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1987

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IN PRECOLONIAL AFRICA**

By Charles H. Ambler

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1987

**Working Papers in
African Studies
No. 126**

African Studies Center
Boston University
270 Bay State Road
Boston, MA 02215

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By Charles H. Ambler

Alcohol has for centuries played a prominent role in the social and religious life of African societies south of the Sahara. As early as the eleventh century A.D., Al-Bakri described offerings of alcoholic drinks in royal funeral rites in the kingdom of Ghana.¹ Indeed, from other scattered references it is clear that alcohol pervaded the continent, and that the consumption, exchange, or offering of alcoholic beverages was often a central element in the ritual life of communities. Before the latter part of the nineteenth century, distillation was largely unknown and imported distilled drinks were confined to a few areas; but virtually every community produced one or more types of fermented drinks from grain, fruits, honey, palm sap or sugar cane.²

Consumption of these beers commonly accompanied celebrations of season and passage, legal deliberations, and meetings of elders; gifts of beer were made to prospective in-laws, to patrons and rulers, and to honored guests; and the pouring of libations mediated relations with gods and ancestors. Yet despite an upsurge of interest in the social history of alcohol in Europe and America, Africanist scholars have paid the topic little attention.³ Moreover, the work that has been done is concerned with the relatively recent past and has focused very largely on attempts by the state - notably in South Africa - to regulate production and consumption.⁴

In Search of a History of Alcohol

As one would expect, the analysis of alcohol use has figured more prominently in the anthropological literature. Ethnographies commonly include information on alcohol, and a number of articles have looked directly at the role of alcoholic beverages in particular societies. These commentaries are remarkably consistent in outlook: African beers are described as drinks of low alcoholic content and high nutritional value that function - on both actual and symbolic levels - as lubricants for highly integrated social systems.

In the first scholarly study of alcohol use in an African society, a 1932 examination of "The Social Significance of Beer among the Balobedu" people of

¹N. Levtzion, *Ancient Ghana and Mali* (London, 1973), 26.

²S. Haggblade, "A History of Indigenous Beers in Sub-Saharan Africa," paper presented at the conference on "New Themes in African Colonial History," Michigan State University, April 1984.

³A wide range of articles will appear in R. Room and S. Barrows, eds., *The Social History of Drinking* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, forthcoming).

⁴The outstanding contributions are R. Dumett, "The Social Impact of the European Liquor Trade on the Akan of Ghana (Gold Coast and Asante), 1875-1910," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 5 (1974), 69-101; and Charles Van Onselen's essay, "Randlords and Rotgut," in his *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand, 1886-1914* (New York, 1982), 44-102. Also, see Lynn Pan, *Alcohol in Colonial Africa* (Helsinki, 1975).

northern Transvaal, E. Krige catalogued the myriad uses of alcohol in that society. According to Krige, "While beer plays an important part in the economic and social life of the people, it can be said to dominate their whole religion. In almost all religious rites beer is essential."⁵ Walter Sangree's work on drink in western Kenya during the 1950s and Robert Netting's on the Kofyar of northern Nigeria during the same period extended Krige's analysis, emphasizing the role that beer drinks could play in reinforcing community solidarity and elder hierarchy. Both argued that despite very substantial levels of consumption and frequent inebriation, drinking did not constitute a social "problem" - on the contrary.⁶ In a more recent examination of Iteso in western Kenya, Ivan Karp argued along similar lines that beer-drinking and inebriation could provide an opportunity for the expression of grievances and disagreements - within strictly observed limits.⁷

While these authors made no claims for their studies as works of history, they do purport to describe deeply entrenched - "traditional" - social relationships and patterns of behavior, in societies that are relatively isolated and self-sufficient. Indeed, Netting quite explicitly characterized his article as an examination of "primitive drinking."⁸ Clearly, their emphases on the integrative role of alcohol use emerged not only out of the structuralist and functionalist traditions of the discipline, but as well from the striking contrast that drinking in rural societies offered to the seemingly flagrant and destructive abuse of alcohol that is such a part of the urban scene in Africa and elsewhere.⁹ Thus, this anthropological perspective has lent weight and sophistication to the nineteenth-century humanitarian view that the advance of European economic and political power into African societies was gradually disrupting controlled - and fundamentally benign - indigenous patterns of alcohol use.¹⁰

This essential interpretation continues to dominate discussion of the history of alcohol in Africa, limited though it may be. It is plainly the view in B. Hutchinson's relatively crude study of "Alcoholism as a Contributing Factor in Social Disorganization: The South African Bantu in the Nineteenth Century."¹¹

⁵Eileen J. Krige, "The Social Significance of Beer among the Balobedu," *Bantu Studies*, 6 (1932), 6-21.

⁶Walter Sangree, "The Social Functions of Beer Drinking in Bantu Tiriki," in *Society, Culture and Drinking Patterns*, ed. by D. Pittman and C. Snyder (New York, 1962), 6-21; and Netting, "Beer as a Locus of Value among the West African Kofyar," *American Anthropologist*, 66 (1964): 375-384.

⁷"Beer Drinking and Social Experience in an African Society: An Essay in Formal Sociology," in *Explorations in African Systems of Thought*, ed. by I. Karp and Charles Bird (Bloomington, Indiana, 1980), 83-119.

⁸Netting, "Beer as a Locus of Value."

⁹Sangree, personal communication. But note that in *The African Beer Gardens of Bulawayo* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1974) H. Wolcott has made a case for "integrated" drinking in urban Zimbabwe during the 1960s.

¹⁰See the numerous pamphlets and articles generated around the turn of the century by the Native Races and Liquor Traffic United Committee and other temperance propagandists.

¹¹Originally published in 1961, but most conveniently available in *Beliefs, Behaviors and Alcoholic Beverages: A Cross Cultural Survey*, ed. by M. Marshall (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1979), 328-341.

But it is scarcely less evident in Van Onselen's much more sophisticated examination of alcohol policy in the development of capitalism in Johannesburg, and in a number of works that refer peripherally to the subject.¹²

What these and other fragments of the history of alcohol reveal more than anything is the degree to which a simplistic and idealized view of the African past persists. In the assumption that the advance of capitalism, the spread of Western culture and the assertion of colonial rule destroyed a pattern of socially reinforcing "traditional" drinking is implied a neat division in African history between the modern period and a vast culturally undifferentiated and static precolonial era. At the same time, the functionalist paradigm obscures the evidence of tension and conflict in pre-colonial societies and thus confers upon ruling castes an inevitability of dominion.¹³

What we know of pre-modern African history tells us that there must be more to the alcohol story. Given the importance of alcohol in ritual life it seems likely that this story if pursued can in turn shed light on the frequently inaccessible processes of intellectual, cultural, and religious change. In this paper I want to suggest some possible lines of inquiry, confining myself essentially to the nineteenth century and focusing on the ways that alcohol may reveal conflict and change, rather than stability and order. In relating alcohol use to disorder, I have two separate meanings of that term in mind: first, the common notion of deviant, criminal or violent behavior; and second and more important, the concept - perhaps better termed "unorder" - of discontinuities, tension and conflict in the relation among individuals and groups within societies.

The Lessons of Alcohol Theory

During the last fifty years a series of attempts have been made to use ethnographic evidence to develop an explanation for alcohol's broad and enduring appeal.¹⁴ On a theoretical level these studies of "primitive drinking" have done little more than restate the prevailing thesis that the expansion of a global political economy destroyed carefully controlled drinking practices in previously isolated societies; but the cases discussed - however inadequately documented - do reveal impressive variation in the role of alcohol in different cultures.¹⁵

¹²"Randlords and Rotgut." An important - although partial - exception to this generalization is Dumett, "Social Impact of the Liquor Trade."

¹³An interesting approach to this question from a different angle is R. Law, "Human Sacrifice in Pre-Colonial West Africa," *African Affairs*, 84 (January 1985), 53-87. See also G. Stedman Jones, "Class Expression vs. Social Control? A Critique of Recent Trends in the Social History of 'Leisure'," *History Workshop*, 4 (1977), 162-170.

¹⁴The pioneering study was D. Horton, "The Functions of Alcohol in Primitive Societies," in *Alcohol, Science and Society* (New Haven, 1945).

¹⁵Subsequent studies include Peter J. Field, "Social and Psychological Correlates of Drunkenness in Primitive Tribes" (Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, 1961); C. Washburne, *Primitive Drinking: A Study in the Uses and Functions of Alcohol in Pre-literate Societies* (New York, 1961); and M. Bacon, "Alcohol Use in Tribal Societies," in *The Biology of Alcoholism*, ed. by B. Kissin and H. Begleiter (New York, 1976), vol. 4, 1-36.

Similarly, very little is yet known about the effects of alcohol beyond the fact that some conjunction of chemical and cultural factors shapes the behavior of people who have consumed alcoholic drinks.¹⁶ The common assertion that drinking alcohol causes aggressive behavior is certainly not borne out either in laboratory or field studies. Indeed, since the consumption of alcohol has been shown to reduce testosterone levels in males the reverse is more likely to be the case. Much of the behavior that is associated with drink is clearly a product of expectation - generated in culture and sub-culture.¹⁷ In their pioneering study, *Drunken Comportment: A Social Explanation*, Craig MacAndrew and Robert Edgerton have examined the ways that different societies at different times have constructed inebriation.¹⁸ In particular they show how the loss of control associated with drunkenness often occurs in specific situations within carefully defined limits.

Their conclusions open up the reports of drunkenness found in descriptions of African societies to more complex interpretation, although as William Taylor has pointed out it is often difficult to decipher accounts that have been filtered through European expectations of the effects of alcohol.¹⁹ A British officer involved in the subjugation of northern Gikuyuland in Kenya recorded the following account of conflict with a local leader:²⁰

Last night Kenuthia had a [beer] party and about 11 p.m. he and his guests started shouting rude remarks at us and firing arrows into the station, but they all had balls at the points. Nobody was hurt.

In these circumstances drunkenness permitted people to express their angry opposition to the British invasion without subjecting themselves to a disastrous violent confrontation. In quite different circumstances, Brodie Cruickshank's description of the celebrations that accompanied the harvest and remembrance of the dead in the mid-nineteenth century Gold Coast illustrate how within Fante society drinking could lead to very different types of behavior depending upon the situation:

During such extraordinary scenes of total abandonment of a whole people, to what may be called religious joy, . . . it is not perhaps to be wondered at, that the day does not close without

¹⁶An excellent recent synthesis for a general audience is Jack Mendelson and Nancy Mello, *Alcohol: Its Use and Abuse in America* (Boston, 1985). Also, see the monograph series issued by the National Institute of Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse (NIAAA).

¹⁷Mendelson and Mello, *Alcohol*, 181-187.

¹⁸(Chicago, 1969).

¹⁹William Taylor, *Drinking, Homicide and Rebellion in Colonial Mexican Villages* (Stanford, 1979). Taylor especially makes the point that European definitions of moderation differed radically from those of native Americans.

²⁰R. Meinertzhagen, *Kenya Diary, 1902-1906* (London, 1957), 17, also 32.

indications of very general inebriety. It is rare, however, to hear of any quarrels during their excesses upon this occasion; good-will everywhere prevails . . . This avoidance of strife is so different to their conduct on ordinary occasions of festivity, that we cannot help attributing it to a sense of the religious nature of this festival.²¹

The complexity and diversity of nineteenth-century African societies was played out in substantial variations in the values and behavior associated with alcohol. Even a cursory survey reveals important differences in the kinds of drinks, in the organization of production, and in the patterns of consumption. The continent was divided roughly between those areas that drank mostly palm wine and those that consumed beers made from grains or bananas.²² While this division was to a substantial extent ecologically determined, it was nevertheless significant.

Beers made from grain were closely identified with food, and in many cases these drinks were thick, filling, and nutritious. According to a missionary doctor in Zululand during the mid-nineteenth century, "The natives speak of beer as food - and of eating it, and appeasing hunger by it."²³ When asked if there were any laws preventing drinking locally produced beer, the Zulu king, Cetshwayo responded, "That is the food of the Zulus."²⁴ Since the ingestion of food, for example the solids in grain beers, has been shown to slow the absorption of alcohol into the bloodstream, the claim of many observers that these drinks were only slightly inebriating may have had some basis in fact. At the same time the identification of alcoholic drinks as food presumably shaped expectations of their power - both in their ritual and psychoactive dimensions.

In contrast, palm wine had a relatively thin consistency and thus would probably have had a faster and more concentrated inebriating effect. Moreover, these wines were produced from sap collected from wild palms, not from a cultivated crop like millet, maize or bananas that was clearly a food. This distinction may help to explain why people along the West African coast, where palm wine predominated, seem to have accommodated the introduction of spirits more easily than southern African people, used to drinking grain beers.²⁵ It seems, also, that grain beers were employed ritually much as were food and livestock; while palm wine (and later spirits) seem to have been accorded active magical properties.

²¹Cruickshank, *Eighteen Years on the Gold Coast of Africa* (London, 1966 [1853]), 224-225.

²²See A. Seckirchner, "Der Alkohol in Afrika," in *Atlas Africanus*, vol. 8, ed. by L. Frobenius and R. von Wilm (Berlin, 1931).

²³H. Callaway, *The Religious System of the Amazulu* (London, 1884), 389 fn.

²⁴C. de B. Webb and J. B. Wright, eds, *Cettiwayo, King of Zululand: A Zulu King Speaks* (Pietermaritzburg, reprint, 1978), 91.

²⁵Contrast Hutchinson, "Alcoholism as a Contributing Factor," with Dumett, "The Social Impact of the Liquor Trade." However, Hutchinson accepts the hysterical commentaries on South African drinking rather uncritically.

Many areas did not produce only a single type of drink but several, made from different ingredients, of varying strengths, for separate groups of people or occasions. In central Kenya for example, the staple alcoholic beverage was made from sugar cane, but a drink made from honey was much more highly valued for its taste and power.²⁶ Southern African societies produced a number of beers that varied in flavor and strength depending upon the grain or fruit used and the process of fermentation. Weak drinks were often brewed for consumption by women and children, while the most potent were reserved for special occasions and sometimes excluded from judicial deliberations.²⁷ There was also wide variation in regulations regarding who could drink, where, and how much. Not surprisingly, men and women ordinarily drank separately; but the idea that women should only drink sparingly was by no means general. This is the description, from a local person, of marriage celebrations in Zululand:

When they have finished dancing, the girls go into the huts and are given much beer to drink, so that they get drunk. . . . The girls are not given much beer before they have finished dancing, for it is said they would become intoxicated and be overcome by the beer, so that they might not be able to dance well.²⁸

Equally striking are the differences from area to area in the organization of the various tasks involved in the production of beers and palm wine. The common assumption that women were the brewers in Africa is simply not true. Women apparently did prepare most beer in southern Africa; but in central Kenya it was young men who prepared sugar cane beer, palm wine was often produced by men, and in parts of Uganda both men and women were involved in brewing banana beer.²⁹ Of course the simple documentation of these variations only proves what we already know: that Africa encompassed a great cultural diversity.

The real issue is how this evidence of difference can be mined to illuminate larger questions. Certainly the fact that a substance so important and powerful as alcohol is produced by females or by males, or is usually distributed according to a certain pattern, and consumed in a particular way can be of more than antiquarian interest. For example, the anthropologist Gerhard Lindblom was told by people in Upare, northern Tanganyika, that they preferred to avoid beer drinks in the nearby colony of migrant Kamba-speakers because "such festivities always ended up in quarreling."³⁰ While such attitudes may have reflected a

²⁶C. Ambler, "Drunks, Brewers and Chiefs: Alcohol Prohibition in Colonial Kenya," in Room and Barrows, *Social History of Drinking*.

²⁷Krige, "Beer Among the Balobedu," 344-347.

²⁸Max Kohler, *Marriage Customs in Southern Natal* (Pretoria, 1933), 18.

²⁹David Parkin, *Palms, Wine and Witnesses* (San Francisco, 1972), 10-11; L. Mair, *An African People in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1934), 105; and Ambler, "Drunks, Brewers and Chiefs."

³⁰Gerhard Lindblom, *Kamba Folklore*, vol. 3, Archives d'etudes orientales, vol. 20 (Uppsala, 1934; field work pre-1910).

contemptuous hostility toward strangers, it may also be evidence that the local Kamba-speakers had developed a "Kamba" style of drinking to maintain their identity, in much the way that Nancy Lurie has described in her interpretation of American Indian drinking.³¹

Alcohol Discourse

In the scattered literature on alcohol in African societies the consumption of indigenous drinks in "traditional" settings is almost invariably described in positive terms. The low alcoholic content of these drinks, their high food value, the necessary seasonality of brewing, and the substantial time and labor required in their production supposedly ensured the absence of excessive and destructive drinking.³² In Robert Netting's exemplary view of Kofyar society in Nigeria, drinking remained strictly controlled and never in any sense constituted a problem despite the pervasive presence of beer and substantial levels of consumption.³³ Before this century African societies had apparently not developed the deep ambivalence that has long characterized Western attitudes toward drink.³⁴ While in pre-nineteenth-century Europe alcohol was viewed as natural and essentially healthful, there was a strong tradition of the dangers of drunkenness. In contrast, a considerable body of evidence suggests that in African societies drunkenness was largely harmless and excited little concern; it is this evidence that has reinforced the notion that drinking in Africa was strictly limited and essentially functional.

Travelers who visited both West and southern Africa during the nineteenth century, and who commented repeatedly on what they saw as drunken excess in coastal areas, often either made little mention of the use of alcohol in the interior or noted the relatively restrained character of drinking.³⁵ According to a missionary's assessment of alcohol use in Baganda during the 1890s,

Beer drinking was common, and many chiefs and peasants spent a large portion of their time, when not at war, or actively engaged upon business, in talking and drinking from

³¹Nancy Lurie, "The World's Oldest On-Going Protest Demonstration: North American Indian Drinking Patterns," *Pacific Historical Review*, 40 (1971), 311-332.

³²This argument is concisely stated in J. Penvenne, "A History of African Labor in Lourenço Marques" (Ph.D. thesis, Boston University, 1982), 130, although she goes on to suggest that alcohol abuse nevertheless existed.

³³Netting, "Drinking as a Locus of Value," 25.

³⁴See the forthcoming study of the roots of American temperance by Joel Bernard.

³⁵For example, see R. Hallet, ed., *The Niger Journals of Richard and John Lander* (New York, 1965 [1832]); and Francis Owen, *Diary, 1837-1838*, ed. by G. Corey (Cape Town, 1926).

morning until night. Still, there was not much of what we should call excessive drinking, and men, when they became the worse for drink, went to sleep until the effects passed off.³⁶

A missionary in Malawi about the same time commented along similar lines: "Heavy drinking (of local beer), however, does not bring the ill effects that brandy drunkenness would entail."³⁷ Likewise, American missionary visitors to Mzilikazi in the 1830s noted that his people "use freely as an article of food, beer, which they make from their corn, and which is exhilarating in its effects."³⁸

However, if one moves beneath the surface of such declarations the picture of alcohol's qualities is clouded by reservations. In proverbs, folk-tales and in accounts of drinking there is considerable evidence that alcohol was believed to have a dangerous edge. For example, a story from Kilimanjaro, relates how the steady consumption of beer escalated a casual debate between two chiefs into a bitter and violent confrontation while a proverb from central Kenya warned youths that if they drank they would make poor warriors.³⁹ Even more telling are the substantial number of accounts that describe the violent outcomes of drinking bouts. In Ngonde beer feasts occasionally ended in spear fights; likewise, the same missionary who noted the relative lack of potency of the local beer in Ngoni also claimed that general village drinking parties were the source of "nearly all quarrels, adultery, bloodshed, and every outburst of passion."⁴⁰

The Landers' description of drinking in the Onitsha area of Igbo country in 1830, while perhaps exaggerated, certainly does not convey a sense of carefully structured drinking practices:

All ranks of people here are passionately fond of palm-wine and drink of it to excess whenever they have an opportunity, which often occurs, as great quantities of it are produced in the town and its neighbourhood. It is a very general and favourite custom with them, as soon as the sun goes down, to hold large meetings and form parties . . . to talk over the events of the day, and make merry with this exciting beverage. These assemblies are kept up until after midnight; and as the

³⁶John Roscoe, *The Baganda: An Account of Their Native Customs and Beliefs* (London, 1966 [1911]), 24.

³⁷D. Fraser, "The Zulu of Nyasaland: Their Manners and Customs," *Proceedings of the Philosophical Society of Glasgow*, 32 (1901), 70.

³⁸Letter dated 18 August 1836 in D. Kotze, *Letters of the American Missionaries, 1835-1838* (Cape Town, 1950), 102.

³⁹C. Dundas, *Kilimanjaro and Its People* (London, 1924), 318-319; Ambler, "Drunks, Brewers and Chiefs."

⁴⁰D. R. Mackenzie, *The Spirit-Ridden Konde* (London, 1924), 35; and Fraser, "Zulu of Nyasaland," 70.

revelers generally contrive to get inebriated very soon after they sit down to drink, the greatest part of the evening is devoted to wrangling and fighting, . . . and occasionally the most fearful noises that it is possible for the mind to conceive. Bloodshed and even murder, it is said, not unfrequently terminate these boisterous and savage entertainments.⁴¹

In more restrained prose Samuel Crowther almost thirty years later recorded his impression that in the same general area excessive drinking had made a number of chiefs unreliable and ineffective.⁴²

In southern Africa, both Moshweshwe (in Lesotho) and Khama (in Botswana) displayed considerable antipathy not only to spirits, but to locally brewed beers as well. Khama went to the extreme of prohibiting local beer, claiming that his father had never permitted any of his sons to drink.⁴³ While Moshweshwe banned spirits, he confined himself to denouncing beer drinking as a "pernicious habit," claiming that he preferred not to drink and that his own father had abstained.⁴⁴ When Moshweshwe contrasted his own sobriety with the "crude, noisy, undisciplined" behavior of his subjects when they were drinking, he pointed to the way that the alcohol issue played into the tensions that emerged out of his struggle to build a centralized state. According to the Sotho king, "a good Chief and Judge cannot claim to be competent to execute his duties, if he makes use of anything of an intoxicating nature."⁴⁵ A similar notion that alcohol clouded judgment comes through in the Asantehene Osei Bonsu's postponement of a meeting on the grounds that he had drunk "more than fitted him to hear great palavers."⁴⁶

Osei Bonsu's concern may be partly explained by the spread of Muslim influence into the Asante capital and court. The gradual advance of Islam in west Africa and the dramatic success of revitalization movements in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries led not only to decline in the use of alcohol among converts, but a broader re-evaluation of the meaning of drink. Perhaps more than any other outward aspect of behavior abstinence symbolized adherence to Islam.⁴⁷ In 1867 when Kabaka Mutesa of Buganda, came under the

⁴¹Hallet, *Niger Journal*, 257.

⁴²Samuel Crowther and John Taylor, *Gospel on the Banks of the Niger: Journals and Notices of the Native Missionaries Accompanying the Niger Expedition of 1857-1859* (London, 1968 [1859]), 392, 416.

⁴³C. H. Lyall, ed., *Twenty Years in Khama's Country and Pioneering among the Batauna of Lake Ngami, Told in the Letters of the Rev. J. D. Hepburn* (London, 1895), 140, 151.

⁴⁴David Robinson and Douglas Smith, *Sources of the African Past* (New York, 1979), 54, 68.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 68.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 169.

⁴⁷N. Levtzion, *Muslim Chiefs in West Africa*, (Oxford, 1968) 81.

sway of Muslim advisers, he began to fast during Ramadan and stopped drinking; and even when he later backed off from the Muslim party, he apparently continued to abstain.⁴⁸

In the interior of West Africa, visitors' descriptions of the absence or nature of alcohol rituals suggest some of the contours of Islam's frontiers. In 1830 when the Lander brothers traveled along the Niger River in present-day western Nigeria they repeatedly moved in and out of the realm of abstinence. In the larger towns local leaders offered them kola, but in smaller villages the travelers received gifts of beer as well. In the areas beyond the direct authority of the *jihad* states, local rulers frequently employed Muslim advisers but do not seem to have rejected alcohol.⁴⁹ There is evidence, nonetheless, that alcoholic drinks were coming to be seen as less of a positive good. When the brothers visited Busa, they attended a speech delivered by the ruler, described by the Landers as a non-Muslim who had a number of Muslim retainers. The speaker first assured his listeners of the stability of the state and its relations with its neighbors. "He then exhorted his hearers to attend to the cultivation of the soil, to work diligently, and live temperately; and concluded with an injunction for them all to be abstemious in the use of beer. He declared that too much indulgence in it was the source of much evil and wretchedness, and the cause of most of the quarrels and disturbances that had taken place in the city."⁵⁰

There is some evidence that the problems with beer-drinking ran deeper than the time wasted and violence inspired by drinking parties. Certainly, if consumption was as regular and substantial as some commentaries suggest, alcohol users could not have escaped physiological damage.⁵¹ Moreover, it is not unlikely that the diversion of produce and labor into alcohol production had grave nutritional consequences. It is asserted that beer was itself a food and argued that beer parties may have served a useful redistributive function during times of scarcity, but this view warrants reexamination. In central and southern Africa, at least, large plots and substantial labor were given over to grains that were used exclusively in beer brewing - land and labor that might have gone into building up stores of surplus food.⁵² Even if beer was nutritious, the preparation of three or four gourds still required enough grain to provide a week's worth of food.⁵³

Samuel Crowther reported that while beer flowed freely in Onitsha through much of the year, food was in very short supply near harvest time: "One must starve at Onitsha, or pay an enormous sum in cowries for a trifle at the

⁴⁸Robinson and Smith, *Sources*, 88; and A. Oded, *Islam in Uganda: Islamization Through a Centralized State in Pre-Colonial Africa* (Jerusalem, 1974), 76.

⁴⁹Hallet, *Niger Journal*, 138, 152 fn., 154, 191.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 160.

⁵¹This point is drawn from Robin Room, "Alcohol and Ethnography: A Case of Problem Deflation?" *Current Anthropology*, 25 (1984), 172.

⁵²Mackenzie, *Konde*, 129.

⁵³A. I. Richards and E. Widdowson, "A Dietary Study in North-Eastern Rhodesia," *Africa*, 9 (1936), 173.

time of want."⁵⁴ While it is true that beer was very commonly distributed by richer men to those poorer, these offerings were frequently made as rewards for work. The result was a cycle in which those richer men who possessed the labor and materials to produce beer were able to attract additional labor for the task of clearing and planting their own fields and thus building up their own stocks of food. Indeed, the frequent brewing of beer was widely held to be a potent symbol of wealth and status.⁵⁵

Alcohol, Wealth and Power

The argument that the production and consumption of indigenous beers was strictly limited by seasonal constraints and by the labor resources of households ultimately turns on an assumption that African societies were isolated, politically fragmented, self-sufficient and largely undifferentiated. This, of course, was not the case. Even in the smallest scale societies, those who brewed beer - often women or younger men - consumed a relatively small portion of what they produced. It was male elders by and large who commanded the production of beer, and those elders who were wealthier and possessed greater labor resources could have beer in greater amounts, more often.⁵⁶ Healers and chiefs could demand alcohol as payment and tribute. Nineteenth-century travelers' accounts describe time and again the offerings of pots of beer or palm wine that visitors received from their local hosts.

Given the amount of time required for the production of beer - often a week or more - it is clear that these local leaders must have had substantial supplies of alcohol on hand most of the time. In Chagga society on Kilimanjaro, people were apparently obligated to deliver a portion of beer to the local chief any time that they brewed.⁵⁷ According to a report from the 1890s, "The natives consume it in great quantities, especially the chiefs, who are half drunk most of the time."⁵⁸ While such accounts must be considered critically, nineteenth-century travelers commented with considerable regularity on the great amounts of alcohol consumed by local leaders.⁵⁹

Larger scale states organized the collection of beer tribute much more systematically. Under Dingane the Zulu capital was daily supplied with beer

⁵⁴Crowther and Taylor, *Gospel on the Niger*, 435.

⁵⁵Carolyn Clark, "Land and Food, Women and Power in Nineteenth Century Kikuyu," *Africa*, 50 (1980), 364-365; C. Ambler, *Kenyan Communities in the Age of Imperialism* (New Haven, forthcoming), Ch. 1.

⁵⁶Josiah Tyler, *Forty Years among the Zulu* (Boston, 1891), 44; and Crowther and Taylor, *Gospel of the Niger*, 85.

⁵⁷Bruno Gutmann, "Das Recht der Dschagga [Chagga Law]," *Arbeiten Entwicklungspsychologie*, No. 7 (Munich, 1926) [Human Relations Area File], 13.

⁵⁸W. R. Abbott, "Ethnological Collections in the U.S. National Museum from Kilima-Njaro, East Africa," Report of the U.S. National Museum (Washington, 1892), 394.

⁵⁹For example, Hallet, *Niger Journal*, 264; and Crowther and Taylor, *Gospel on the Niger*, 392, 416.

carried in over considerable distances.⁶⁰ In 1837 a European visitor described how "One morning when at the great place giving the King his reading lesson, I saw coming over the ridge in single file 60 Zulu girls, each with a pot of beer on her head, they came up singing, entered the enclosure and put down their burdens."⁶¹ As D. W. Cohen has argued, the rulers of Buganda placed a very heavy tribute burden on the peasantry with demands for the production of surplus food and beer to supply their courts.⁶² In John Roscoe's description from the turn of the century, "The King had his own brewers, who resided near the royal enclosure. Every day peasants might be seen carrying large gourds of beer upon their heads, each gourd containing some three gallons . . . Both food and beer was carried from the country-estates into the capital, because it would have been impossible to supply the population any other way."⁶³

The royal court of Buganda was itself awash in beer. In the King's compound alcohol was constantly available from the beer-maker's house, which those attending court regularly visited to refresh themselves.⁶⁴ According to John Speke's record, Kabaka Mutesa was provided "constant and copious draughts from neat little gourd-cups" by ladies in waiting.⁶⁵ At the Queen Mother's court beer extracted from the countryside flowed in an apparently continual display of conspicuous consumption:

The queen and her ministers then plunged into the pombe [beer] and became uproarious, laughing with all their might. . . . A large wooden trough was placed before the queen and filled with liquor. If any was spilled the wakungu instantly fought over it The queen put her head to the trough and drank like a pig from it, and was followed by her ministers [a jester performed, music and dancing began] The queen and councillors all became uproarious. The queen began to sing, and the councillors to join in chorus; then all sang and all drank, and drank and sang, till, in their heated excitement, they turned the palace into pandemonium.⁶⁶

As descriptions of drinking patterns across the continent show, even in the humblest home the rituals of consumption taught the lessons of hierarchy. Beer or palm wine was distributed according to rank, with the provider of the

⁶⁰Owen, *Diary*, 72.

⁶¹R. B. Hully [Owen's assistant], *ibid.*, 180.

⁶²D. W. Cohen, "Food Production and Food Exchange in the Precolonial Lakes Plateau Region," in *Imperialism, Colonialism, and Hunger: East and Central Africa*, ed. by R. Rotberg (Lexington, Mass., 1983), 2-3; also A. Kagwa, *The Customs of the Baganda*, translated by E. Kalibala (New York, 1934), 88.

⁶³Roscoe, *Baganda*, 441.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 259; and Kagwa, *Customs of the Baganda*, 88.

⁶⁵John H. Speke, *Journal of the Discovery of the Sources of the Nile* (New York, 1864), 284. This account dates from before Mutesa's commitment to Islam.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 302-303.

drink often "tasting" first. In his description of the Buganda court Henry Stanley recounted a ritual in which royal officials were only permitted to drink the King's beer if their worthiness had been affirmed; those deemed unworthy were supposedly condemned to death.⁶⁷

Consumption of alcohol, however, did not always follow pattern. Certainly, women and youth were known to drink out of turn.⁶⁸ The attitudes of Moshweshwe and Khama toward beer suggest at least that they saw drinking rituals as a threat rather than a buttress to their authority. Although there is some evidence that rulers like Moshweshwe purposefully used drink to encourage the acquiescence of their subordinate chiefs, the Sotho king seems to have believed that the alcohol that flowed freely at large meetings emboldened his chiefs to challenge his position.⁶⁹ In one sense, these occasions provided subordinates an opportunity to speak their resentment of the king's authority; but in another, the demands that these men made for their "traditional" rights of expression point to serious tensions emerging in the struggle to entrench centralized authority.⁷⁰ Later in the century in Botswana, Khama's opponents used beer brewing and drinking as a rallying standard in their abortive attempt to overthrow him.⁷¹

The Commercialization of Drink

In his study of the development of the English alehouse from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, Peter Clark has described how the sale of ale from households gradually replaced home production and was in turn superseded by the establishment of businesses - the ancestors of the modern public house - devoted to the sale of drinks, and to their consumption on premises.⁷² In a world where alcohol had played vital ritual and social roles, the migration of drinking out of the home and into the market had great significance. Comparable processes certainly mark the twentieth-century history of drink in Africa; but even in the nineteenth century local markets in alcohol had begun to develop, although commercial drinking premises were mostly confined to coastal trading towns.

Nineteenth-century accounts of the Niger region from Bornu to the sea show that local grain beer and palm wine were readily available from trading women and in markets. Traveling by canoe near Busa in 1830, the Landers "saw a woman at the water's edge who had a quantity of cheap country beer for sale, and thinking it might animate the men to a little more exertion, we purchased as

⁶⁷Quoted in Robinson and Smith, *Sources*, 85.

⁶⁸Gutman, "Chagga Law," 121.

⁶⁹Leonard Thompson, personal communication. Also see Owen, *Diary*, 72-73, for the use of alcohol to promote raucous behavior in the Zulu court.

⁷⁰Robinson and Smith, *Sources*, 54.

⁷¹Lyall, *Khama's Country*, 236.

⁷²Peter Clark, *The English Alehouse: A Social History, 1200-1830* (New York, 1983).

much as they could drink."⁷³ In the 1850s traders near Eggan regularly sold beer to river travelers; and palm wine was a staple in markets near Onitsha.⁷⁴ In these circumstances beer was commonly obtained by or given to workers like canoemen, who apparently drank a great deal, often to the point of drunkenness.⁷⁵ Whether or not the fact that the substance they consumed was a market commodity influenced their attitudes toward its qualities remains to be investigated.

Outside of West Africa there were fewer signs of commercialization, although in Buganda, by the very end of the century if not before, market sellers offered small measures of beer for sale for immediate consumption.⁷⁶ The fact that imported spirits had a long history in the towns and hinterlands of Africa's western coast may partly explain the earlier commoditization of indigenous drinks in West Africa, although rum had not reached the region of Bornu and Nupe when the Landers and Crowther bought beer there.

The gradual expansion in the use of imported spirits marked the beginning of the process of the introduction of industrially produced alcoholic drinks that would accelerate rapidly during this century and especially after the Second World War. Raymond Dumett has argued that the rapid expansion of spirit consumption in the late nineteenth-century Gold Coast brought little disruption because these drinks were incorporated into the "traditional religio-cultural system."⁷⁷ He is certainly correct in arguing that the flood of spirits did not cause the human devastation that temperance advocates claimed. Rum had been an established trade good on the West African coast for centuries, and had long before entered the ritual life of coastal societies.⁷⁸

Yet there is no escaping the fact that rum or gin were different from palm wine or grain beer, and these differences continually reasserted themselves as the spirit trade pushed into the interior during the nineteenth century. While beers and palm wine were produced locally from local plants, the process through which spirits were made was essentially unknown - it was an alien substance. Not only were spirits stronger than fermented drinks, they were also much less perishable. Beers and palm wine would last no more than a few days, while gin and rum might be saved for years. As a consequence, it was not necessarily the presentation and consumption of spirits that was the emblem of high status but their very possession.

⁷³Hallet, *Niger Journal*, 138.

⁷⁴Crowther and Taylor, *Gospel on the Niger*, 78, 256.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 406; and Hallet, *Niger Journal*, 176.

⁷⁶Roscoe, *Baganda*, 454-455.

⁷⁷Dumett, "Social Impact of the Liquor Trade," 84.

⁷⁸Hallet, *Niger Journal*, 46; and Jay Coughtry, "Liquid Gold: Rhode Island Rum and the International Trade to West Africa in the Eighteenth Century," paper presented to the Western Society of Africanists, n.d. (ca. 1970).

That graves were covered with various bottles of rum and gin was not an indication of the cause of death - as temperance advocates sometimes imagined - but a sign of the wealth of the deceased.⁷⁹ By the end of the nineteenth century, cases of gin - that conveniently could be broken down into individual bottle units - had become a common currency in many areas of West Africa.⁸⁰

⁷⁹See a photograph of such a grave in Dr. and Mrs. Wilbur Crafts and Mary and Margaret Leitch, *Intoxicating Drinks and Drugs in all Lands and Times*, 10th ed. (Washington, 1909), 49.

⁸⁰G. I. Jones, "Native and Trade Currencies in Southern Nigeria during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *Africa*, 29 (1958), 52.