

Issue: 6, 2003

Australia, Alcohol and the Aborigine: Alcohol Consumption Differences Between Non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians

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ABSTRACT

While Australia was colonised by settlers with a strong dependency on alcohol and strongly established behaviours associated with its consumption, the indigenous inhabitants had no experience with this commodity. In the two centuries that followed, but especially in the brief period since alcohol became universally available to Aborigines, this situation has changed dramatically. Alcohol problems within Aboriginal society are severe. This paper investigates the similarities and differences that exist between the alcohol consumption behaviours of non-indigenous and indigenous Australians.

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Introduction

While Australians are renowned for being ardent consumers of alcohol, this reputation is generally considered in terms of the component of the population that has a European heritage. Australia's indigenous Aborigines comprise only two percent of the Australian population, and have alcohol consumption behaviours that are distinctive from those of their European-heritage counterparts. This paper explores the key differences that exist between the alcohol consumption behaviours of indigenous Aboriginal and non-indigenous Australians[1], with the intention being to provide an understanding of the ways in which these consumption behaviours reflect broader cultural and social differences between the two groups.

Non-indigenous Australians

Alcohol consumption has played a central role in social relationships since the European settlement of Australia. Freeland (1966) writes that within a day of settlement, the 750 convicts of the first fleet, under the influence of a special ration of rum, indulged in a night of feasting, drinking and debauchery unparalleled in the history of colonial settlement. This led to the colony's first legislation, the prohibition of trading in alcohol. Over the ensuing months, magistrates spent a considerable amount of their time involved with violations of this legislation. Following the removal of the prohibition in 1792, the public house became the cornerstone of the nation's social developments. Pubs usually preceded churches and often afforded the sole opportunity for public congregation. Australia's first bank, oldest existing newspaper, foundation postal services, art gallery and public lending library were all established in pubs.

Contemporary Australians, on average, are relatively heavy consumers of alcohol, ranking nineteenth in the world in terms of consumption per capita (Productschap Voor Gedistilleerde Dranken 1999). Average alcohol consumption rates are equivalent to approximately three cans of full-strength beer per day (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] 1995). While Australians have been criticised as being heavy drinkers (King 1978), current consumption levels are not excessive among large proportions of the population. Instead, high levels of consumption tend to be polarised to particular segments, with males, younger drinkers, and those living in the warmest parts of Australia consuming significantly greater amounts of alcohol per capita than other Australians (ABS 1990, 1995). Douglas (1987) describes drunkenness as culturally prescribed, and therefore expressive of the culture in which it occurs. Non-indigenous Australians have long associated drunkenness with egalitarianism due to the tendency for social distinctions become less noticeable and meaningful among the intoxicated (Fiske, Hodge, and Turner 1987; King 1978).

Indigenous Australians

Alcohol has been central to Aboriginal-European social relations since occupation. It signifies more than simply another commodity and its use by Aborigines symbolically represents acceptance and inclusion within non-indigenous Australian society (Hunter 1993). By the commencement of the twentieth century, most Aborigines lived on reserves and depended on Europeans for scarce employment (Stanner 1979). Over half of Australia's Aborigines remain unemployed. In the remote Kimberley where half the data were collected, ninety percent of Aborigines live below the poverty line (Evans 1989) and almost all survive on government welfare (Yu 1994). A large proportion of this welfare is returned to the

Government through the medium of taxes, especially on alcohol sales (Langton, 1993). The ban on Aborigines' consumption of alcohol was only lifted in 1967 (Biskup 1973). While a smaller percentage of Aborigines consume alcohol than non-indigenous Australians, consumption per capita is greater (Gray and Chikrizhs 2000). Figures show that an estimated 85 percent of the Kimberley Aborigines who drink alcohol have an alcohol problem (Hunter, Hall, and Spargo 1992). The median consumption rate per drinking day for young Aboriginal males is equivalent to eleven cans of full strength beer, while young Aboriginal women consume around half this average (Hunter 1993, p.104).

Pre-occupation Aboriginal society had a deep-seated sharing ethos that was needed for survival. This involved a network of commitments, duties and debts, based upon reciprocity with sanctions for non-reciprocity (Thompson 1949). The act of giving, however, was usually considered more important than the gift itself (Stanner 1979). In contemporary Aboriginal society there is a strong expectation that durable goods, such as rifles, video recorders, and motor vehicles, will be shared communally. Cash is shared even more than market foods, being readily asked for and given, especially with the arrival of food supplies in remote areas. Although no records are kept, a balanced reciprocity prevails over time, and those who continually fail to reciprocate are avoided (Shaw 1979). Communal gambling and alcohol drinking are also major occasions for sharing cash (Altman 1987). While gambling and drinking are considered occasions for leisure, excitement and social cohesion, they also often result in dissension, conflict and dispersion. Alcohol continues to wreak havoc among communities and suicides continue at well above the rate of non-indigenous Australians (Hunter 1993). Alcohol occasions neglect and abuse within the family and exacerbates already severe health problems (Hunter et al. 1992).

The upsurge in Aboriginal alcohol consumption since 1967 has been attributed to a diversity of causes. These include: (1) the breakdown of traditional social control mechanisms; (2) a lack of means for establishing and ritually enacting group identity; (3) a lack of traditional rules for alcohol consumption behaviours; (4) the culturally infused sharing ethos; (5) resistance to imposed controls on Aboriginal society; and (6) a lack of processes for reducing tensions and frustrations occurring as a result of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, boredom and dislocation (Altman 1987; Huffer 1983; Langton 1993; Sackett 1988). This last reason, in particular, could explain the greater incidence of alcohol abuse among males who have lost more status than females in the change from a tradition-oriented to welfare culture.

Methodology

The data used in this study were derived from two separate ethnographic studies of alcohol consumption in Australia. The data for the Aboriginal study were collected within remote communities in the north-west region of Australia. The second study focused on the non-indigenous population and involved both in situ interviews in drinking venues and interviews in people's homes, in schools, and in retirement villages. Interviewing was conducted in different areas across three Australian states (NSW, VIC, and WA) to ensure coverage of various age and socio-economic groups.

Findings

Alcohol consumption behaviours among non-indigenous Australians

The interview and observation data yielded three major characteristics of alcohol consumption among non-indigenous Australians: (1) the importance of social aspects of alcohol consumption to drinkers, including the communication of group membership and the facilitation of bonding activities; (2) the stratified nature of alcohol consumption, particularly among drinkers of different genders; and (3) the ritualised nature of alcohol consumption.

Social Consumption

Among non-indigenous Australians alcohol consumption is used as a means of achieving social interaction and communicating group membership. At the aggregate level it signals a degree of "Australianness" that aligns the drinker with other members of the national culture. This symbolism can only be accessed, however, when the drinker consumes alcohol in a social context. Cultural conditioning effectively ensures a favourable attitude to social drinking, and a suspicious, condescending attitude to private drinking. These informal sanctions against drinking alone are accompanied by the expectation that "real" Australians engage in alcohol consumption during most social events. Informants noted that it is virtually unthinkable that a social gathering could occur between friends without the presence of alcohol. The relationship between alcohol and socialising is particularly strong where food is consumed.

The consumption of alcohol in social situations enables non-indigenous drinkers to link their identities with those of their peers. Importantly, it allows them to simultaneously communicate their membership of particular social groupings and the broader Australian culture. As such, alcohol performs the important

functions of facilitating interactions between individuals and locating them within the cultural sphere.

Stratified Consumption

Among non-indigenous Australians the consumption of beer is highly male-dominated while females are more strongly associated with wine consumption. Due to the high levels of gender symbolism attached to different alcoholic beverages, the vast majority of non-indigenous drinkers conform to societal expectations, choosing to stay safe in the accepted symbolism of their "chosen" beverage. Thus while non-indigenous males and females can choose to consume alcoholic beverages outside of those that are socially prescribed, they do so at the risk of alienation from others. To a lesser extent, age and social class were also found to be alcohol consumption variables. Younger informants perceived a need to drink in larger volumes to achieve intoxication, while older informants typically reported engaging in more restrained consumption. Some categories and brands of alcohol were generally considered more suitable for younger drinkers, while others were deemed to be the consumption domain of older drinkers. Similarly, wealthier informants exhibited preferences for specific varieties of alcohol that differ in price and symbolism from those types favoured by less-affluent drinkers.

Ritualised Consumption

There are several specific rituals associated with alcohol consumption among non-indigenous Australians, each serving to facilitate the communication of core cultural beliefs. For example, by engaging in shouting rituals drinkers express their belief in egalitarianism. Shouting entails each member of the drinking group paying for a round of drinks in turn, introducing a system of reciprocity to the drinking process (Brady 1992). It ensures that individuals consume at levels considered appropriate by the group, and thus has a coercive element despite its perceived equity (Fiske et al. 1987). The ritual of shouting often results in the tendency to choose the same brand as one's peers, thus reinforcing the social bonding that is a primary objective of the alcohol consumption process.

Similar in nature is the ritual of contributing to the alcohol supply where drinking occurs in social environments other than pubs. For example, when attending a party, drinkers are typically expected to bring alcohol with them to be shared with others during the event. Other rituals include pub attendance and bingeing (where drinkers consume large volumes of alcohol in a single sitting [Health Department of Western Australia 1997]). Through the ritual of pub attendance, many male drinkers communicate their bonding with

other males and their difference from females. The consumption of alcohol in a friendly pub environment also operates as an escape from the stress and complexities of home and work lives (Fiske et al. 1987). By engaging in binge drinking, male drinkers believe that they communicate their strength and masculinity, and where females participate in this activity they often hope to communicate their assertiveness and desire for equality (Mackay 1989). Combined, these rituals provide non-indigenous drinkers with guides for alcohol consumption that facilitate the social interaction with others that can result in satisfactory identity formation and maintenance.

Alcohol consumption behaviours among indigenous Australians

Contrary to the Australian stereotype of "the drunken Aboriginal man" (Langton 1993), figures show that the Kimberley Aborigines have a higher percentage of non-drinkers (24 percent among males and 54 percent among females) than the general Australian population and a significantly higher proportion of reformed drinkers than the non-Aboriginal population of the Kimberley (Hunter et al. 1992). Part of the explanation for the 'drunken man' stereotype is the greater visibility of Aboriginal drinking in public open spaces, compared to non-indigenous Australians who indulge within the privacy of houses or the sanctity of the pub. Aboriginal informants also claimed that alcohol offers an opportunity for the release and expression of emotions that are otherwise culturally inappropriate. This is illustrated by comments about drunken bragging, spousal abuse, belligerent talk, and other violence. At the same time, after a drunken binge there is often a suggestion that this 'lack of responsibility' can be explained away because the alcohol was in control. Among Aboriginal groups in the Kimberley, the government-imposed prohibition on aboriginal alcohol consumption encouraged secretive binge drinking. Further social disruption occurred when 'card carrying'[2] mixed descent Aborigines, who were not subject to these restrictions, attained higher status in their communities because of their ability to drink in the 'whitefella's pubs,' as well as provide illegal supplies to other Aborigines. Following the granting of citizenship rights to all Aborigines in 1967, the situation changed dramatically and social disruption increased further.

With regard to identity, the ringer[3] is the most alluring and enduring role model for Aboriginal males in the Kimberley. For many, the initial attraction to drinking is related to this glamorous lifestyle of which alcohol is perceived to be an integral part. Once they begin drinking, peer pressure or 'mateship' often reinforces

their alcohol consumption behaviours. However, it is not only the role model of ringers that is used as a form of identity. There is also a strong network of younger males who associate through drinking either through attendance at music gigs or by driving to nearby communities where alcohol restrictions have not been implemented. Gambling sessions offer a further opportunity for socialising and often include the consumption of alcohol. Strong community divisions also exist between 'the drinkers' and those who refrain.

The lack of rules relating to inebriation in subgroups within Aboriginal culture, combined with the culturally infused sharing ethos, exacerbate the problem of alcohol consumption. The proposal that drinking to excess is a form of resistance (Sackett 1988), expressed through non-compliance with the order imposed by the non-Aboriginal world, was supported by field observations of the conspicuous litter of beer cans and wine cartons, plus the increased aggressiveness toward non-indigenous Australians following consumption of alcohol.

Discussion and Conclusions

A comparison of the major characteristics of non-indigenous and indigenous alcohol consumption revealed distinct similarities and differences. The similarities include the use of alcohol consumption to achieve identity formation and maintenance and to provide a form of escapism for drinkers. By comparison, the differences in consumption patterns take the form of subculture inclusion and exclusion, the extent of sharing between drinkers, and the physical locations in which drinking takes place.

Similarities

The use of alcohol consumption to establish and communicate an identity was found in this study to be relevant to both non-indigenous and indigenous drinkers. Non-indigenous Australians seek to identify with the broader Australian culture, as well as with specific subcultures, particularly those relating to gender and age, and to a lesser extent social class. Indigenous Australian males relate alcohol consumption to the coveted lifestyle of the outback ringer, while younger indigenous drinkers also associate drinking with their attempts at self-expression through music. In addition, alcohol is perceived by indigenous Australians to be an important link with non-indigenous Australian culture. In both streams of Australian society the consumption of alcohol facilitates specific behaviours that enable individuals to communicate their participation in Australian culture and their membership of specific subcultures within the broader cultural environment.

Both non-indigenous and indigenous Australians take advantage of the inebriating effects of alcohol to enable them to manage their daily lives. Indigenous Australians consume alcohol as a respite from the poverty and boredom that characterise their lives, while non-indigenous Australians are seeking to obtain temporary relief from the stresses associated with their work and family roles. Drinkers from both groups sacralise their drinking time for the liberation it provides in the form of physical and mental relaxation.

Differences

The first major area of difference between indigenous and non-indigenous alcohol consumption is the use of alcohol as a form of inclusion and exclusion. While alcohol consumption has an inclusive pattern among indigenous Australians, within the non-indigenous population it is highly stratified according to gender, and to a lesser extent by age and social class. It thus offers a means of exclusion, effectively demarcating different groups within the non-indigenous population. By comparison, alcohol consumption in remote indigenous communities is characterised by communal drinking behaviours, with people of different genders, ages and income levels drinking the same beverages in the same locations at the same time.

The second category of difference is the extent of sharing of alcohol that occurs between drinkers. Non-indigenous Australians often engage in shouting and contribution rituals while drinking, rituals that entail each individual contributing equally to the total pool of alcohol consumed by group members on each occasion. In this way, reciprocity is immediate and direct. By comparison, reciprocity amongst indigenous drinkers is more generalised and occurs over much longer time periods. Those with alcohol are expected to share with those without, thus ensuring that nobody is left out of the consumption process. The third area of difference is the physical locations in which drinking occurs. Reflecting their European heritage, non-indigenous drinkers tend towards indoor locations, particularly homes and pubs. The drinking patterns of indigenous drinkers reflect their closer relationship with the land, and tend towards the consumption of alcohol in outdoor locations.

To conclude, this study of alcohol consumption in Australia identified similarities and differences in consumption patterns between non-indigenous and indigenous members of the Australian population. The differences, in particular, reflect the social and cultural variations between these two groups. The poverty levels experienced by indigenous Australians mean that they have fewer product options available to them, with most drinking the least expensive forms of beer and wine available to achieve their identity

and escapism objectives. Also, their poverty largely restricts their consumption to outdoor locations, an outcome also encouraged by their cultural heritage that emphasises the importance of the land to the individual and the group. Non-indigenous Australians, by comparison, readily employ product and brand symbolism to communicate socially decreed distinctions between members of different subcultures, such as those of different genders and social classes.

Footnotes

1. In this paper the term indigenous refers to those Aboriginal Australians living in the remote outback regions of Australia, either in their own communities or as fringe dwellers of larger country towns. The terms non-indigenous and European Australians refer to the predominantly Caucasian population of the major urban cities.
2. Aborigines could apply for citizenship that was identified by the carrying of a card. However, this citizenship was subject to meeting prohibitive conditions. These included the supplying of two references from reputable citizens certifying industrious habits; evidence that citizenship would be conducive to the applicant's welfare; and that the applicant was fluent in English, was of good reputation and not suffering from disease. Citizenship could be revoked for any offence including drunkenness.
3. The term *ringer* refers to a person handling cattle, like the term 'cowboy'.

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