

ESSAY REVIEW

DRINKING FOR PLEASURE — AND WHOSE PROFIT ?

*If all be true that I do think,
There are five reasons we should drink;
Good wine, a friend, or being dry,
Or lest we should be by and by;
Or any other reason why.*

Henry Alderich (1647-1710)

THE SUBJECT OF Africans' drinking of alcohol, particularly in the urban townships, is highly emotive. White politicians have seen in it evidence of profligacy, with the corollary that there must be surplus income potentially available to pay rents, or to finance social services which, it is contended, are largely borne by white taxpayers. Black politicians have hinted at a white plot to debauch the African and sap his will to seek political, economic and social advancement. Churchmen, welfare workers, physicians, as well as those more personally affected — spouses, parents, or children of drinkers — have denounced or bemoaned an evil trade.

Facts have been hard to come by and unanswered questions abound. Are people poor because they drink, or is drink a refuge from poverty? Do I beat my wife because I drink heavily, or do I drink heavily for the same reason that I beat my wife and, if so, what is it? Are beer-gardens a response to social need, or the creators of demand? Why do some people abstain, some exercise moderation and others know no bounds? In the relation between drinking and social malfunction, where are cause and effect? How great is the social benefit and how high is the social cost? Can tens of thousands of happy drinkers be wrong? Could we have the blessing without the curse?

The public conscience is invoked, because the African liquor business is largely plied by local authorities. They have a monopoly over the production and sale of African beer in urban areas and over the sale of other liquor in the townships. In rural areas, municipal beer competes with private enterprise in beer-gardens run by African Councils. There are grave implications for the image of local government generally and for Black-White relations in the towns. The Minister of Local Government and Housing has accused local authorities of selling excessive quantities of beer, although at the same time he has extolled the valuable contribution of beer profits to African welfare. Making an appeal for excessive drinking to be controlled at the point of sale, he added that he intended to use more of the profits for building houses.¹

In Bulawayo, where senior staff of the city's Housing and Community Services Department meet weekly to plan and review their work, an unrelenting climax to their meeting is provided by graphs of liquor consumption, among which African beer sales provide the focus of interest. If they are

¹ *The Chronicle* [Bulawayo], 20 May 1976.

good, the beer has been good and customers have been satisfied. 'Euphoria' — a theme word of the liquor undertaking's Trade Fair exhibit one year — has prevailed. People have relaxed, exchanged news and views, conducted business, dissolved tensions built up over the week, listened to music, danced, loved, and fought. Bad beer spells discontent, expressed in immediate strife, or stored grievance. High sales mean money for housing, health and welfare services: perhaps also more drunkenness, more beaten wives, fewer school fees paid, and a hard day's night for the traumatic surgeon at Mpilo Hospital.

Officials (and elected representatives) are faced with an intractable dilemma. The social rewards make the beer-garden seem desirable and possibly inevitable: the social ills that accompany it prompt demands for reform, if not prohibition. The complexities of drinking behaviour, the ambivalence of its social role, and its involvement with many institutions of society, create a deep well for social scientists and reformer alike to fish in. Three recent studies contribute to a better understanding of the issues, and therefore conceivably, to more enlightened social management. The studies are concerned respectively with alcohol control, alcohol use, and the institution of the beer-garden.²

Reformers who pin their hopes on limitation of supply will find little comfort in the history of alcohol control measures in West Africa, documented and discussed by Lynn Pan. A succession of conferences and agreements, from Brussels in 1889 to Abidjan in 1956, reflected the desire of the colonial powers to be (or to be seen to be) in support of efforts to shield Africans from the ravages of the liquor trade.

The main effort was directed at protecting people, among whom the taste for alcohol was not greatly developed, against a particular type of cheap and noxious beverage — 'trade spirits'. Energies were dissipated in the search for an acceptable working definition and surveillance was confused by statistics that variously related alcohol strength to volume, or weight, or percentage of proof alcohol.

The outcome demonstrated the poor bargaining power of moral principles in the face of economic and political determinants. The liquor trade was too lucrative — to the producer, to the distributor, and to the colonial governor in search of tax revenue for development — to be lightly abandoned. Relationships between the powers rested on a variety of pragmatic considerations among which ideals easily foundered. And the more effective the limitation of imports, the greater the incentive to smuggling, or local manufacture of substitutes. Pan remarks that the conflict of interests that clouded the reform purpose has a familiar ring today, not least in Rhodesia. That is not to say that humanitarian ideals scored no gains in the clash with private interests. In the Scramble for Africa, it was remarkable not that alcohol control was somewhat ineffectual and overtaken by events, but that it secured as much hearing and implementation as it did.

The attempt to exercise control by restricting the availability of liquor rested on the presupposition that the extent of liquor-related problems was a function of the overall level of consumption. This seemed self-evident at the time but would now, Pan notes, be regarded as contentious, as would

² L. Pan, *Alcohol in Colonial Africa* (Helsinki, Finnish Foundation for Alcohol Studies (in collaboration with the Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Uppsala), No. 22, 1975), 121pp. US\$6.50; J. May, *Drinking in a Rhodesian African Township* Rh\$3.00; H. F. Wolcott, *The African Beer Gardens of Bulawayo: Integrated Drinking* (Salisbury, Univ. of Rhodesia, Dep. of Sociology, Occasional Paper No. 8, 1973), 94pp. in *A Segregated Society* (New Brunswick, N. J., Rutgers Center of Alcohol Studies, 1974), 261pp. no price indicated.

the assumption that alcohol was a prime cause of the social disorganisation of the 'uncivilised peoples' whom the colonial powers felt obliged to protect. The long-term question was not, in fact, whether Africans should have access to this or that form of alcohol, but how alcohol use would be incorporated into the new societies of Africa; in what ways it would prove to be functional or dysfunctional within the context of rapid social change; and in what relationship it would stand to other integrative and disintegrative concomitants of change. Such issues are explored in the other two studies.

Wolcott had available to him the statistical data of two earlier surveys conducted by the Alcoholism Research Unit of the University of Rhodesia* as well as unpublished interview records round which to construct his work. May's publication is a sequel to those surveys which moves well beyond the basic statistics to present a rounded and insightful picture of African liquor use in circumstances of socio-cultural change. Her account, based primarily on structured and part-structured interviews of a randomized sample of an urban township population, is clear and convincing in its conclusions. Wolcott, by contrast, is a grazer and browser in the contemporary scene, taking an unfettered look at his surrounds and picking off what appeals to him as apposite. The result is very readable and opens up unexpected and promising lines of inquiry.

As Wolcott remarks, 'the payoff in any field study is knowing what questions to ask'.⁴ In his case, it was only as the research proceeded that he came to know even what it was to be about. Having set out to use a sabbatical year to make an anthropological cross-cultural study in the field of education, he found himself diverted to the twenty-fourth and last on his list of researchable topics — beer-gardens. He took it that he would be researching African beer drinkers, and that he would do so as a participant observer, but was mistaken in both respects. Not only was participant observation not feasible, but the fascination of the beer-garden as an institution proved too strong. He turned to researching the integrative functions of the beer-garden, both within African urban society and between the white and black sectors of the city community.

Beer drinkers took second place to 'Beer Garden Beneficiaries' — physicians, welfare workers, policemen, missionaries, administrators and managers — whose professional roles were wholly or partly defined by the existence of African drinkers. Their points of view, recorded in formal interviews and in the course of fieldwork, were critically examined. Not surprisingly, professional responses were found to be consonant with professional roles, ritualized and predictable. Wolcott points out that such viewpoints tend to be maintained in isolation from one another and to inhibit a comprehensive and objective grasp of the complexities of the situation. Thus the administrators, he suggests, had created the beer-gardens after a western model and such improvements or modifications as they sought to effect were in the same mould. If the 'naturalness' of drinking in African thought were recognised, enclosed drinking dens might give way to open recreational gardens, offering

* D. H. Reader and J. May, *Drinking Patterns in Rhodesia: Highfield African Township* (Salisbury, Univ. of Rhodesia, Dep. of Sociology, Occasional Paper No. 5, 1971); J. May, 'Survey of Urban African Drinking Patterns in the Bulawayo Municipal Townships', (Salisbury, Univ. of Rhodesia, Inst. for Social Research Report for the Municipality of Bulawayo (mimeo), 1971).

⁴ H. F. Wolcott, 'Feedback influences on fieldwork, or: A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Beer Garden', in C. Kileff and W. G. Pendleton (eds), *Urban Man in Southern Africa* (Gwelo, Mambo Press, 1975), 106.

liquor among other amenities. This, Wolcott feels, would 'capture more of the integrative dimension of African beer drinking'.⁵ A similar criticism is levelled at the 'well-intentioned program starts' of welfare services likewise derived from the Western world, which Wolcott believes are not what Africans would 'really' choose, even if they are what Africans say and believe that they want.⁶

Such musings beg the question as to how far patterns of thought and behaviour derived from traditional society can usefully serve as determinants of services provided in a modern city. One suspects the anthropologist *à la recherche du temps perdu*. Traditional elements persist in the new life of the beer-garden (just as mutual kinship support, for example, survives the transplant to urban dwelling and nuclear family) only to the degree that synthesis is possible and subject to constant transformation in relation to other social pressures. Services which set out to provide for traditional survival are just as likely to founder as those which pay no heed at all to cultural heritage.

Wolcott presents a vivid description of beer-garden life and of the multifarious reasons why drinkers and non-drinkers frequent what he aptly terms a 'cultural cafeteria'.⁷ Drinking is no longer an accompaniment of group ceremonial: the beer-garden provides 'a down payment on the promise of the city'; a setting where one can 'revel in the freedom of urban autonomy and the euphoria of temporarily forgetting his woes'.⁸

These twin functions of the beer-garden — revelry and euphoria, or, more precisely, convivial and utilitarian drinking — were examined by May, who found that the younger people drank for conviviality, whereas older people tended to drink for indulgent reasons, presumably on account of increased tensions and heavier responsibilities. As both studies suggest, recreational drinking may readily become addictive and excessive in the absence of social controls. Stress drinking also tends to intensify, since it commonly adds to the problems that give rise to it, producing a confusing round of cause and effect.

May takes a close look at the phenomenon of heavy drinking. Apart from 39 per cent of her sample who were abstainers, only 15 per cent claimed never to get drunk; 17 per cent became drunk less than once a week and 29 per cent were drunk every weekend or more often. Intoxication was regarded as the natural and desirable consequence of drinking. There was great tolerance of drunkenness and little anxiety over it: only 6 per cent of respondents regarded frequent drunkenness as excessive. Respect was accorded to what May terms controlled drunkenness; only daily drunkenness, gross neglect of responsibilities, or total loss of dignity and control stood condemned. May comments that drinking behaviour of this order might in European middle-class circles seem to border on the pathological, but in the circumstances of African urban living it could be held to be functional. It would be interesting to make the comparison with European working-class circles. Weekend pub life in a working-class district may well exhibit a high tolerance of drunkenness and readiness to drink to get drunk. As Eugène Marais remarks, 'The disrepute into which drunkenness has fallen among the higher classes in Western civilization is a thing of recent growth'.⁹

In the African context, concern lies not so much in the high tolerance for and frequency of drunkenness, as in the proportion — one fifth — who

⁵ Wolcott, *The African Beer Gardens of Bulawayo*, 234.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 230

⁷ *Ibid.*, 85

⁸ *Ibid.*, 96

⁹ E. Marais, *The Soul of the Ape* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1973), 91.

confess to alcohol-related problems. May considers what tends to prevent or limit the amount of drinking. A definite deterrent, not always effective, is affiliation to a church or sect that forbids alcohol. Few heavy drinkers, indeed, have any meaningful church ties at all. More significantly, abstainers and moderate drinkers are those who are 'most firmly enmeshed in urban-based social activities'.¹⁰ They live in a nuclear family, belong to both formal and informal groups, attend church at least occasionally, have a positive attitude towards the opportunities of town life and find satisfaction in their jobs. Conversely, those least well integrated into urban life are among the heaviest drinkers.

The functional and dysfunctional aspects of alcohol use present a dilemma of social management: 'how to minimize drinking in the interest of public health and social well-being without an assault on the fabric of collective life'.¹¹ The answer clearly does not lie simply in action directed at drink, drinkers, or drinking places. Whether a man drinks to excess or not is likely to depend a great deal upon the quality of his personal life and the satisfaction it brings him, on the one hand, and the social code to which he is subject, on the other. It is society itself which must bear the reproach.

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¹⁰ May, *Drinking in a Rhodesian African Township*, 79.

¹¹ Pan, *Alcohol in Colonial Africa*, 106.

