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Alcohol and Social Structure

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Papua,
Territory of Papua
& New Guinea

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Mr. Richard H. Nolte,
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Dear Mr. Nolte,

One of the oldest saws about Papua and New Guinea is to the effect that Papuans and New Guineans speak most honestly and unrestrainedly, especially about Europeans, when under the influence of alcohol. Without canvassing the merits of this particular theory, however, it does seem true to say that the structure of drinking relationships in Papua and New Guinea does in fact reveal a great deal about the structure of Territory society.

Until 1962, indigenous Papuans and New Guineans were forbidden by law to drink alcohol. In part, this law derived from the contemporary ascendancy of various mission interests, and in part from the fear that the consumption of liquor by indigenes could create social problems. Thus, in theory at least, most Papuans and New Guineans did not drink, although illegal liquor seemed quite often to be supplied by Europeans at social functions, or, more usually, in exchange for services rendered - specifically, for the procurement of women. The few interracial social functions which were held before 1962 seem to have had a rather odd appearance, with the Europeans present imbibing fermented and spirituous liquors quite freely, while their indigenous guests gentilely sipped their orange juices. Mixed-race people were allowed to apply for a special permit to drink.

After 1962, the Territory's hotels ceased to be the exclusive preserve of Europeans, and so the more conservative B4's as they were called retired to the privacy of their clubs, the integration of which even now cannot be enforced by law. Segregated drinking in hotels was also preserved, however, by the ingenious device employed by many hotel proprietors of enforcing quite strict dress regulations upon wouldbe drinkers.

Thus, some enterprising Highlanders of my acquaintance made quite some money in the early days of legalised drinking by hiring out their shoes to other indigenes who wished to enter a hotel to drink. Gradually, however, the Territory's various hotels began to perceive the potential market for alcohol among the indigenes and built special bars for them, or vacated the older European public bars for indigenous drinking. Drinking, therefore, remained largely segregated by local custom as well as dress regulation, although only rarely as

an openly acknowledged item in a particular hotel's policy. As late as 1965, indeed, a European who drank in an indigenous bar was apt to find himself very quickly surrounded by friendly Papuans and New Guineans, eager, although strangers, to buy him a drink, and to expound at length on the virtues of those few Europeans who bothered to drink with them.

Gradually, as the number of well-dressed and better-educated indigenes has grown, so have the Territory's bars become increasingly integrated, to the point where some hotels now shpw no external signs of segregation at all in the former European bars, although the old "native bars" still rarely see a European visitor. The new open-air, one-room taverns that have recently been built in a number of major centres have provided, for the first time, no alternative to wholly racially integrated drinking, for those people who bother to drink there at all.

Drinking among Europeans in the tropics has a wellknown history of its own. Every reader of colonial memoirs and stories knows of the peril of alcohol in the tropics, and all the more so when the beer is as strong as Australian beer (which has one of the highest alcoholic contents in the world), and liquor consumption as high as it is in Papua and New Guinea. Indeed, alcohol consumption in the Territory was, including women, children, missionaries and other assorted teetotallers, double that of Australian annual per capita consumption before the indigenes were allowed to drink. Drinking behaviour among Papuans and New Guineans, however, has been less well documented, though it is probably far more interesting. Modesty as well as prudence dictate that the following contribution to knowledge be accompanied by a disclaimer to the effect that research was carried out by the author in the role of observer rather than participant.

Many Papuans and New Guineans do not drink at all for religious reasons, or live too far from a hotel to take a real interest in alcohol. There are as yet relatively few native clubs in the rural areas to bring beer within the effective reach of all. For the urban indigene, however, the Territory's small towns display so much of the dreariness and cultural emptiness of colonial life generally, that alcohol often provides a pleasant escape from, and the only readily available form of entertainment amid, the boredom and drudgery of paid employment. Thus, on the Friday nights when the public servants receive their fortnightly pay, or the alternative Fridays when private enterprise pays its employees, Port Moresby's hotels are crowded with men on their only "binge" for two weeks.

Drinking, then, takes one of several forms. Often a group of wantoks will go to a hotel together, and those who have been paid that week will spend their money on alcohol for their less fortunate friends. If money is short, then methylated spirits may be used, especially as so few Papuans and New Guineans are yet aware of its possible deleterious effects on their longterm health. Some traditional brews are reputedly as strong and equally injurious to the health of the consumer.

One particularly relentless form of consuming beer is practised by some of my Highland friends. A group of men go to

a hotel together. Each man in the group then buys a round of beer for every other man in the group, until each member of the group, numbering say 8 people, is seated with 8 beers in front of him on the table, which he proceeds to consume one after the other. This system ensures that no member of the group is in another's debt, and that each one has displayed equal magnanimity to all of his friends.

On other occasions, a man will simply go to the hotel to buy drinks for as many of his wantoks as are there, knowing full well that whenever he goes to the hotel for some time to come, one of the recipients of his generosity will probably be there, and feel obliged to settle his debt. The original generosity, then, appears as no more than a variant of a type of insurance scheme that is to be found in many areas of traditional economic activity in the Territory.

Another interesting form of competition concerns not only one's physical ability to consume large quantities of alcohol, but is an interesting variant on the traditional battle for prestige by displaying great magnanimity, and thereby placing as many people as possible in one's debt. A man on one side of the hotel bar will send drinks, via the waiter, to a group of friends on the other side. The gift, of course, requires repayment (preferably, to excess), and so a competition begins in which the two groups vie to see who can drink the most, and who can give most generously. The competition constitutes quite a strain on one's purse as well as one's sobriety, and I have seen men go to great pains to refuse such presents from rival groups, knowing full well that receipt of the initial gift may involve one in a competition in which the initial givers seem certain of success.

Perhaps it is true that men are more honest when drunk. Perhaps we simply lose some of our inhibitions and say things we do not really mean, but displays of racial ill-feeling are not unusual when the alcohol is flowing freely. One odd form of behaviour, however, which no amount of psychological rationalisation will fully explain to me, is that associated with some very unsophisticated people indeed. When under the influence of alcohol, quite uneducated Highlanders who have often heard, but never actually spoken, English, and who are, in fact, quite incapable of understanding, much less speaking, English when drunk sober, will cease to speak Pidgin, and begin to identify themselves with their European companions by speaking quite beautiful and polished English. Perhaps they are simply trying to identify themselves with their European social superiors - certainly, the phenomenon seems to require some scientific investigation.

Thus, although many educated Papuans and New Guineans now drink quite often in the formerly European sections of the Territory's hotels, their less well-educated companions do not, for they do not feel at ease as yet in European company, or simply do not like the frequent inspections of the European barmaids who check that the drinkers are properly dressed. Many Europeans have now retreated to their expatriates-only clubs, which do not openly exclude Papuans and New Guineans from membership, but allow any of their present members to "blackball" any unwelcome applicants, while in a number of rural areas the new "native clubs" have been established, although they are much more willing to admit outsiders than their

European counterparts often are. Indeed, the atmosphere is rather odd in the Territory's older clubs when one is told that the times are definitely changing, and that their executives are now seriously considering the admission of "the right sort of native" to full membership within the next 5 to 10 years. "It's inevitable within that time," I have been told.

It is, however, in the bars mostly frequented by the local people that one learns most about their problems in the towns, and, in the process, gains an interesting insight into the status tensions and kinship obligations of changing indigenous society.

Yours sincerely,

Edward Wolfers

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