retinue, asserted rather the primacy of his authority, over elder men and all (Bowdich, 1966).

Similar conflicts may be discerned in inter-lacustrine East Africa in the nineteenth century, where kings rewarded with drink the young warriors who ensured their power over older men (Willis, 2002). More widely, the ritual use of drink by older men – pouring libations to ancestors, or blessing young initiands – were features of many societies, and ideals of quotidian drinking often revolved around the notion that drink, and the maintenance of societal well-being, were a matter for the older men who headed households, not for women or young men; it was the drinking of such men which lay...
at the heart of what Robert Carlson has called the ‘symbolic mediating’ performed by liquor (Carlson, 1992). It was said of Maasai society in the late nineteenth century that ‘A very fiery spirit, made from fermented honey, is drunk only by the elders, who periodically get intoxicated. The warriors are never allowed even to smell this’ (Hinde and Hinde, 1901, pp. 45-6). Temperance was not a matter of quantity, or time, of drinking: it was defined by gender and generation (Willis, 2002). Even the beer-party for workers was about authority, as well as neighbourly reciprocity: women and younger men did the work, but the elder and wealthier men might claim the lions’ share of the drinking (Speke, 1967).


But actual practice in daily life may have sometimes have questioned these lessons. Even if we take with a large pinch of salt the accounts of widespread bacchanalia offered by travellers such as Burton (and his companion, Speke, who wrote that ‘Pombe [beer]-brewing, the chief occupation of the women, is as regular here as the revolution of day and night, and the drinking of it just as constant’), there is evidence that women and younger men did drink (Speke, 1967).

And in societies where there was some centralized authority, drinking at the palace followed quite different patterns: there it was young men and women – some of them captives, others voluntary additions to the royal following – who drank. And it was they whom the king could use to dispossess, and kill, recalcitrant heads of household. There may have been a widespread culture of drinking which asserted that alcohol was the prerogative of older men; but drinking practice could and did challenge this, as alternative cultures of drinking emerged (Ambler, 1987: 13; Akyeampong, 1996).

**MONEY AND TOWNS**

Money and towns were among the dramatic consequences of colonialism in Africa. Not that either was entirely novel: there had been systems of currency in operation in parts of the continent for a long time, and substantial urban settlements had existed in many places too. But both money and towns became much more common during and after colonial rule; and the role of alien political and economic forces in both ensured that cash transactions and town life offered ready opportunity for cultural challenge and innovation. The vision of the town as a place of immorality where young men and women stepped outside the bounds of proper behaviour in their pursuit of money may be stereotypical; but it reflects an important dynamic of twentieth century Africa.

In West Africa, the ability of the young to earn money – through wage labour, or by selling cash-crops – had already by around 1900 created societal tensions between young and old which found expression in arguments over the drinking habits of the young while in East Africa, Monica Wilson’s classic study of south-western Tanzania showed how wage employment there allowed younger men to earn money and challenge the authority – and the near-monopoly on beer-drinking – of their elders (Akyeampong, 1996; Wilson, 1977). And there is ample evidence from across the continent of the disquiet caused to men by women who began to sell for money the grain beer which they brewed. Instead of being supplied to the household head in acknowledgement of his dominance, beer became a source of independent income for women – though
it was not always very lucrative, and men too could and did deal in various types of locally-made alcohol (Beidelman, 1971; Willis, 2002). Drinking in Africa’s rapidly growing towns was largely commercial from the start; drink was given and consumed not as part of patterns of reciprocity and obligation which ran through society, but in return for money. The location for quotidian drinking became not the household of neighbours but some specialized drinking place – a licensed beershop, or an illegal drinking den. The novelty of such arrangements allowed cultural challenge. In some places it was the presence of both men and women in the same drinking place that was the challenge; elsewhere there was innovatory mixing of old and young in drinking events.

Even as commercialization created new cultures of drinking, colonial authorities anxious to control Africans living in the town legislated to enforce novel – indeed, alien – ideas of temperance. There could be a gender element to the colonial state’s ideas of temperance, with women being forbidden to make or possess liquor in towns; and there was some age element to it, too, as alcohol was forbidden to those under sixteen, or eighteen years of age. But in other aspects, these ideas of temperance were absolutely innovatory. Race was central to this; particularly in British colonial territories, the law distinguished categorically between kinds of beverage which Africans could drink and those which Europeans could drink. The imposition of controls on where liquor might be sold and drunk, and the hours at which this might take place, were also quite new; as was the creation of licensing system (or rather, usually, two systems, one for ‘native liquor’ and the other for the ‘intoxicating liquor’ drunk by Europeans (and Asians). The licensing systems worked quite separately, following different procedures and with different requirements regarding the times and places at which sale was legal, but each required sellers of liquor to obtain some sort of permit or licence. Such attempts at control were inspired partly by colonial anxiety about the disorderly tendencies of drunken subjects, but there was also an economic concern: drink disrupted the labour supply, making people unfit for work, and drink-selling offered a ready income to urban ‘undesirables’ who employers thought should really be working for a wage. Over time, licensing systems spread from the towns and out into rural areas, so that the legal framework of the colonial state came to apply to drinking everywhere (Willis, 2002).

There was a good deal of popular resistance to such laws, and indeed in some places they proved extremely difficult to enforce; unlicensed brewing and selling, often by women, was common, and so too was consumption off premises, and outside hours. In South Africa, in particular, this issue came to play a central role in the long struggle between the majority African population and the white-dominated state; and state control here reached its most striking physical form, in the creation of the municipal beer halls, in which urban local authorities sold industrially produced ‘traditional liquor’ to African drinkers penned into wire cages (Ambler and Crush, 1992).

But the struggle could be complex. Attempts at controls on urban drinking sometimes commanded a degree of popular support; and the steady growth in the sale – rather than the giving or exchange – of liquor was as disquieting to many of the colonial states’ subjects as it was to their white rulers. Some might resent youthful drinking, or the alleged
profits reaped by women brewers; others drew on the spreading influence of Islam or of evangelical Protestantism to condemn all kinds of alcohol (Akyeampong, 1996). Advocates of this latter idea of temperance were perhaps more socially radical than the youthful drinkers of the towns; as Paul Landau has observed of Botswana, temperance crusades could be ‘acts of feminine resistance’ against the dominance of male household heads (Landau, 1995). And the teetotaller could use abstinence as a justification for stepping out of the multiple obligations to kin and neighbours which were entailed in the constant round of giving and receiving drinks (Parkin, 1972). In South Africa, the distinction between the ‘red’ people and the ‘school’ people – between those who self-consciously adhered to tradition and those who embraced literacy and education – was clearly marked through attitudes to drink (Mayer, 1961). Political radicalism and temperance developed a link which was to endure into the 1970s, when militant youth in Soweto bewailed their fathers’ drunken subservience to the apartheid state.

In South Africa, and in most other parts of Anglophone Africa, African subjects of the colonial state who rejected locally made grain beer, palm wine or other such beverages could find no legal alternative: all kinds of ‘European’ liquor – even bottled beer – were forbidden by law to Africans in these territories through most of the colonial period (Pan, 1975; Willis, 2002). In French and Belgian territories, bottled beer and wine could be bought by the tiny minority of Africans who could afford them. Such prohibition was the consequence of the colonial anxiety to enforce distance between ruler and subject, and of the notion of paternal trusteeship which legitimized colonial rule to its practitioners: Africans were children, unable as yet to cope with the white man’s liquor. Unsurprisingly, such discrimination turned European liquor into a high-status consumption item; the high price of these heavily-taxed beverages gave them rather the same status even where they were legally available to Africans. While some of Africa’s emerging new educated elite were teetotal, using abstinence as a badge of status, others touted bottled beer as a mark of their wealth and respectability; here it was the substance consumed, as much as the place and time of drinking, or the age and gender of the drinker, which informed the culture of drinking.

**INDEPENDENT SPIRITS**

By 1950, changes in the law had made bottled beer legally available to most Africans; but in large parts of the continent spirits were still permitted only to a favoured few Africans until the later 1950s. The colonial fear that Africans were simply unready to drink such potent liquor was an enduring one, enshrined in the system of treaties which underlay the European colonial presence and so powerful that in much of sub-Saharan African distillation for European consumption was also forbidden, lest spirits escape the distillery – with the exception of some Portuguese and Italian territories, all spirits consumed by Europeans in colonial Africa were imported, and taxed heavily to discourage illegal supply to Africans. The corollary of these restrictions was a willingness to allow spirits as a mark of favour to those who were considered most ‘civilised’ – the kabaka, or king, of Buganda, for example.

More widely, however, people helped themselves to spirits. Local distillation was illegal, but it became widespread, and the
circumstances of its emergence played a defining role in the drinking culture which emerged around it. The practice had been almost unknown in nineteenth-century sub-Saharan Africa, but under colonial rule knowledge of distilling techniques spread quickly: the techniques of small-scale, ‘artisanal’ production, using simple stills to distil twenty of so litres at a time, were relatively easy to master. Imported spirits had already possessed a certain cachet before the colonial – because they were marks of involvement in a commerce with the wider world, it was the wealthy and powerful who had best access to them. Colonial restrictions and taxes emphasised this association – spirits were the drink of colonial rulers, and their favoured allies. Illicit distillation spread most quickly among those who were associated with the new politics and economics brought by colonialism, but not wealthy or important enough to be given access to imported spirits: soldiers, policemen, the chiefs who formed the lowest layers of the administrative system. By the 1930s, illicit distillation was sufficiently common in British West Africa to force reconsideration of attempts to tighten restrictions on imported spirits there, which had always been a little looser than those in eastern and southern Africa: colonial officials feared locally-distilled spirits even more than imported liquor. Locally-produced spirits were alleged to be particularly impure, indeed poisonous; and widespread involvement in illicit production and consumption was believed to be undermining respect for the law more generally (Akyeampong, 1996; Willis, 2001).

**POST-COLONIAL DRINKING**

By the end of the 1950s, in the last years of colonial rule, such concerns had led states across the continent to entirely abandon racial legislation on drinking, and as a new African political and economic elite took control of the states created by colonial rule, official attitudes to drink changed markedly: the subjects of the post-colonial state were positively encouraged to drink bottled beer, or branded spirits, rather than the fermented drinks or illicit spirits produced in backyards and bush distilleries (Willis, 2002). Where ‘European’ liquor had been seen as too potent for African consumption, now it was officially encouraged. Until around 1960, the liquor industry’s interest in African had been modest, because of the racial restrictions; but a rough alliance was formed – more successful in some places than others – between international liquor capital and Africa’s new states. In the 1970s, a wave of nationalisations threatened the workings of this alliance, and the effectiveness of the industry, but the economic liberalization of the 1990s reversed this, and over the last fifteen years the major international liquor companies have consolidated their African interests, and their relationships with African states (Bryceson, 2002).

Breweries and distilleries have provided investment, a rather small number of jobs and a good source of tax revenue, and they have provided the kinds of drink which colonial experience and postcolonial practice had taught all to regard as modern, superior and safe. Most independent states have maintained the legal distinction between ‘native liquor’ (now more decorously, if not always accurately, called ‘traditional liquor’) and the kinds of drink produced by big breweries and distilleries, and distinct systems of licensing helped maintain a clear cultural separation between these beverages – they were (and are) drunk in different places, at different times, and often by different sorts of people. Not all postcolonial governments went so far as
Kenya, which sought to largely ban ‘traditional’ liquor (Haugerud, 1995). But most have maintained a legal ban on artisanal distillation, and the public practice of the political and economic elite has consistently favoured bottled beer and branded spirits; helping to create new kinds of drinking culture. The most successful drink in members’ clubs, or hotels, or in their homes, and prefer imported wines or spirits; this is a culture which celebrates achievement in politics and/or business, and fits into a wider consumption pattern which emphasises clothing, cars and other goods which are mostly imported (Partanen, 1991). More widely there is a drinking culture in which bottled beer is central, and which is to some extent ‘national’ in each African state (with the idea of bottled beer as a national drink playing an important part in advertising) but which also shows some similarity across the continent (Bryceson, 2002). This is a drinking culture which is associated with men in salaried jobs or in business, the advertising of which often stresses both maleness and nationality, and it is located in the urban bar or in clubs which are much less exclusive than those of the elite; the irony of the rhetorical celebration of the ‘national’ through drinking a product which is increasingly transnational is only occasionally noted (for advertising see Mager, 2005; Willis, 2002; for drinking as a male activity see Rocha-Silva, 1991). Like the elite culture, the bottled beer culture is one which celebrates consumption as a demonstration of wealth, and which values the ability to ‘hold one’s drink’.

There have been experiments with the industrial production of a kind of ‘traditional’ grain beer, which grew out of the colonial schemes for municipal beerhalls, and in southern Africa in particular these have had some success; there were also one or two unsuccessful attempts at collecting and marketing artisanal spirits (Haggblade, 1992; Willis, 2002). But more generally, state and capital have looked askance at the alcoholic beverages produced in what is now called the ‘informal sector’. Such hostility has not, however, succeeded in suppressing such production, or the alternative drinking cultures which exist alongside it, partly because of the widespread venality of petty officials in the post-colonial state but also because popular feeling would make enforcement impossible anyway. In much of sub-Saharan Africa (South Africa being a partial exception), the unwaged – that is, most people – cannot afford to participate regularly in the ‘national’ culture of bottled beer, much less the elite world of whisky and clubs (Yguel, 1990; Rocha-Silva, 1991; Rocha-Silva, 1998). Instead they drink locally-made informal sector fermented or distilled beverages, many of them produced in innovative ways with novel ingredients (tea leaves, dried bakers’ yeast, processed sugar) (Maula, 1997). Whether urban or rural, such drinking is now very largely commercial: drink is made to sell (Green, 1999; Maula, 1997; Nelson, 1982; Nelson, 1997; Pietila, 2002; Saul, 1981).

Such commercial, unrecorded, drinking does not all take place within a single drinking culture. Local notions of propriety vary – in some places, the mingling of men and women at drinking places is seen as unproblematic; in others, public drinking is largely a male preserve, and ‘relative tipsiness is tolerated in men but not in women’ (Partanen, 1991; Ngokwey, 1987). Where the state lays a relatively light regulatory hand on such beverages, the places where they are consumed are more likely to be a very public part of any community; where regulation is close or
prohibitory drinking may not be diminished, but it is definitely more covert. Such commercial drinking continues to be an important part of life, and to be associated with sociability. Some choose to reject this sociability, and the social obligations which it implies. There is no absolute correlation between abstinence and Islam or evangelical Protestantism, but there is a very strong association, and religious belief provides a ready means to explain a refusal to share drinking sociability (Partanen, 1990; Luning, 2002; van Dijk, 2002).

There is a strong emphasis on sociability in the cultures of drinking around fermented beverages: drinking in groups, with systems of sharing or rotating the cost, is common. This kind of drinking group can also be found, especially among men, in the drinking of bottled beer, though it exists in a sort of tension with the element of individual status display and conspicuous consumption associated with bottled beer. Sociability is a prized aspect of drinking; that drink encourages talk and openness is widely considered to be desirable.

This emphasis on the beneficial consequences of alcohol on sociability is also apparent in the continued role of alcohol in a number of ritual performances; as Suzette Heald’s research in the 1960s suggested, the selling of locally-made liquor did not mean that liquor immediately lost its ritual role (Heald, 1989). Ritual is an area where Christianity and Islam have had particular impact: the combination of ‘pagan’ practices and locally-made alcohol has attracted particular censure from local authorities, and in some societies rituals of intercession, and the use of alcohol in these, have substantially declined or disappeared (Sangree, 1966; Omori, 1978). But drink is still often a feature of weddings, funerals and other events which mark change in personal status; the social prestige attached to bottled beer has meant that this has generally become the preferred beverage for such events, but for those who cannot afford bottled beer, ‘informal sector’ drinks may still be used (Omori, 1978).

And alcoholic beverages of various kinds may still also feature in rituals of intercession in some societies: men on the Kenya coast still spill drops of palm wine to please their ancestors before they drink; libations are still poured in Asante society, too (McCaskie, 2000). Even though it is true of Maasai society, in East Africa, that ‘access [to liquor]which used to be qualified by age seniority is increasingly mediated by monetary ability’ (Kituyi, 1990, p. 67), this does not mean that, among the Maasai or elsewhere in Africa, liquor has entirely lost its ritual role or its association with the power of elder men. New cultures of drinking have developed; and older ones have been adapted to changing circumstances. This has not always been an easy or consensual process, and there are problematic aspects to the newer cultures of drinking. But this is not just the rise of ‘drinking for drinking’s sake’ to replace an older ‘integrated’ drinking, as Colson and Scudder have argued (Colson and Scudder, 1988). There has not been a complete moral collapse around drinking, and it is interesting that while survey data on South Africa (one of the few remotely reliable datasets on this topic) suggest that ‘risky’ drinking may be common in townships and informal settlements, it also indicated that more generally men around the age of 40-50 were the principal drinkers, a pattern which would have fitted comfortably with older notions of temperance (Parry and Bennetts, 1998; Rocha-Silva, 1998). The causal link between the sale of ‘traditional’ liquor and the decline of an
older social order has been repeatedly argued, perhaps most memorably by one of Monica Wilson’s informants in Tanzania: ‘What brings disrespect is beer; formerly the young did not drink beer, but now they come with their own money and buy and drink. Beer brings pride’ (Wilson, 1977, p. 93). But the very use of that argument is a reminder of the durability of the model of temperance – and of elder men’s authority – which it implies.

More individualized cultures of drinking have tended to develop around spirits. Consumption of spirits has continued to be seen as an assertion of status and sophistication (Rocha-Silva, 1991), though not all can afford to do this in the same way; while a political and business elite drink imported Johnny Walker in their clubs, the less wealthy consume locally-distilled spirits, which are in most parts of Africa still illegal. Perhaps partly because of its generally covert nature, this drinking seems usually to be less concerned with sociability, and less likely to involve sharing and group arrangements. It is perhaps around these cultures of drinking that forms of ‘risky drinking’ are most likely to develop. Emmanuel Akyeampong has suggested of Ghana that, faced with the overwhelming multiple challenges of life in modern Africa, many individuals have taken solitary refuge in drinking spirits as a way of surrendering responsibility – they would rather be seen as victims of drink than as social and economic failures (Akyeampong, 1995). Margrethe Silberschmidt has made a somewhat similar argument of western Kenya, identifying, arguing that socially destructive patterns of drinking among men are the result of socio-economic pressures on men (though she does not consider the actual culture of drinking in any detail) (Silberschmidt, 1990).

More widely, the individualized culture of spirit-drinking has allowed the development of practices which pose a direct risk to public health (Room et al., 2002). In the late 1970s, a study of the ‘high prevalence of alcoholism’ in western Kenya identified spirits drinking as the most problematic kind of consumption and – while there are methodological questions regarding that particular research – this does seem to be an area for wider concern (Otieno, 1979). Problematic drinking styles are compounded by issues around the quality of the beverages involved. There have long been questions about the safety of artisanal distillation, though on the whole, the evidence has not shown that there are any consistent dangers associated with this. But there is an increasingly common practice of adulteration, rather than distillation – with various kinds of industrial alcohol being diverted to beverage purposes. This is particularly likely in situations where consumers who have grown accustomed to bottled beer or branded spirits find themselves faced with economic problems which leave them unable to afford these drinks. It would seem to be this which has led to several serious poisoning incidents in Kenya in recent years (Willis, 2003); and to similar events in Madagascar and Sudan.

CONCLUSION

There is much continuity and in cultures of drinking in Africa, and some of the debates over drink overstate the degree of change and social disruption in drinking – the more dramatic statements about drinking decline today seem very similar to those offered fifty years ago (Nsimbi, 1956). One might anyway question whether drinking in Africa was ever really ‘integrated’ in the way that some classic anthropological works have described it (Netting, 1964). But while
there is no need to assume an ideal drinking past, there is no doubt that certain kinds of drink, and of ‘risky’ drinking, have become more prevalent in some parts of Africa in recent years. The challenge for policy makers and public health professionals is to address these real problems, rather than to assume that the modern world inevitably brings a wholesale ‘drinking crisis’.

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