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Athabascan Drinking

The single largest problem that affects the health and well-being of Alaskans involves the use and abuse of beverage alcohol. In 1972, the per capita consumption for Alaskans 15 years of age or older was 5.06 gallons of distilled spirits, 2.93 gallons of wine and 27.87 gallons of beer. A recent study by the State Office of Alcoholism indicates that in fiscal year 1976 alcohol related costs accounted for \$17,807,200 in expenditures from the General Fund.

In the following article, Mr. Brelsford describes the systemic properties of alcohol distribution and consumption in an Alaskan Athabascan village. In so doing, he focuses on a cultural, as opposed to a medical or psychological, dimension of alcohol use in order to help us understand the social context in which drinking takes place. In most small scale societies or communities the ingestion of chemical substances, like alcohol, is used to expose tensions that grow slowly between individuals who live in close and constant contact. It also provides an occasion around which to establish, affirm, or break off social relationships. This article illustrates aspects of these processes as well as describing the economic network that exists to provide beverage alcohol to a "dry" community.

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ng Behavior:

A Preliminary Ethnography

by Gregg Brelsford

This information was gathered in an Athabascan village in rural Alaska between April 1974 and June 1975. During this time I was employed by this village as a mental health worker, and spent an average of two days and nights per week in the village for the duration of a year.

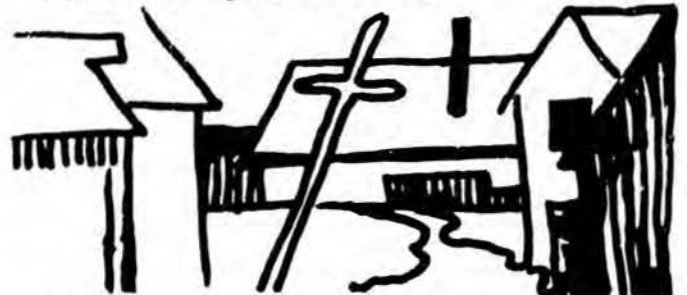
The identity of the village in this paper will remain anonymous. Toward this end, the descriptive information concerning this village will be kept general, the behavioral information, however, will be specific.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: (1) to demonstrate the cultural dimension of drinking behavior, as illustrated in this particular village, and (2) to partially address what Dorothy Hones, in referring to the attitudes of "white run alcoholic rehabilitation centers," accurately describes as "little awareness of cultural differences in the meaning attributed to drinking... in many Native villages" (Jones 1976:40; see also Kunitz and Levy 1974a: 246). This cultural dimension is to be distinguished from the medical and psychological dimensions, i.e., the disease, and the stress-coping models of drinking behavior. This is not to repudiate the medical or psychological models, but rather to demonstrate the broader context within which they occur.

A quick review of the literature will place this research with the context of similar efforts of this kind. To my knowledge, there are only 3 articles published on the drinking behavior of Alaska Natives generally; none of which directly addresses Alaskan Athabascans. Two of these articles are statistical (Knisley 1972:Foulks and Katz 1973). The third (Berreman 1956) genuinely describes Aleut drinking behavior and dates from 1956. With regard to non-Alaskan Athabascan drinking behavior, Honigmann and Honigmann (1945) have written about Canadian Athabascan drinking, and recently, attention has been devoted to Mescalero Apache (Curley 1967), and Navaho (Kunitz 1970; Kunitz and Levy 1975a,b) drinking patterns.

To demonstrate the cultural dimension of drinking behavior, the following definitions will be used throughout this paper. My operational definition of culture is the system of rules by which behavior

is arranged and organized and the rules by which meaning (values and beliefs) is assigned to these arrangements of behavior. Ethnography simply means the description of a culture. A system is "a regularly interacting or interdependent group of items forming a unified whole" (Webster's 7th Collegiate). Drinking behavior is any behavior directly associated with the consumption of alcoholic beverages. This paper, then, will describe the system of drinking behavior present in this rural Alaskan Athabascan village. The three aspects of this system focused on here will be: (1) the source of alcohol; (2) the patterns of consumption, and; (3) the drinking behavior itself.



At the time this information was gathered, Village X had a population of approximately 270, an active Russian Orthodox Church, a K-12 school, a Native store, a community center, a youth recreation hall, and a medical-dental clinic. There was no liquor store or bar, and no police. The village is relatively isolated and can be reached primarily by charter plane. Internally, however, it does contain a number of automobiles and trucks, and a small road system.

Economic activity is primarily seasonal, with most of the village involved in commercial and subsistence fishing. Year round employment is available at a nearby industry to any who desire it, or who can endure the inequitable management practices. A few other jobs are available with the village itself, the recreation center, a community services organization, the store, a day care center, and the school.

It is not known how long alcohol has been present in Village X. The earliest recorded plausible reference I could locate is drawn from the report of the Russian Orthodox Missionary Hieromouk Nikita to Bishop Nestor, Number 7, April 27, 1882:

"Drunkenness is the chief vice of the aborigines. Because of the lack of good grain alcohol, they make their liquor from flour fermented with sugar in stills made of gasoline tins and distill it through a rusty gun barrel. The smell of such a drink is repelling." (Townsend 1974:13)

I am certain, however, that alcohol was present at least by the time of the first Russian contact over 100 years earlier (informant: 7-17-74).

Source of Alcohol

Because the village is legally dry, and relatively isolated, there are no commercial liquor outlets present or nearby. "Home brew" is virtually non-existent. Only two elderly men brew their own, in spite of the fact that it is vastly cheaper. This means almost exclusively that alcohol arrives on the small planes that serve the village.

The primary air service serving Village X estimates that it transports minimally the following amounts of alcohol to the village every month (quantities shown are correlated with their costs as priced at an Anchorage retail liquor store): 15 cases of liquor (12 fifths per case; Calvert whiskey at \$63.48 per case), \$952.00; 4 cases Port Wine (12 fifths per case; Italian Swiss Colony Red Port at \$18.60 per case), \$75.00; and 10 cases of beer (Olympia, 12 ounces, at \$8.55 per case), \$85.00. This is a total of \$1,112.00 per month. These are minimal figures and are utilized merely to provide a point of reference. It is my impression, and that of many villagers, that alcohol consumption fluctuates in terms of this reference point at different times of the year (end of fishing season, Christmas, etc.). Also, in addition to the above carrier, there are three others that regularly serve Village X, and it must be assumed that they are also transporting alcohol to this village.

The act of flying to a liquor outlet and returning to the village with alcohol is known in the village as a "round trip" or "R.T." The air fare alone for this is \$72.00 total. Though I do not know the amount of alcohol generally purchased on a "round

trip", I have personally helped unload five cases of beer and two cases of whiskey from one "round trip" and had the impression that this was a large run.

"Round trips" tend to be spontaneous rather than planned or organized. A run is generally made only for enough liquor to satisfy immediate desires, requiring another run, plus air fare, when that supply is consumed. One individual made a "round trip" on three consecutive days. He purchased a total of \$216.00 in air fare, for a total expenditure of \$407.00. I do not imply that this individual drank all of this himself, or that this reflects the normal drinking pattern in this village. It does, however, indicate somewhat the degree of expenditure occasionally made.

It is easy to see why the primary air carrier for the village is just that, the primary carrier. Not only is its attitude regarding carrying alcohol very liberal, but it allows the air fare to be charged on account. The only cash required for a round trip, therefore, is money for the cab and the price of the liquor. For example, the cash required for the above mentioned three day expenditure was closer to \$190.00, rather than the entire amount of \$407.00. This is a key factor in this system. This "charge account" arrangement implicitly supports and maintains the system of drinking in this village by maintaining relatively easy access to alcohol. It also probably maintains the spontaneous nature of the "round trip" because the additional costs of plane fares are not immediately experienced in connection with the purchase and consumption of the liquor.

Patterns of Consumption

We turn now to the second element of the drinking system in Village X, the patterns of consumption. This discussion will include descriptions of the patterns themselves, the drinking group, and frequency and duration of consumption.

Description of Patterns

Once the alcohol arrives in the village, it is loaded

into cars or pick-ups. Rarely is it left to sit at the airstrip. This seems to be more due to concern for protecting one's goods than concern for getting caught.

The patterns of consumption of alcohol appear to be functions of 4 elements, and the relations between them. These elements are: (1) location; (2) time of day; (3) age; and (4) sex.

Alcohol consumption in Village X is essentially private in nature. It occurs primarily in private homes or private vehicles such as cars or trucks. No drinking was observed in fishing boats or on snow machines.

Drinking in vehicles occurs as early as late afternoon, but primarily in the evening and night. The vehicle may be parked in an isolated area, but for the most part is done while driving along the village roads, talking and listening to the radio. This is practiced only by the teenagers and young adults up to approximately age 30.

In private homes, drinking may occur during any time of the day or night. The kitchen and living room seem to be the location of most drinking activity (reinforcing the idea of the "social" nature of drinking in this system), with some drinking also occurring in bedrooms. All age groups engage in drinking in private homes. The pre-adolescents and early and middle teenagers drink covertly, as they are not explicitly allowed to drink by the adults. This restriction appeared not to be an issue of legality or morality, but an economic one, i.e., not "wasting" a valuable commodity on someone not likely to (be able to) reciprocate.

Age, therefore, is apparently a significant factor in determining the location of where alcohol is consumed. The young adults and late teens drink both in homes and vehicles, whereas the adults (approximately 30 years plus), middle-aged, and elderly drink exclusively in private homes.

As noted above, drinking activity is essentially private in nature. Alcohol is never consumed, as part of the group activity, at public gatherings, whether business or recreational. People may attend while intoxicated, withdraw temporarily to

drink and return, or occasionally even take quick, hidden, pulls on a bottle, but none of this is done as part of the group activity. The one exception to this which I observed was a religious activity—starring. Starring is a Russian Orthodox custom at Christmas in which the village gathers together (in this case, mostly small children up to older teenagers) and visits each house singing Christmas songs and prayers. As the group arrives at each house in turn, the host offers them refreshments, including alcoholic beverages. This is done in an atmosphere of festivity and celebration. Even the youngsters are allowed to participate in the drinking, though somewhat ambivalently, by the adults.

Another exception to the essentially private nature of drinking here, is the minor degree of drinking which occurs openly while the person is walking on the streets in the village. This is done only by the young men, approximately 19-27 years old. Walking the village streets while intoxicated (walking, but not consuming alcohol) occurs with low to moderate frequency, and is also done only by males. Someone will occasionally pass out on the side of the street, although this is very rare. This person is generally left where he is if he is in no danger. This also occurs only with males and is apparently nonexistent in winter.

The Drinking Group

Drinking in Village X is a social activity. It is the only time that as many people get together, as often as they do, for as long as they do. I did not hear of, or observe, a single instance of substantive drinking in isolation. Whether it occurs in a home or vehicle, whether the age of the person is 8 or 80, and whether the number of companions is one or ten, drinking occurs only with other people.

In the drinking group, no restrictions are placed on the amount of alcohol a person may consume, except as conditioned by the quantity available, and the person's credit. When the supply and credit are unlimited, so is the freedom, and expectation, to consume. Under these conditions, even persons known to become violent are allowed unlimited access to alcohol.

Though not documented, it appeared that membership in a specific drinking group was determined either by kinship or an individual's ability to reciprocate and contribute to the alcohol supply of the group. This reciprocity could extend over a long period of time and was not necessarily limited to the immediate moment. This is supported by my observation of the exclusion of some adults on the basis that they were consuming more than their share (3-14-74). This perspective would also explain the exclusion of children on an economic basis rather than a moral or legal one. The costs involved in obtaining liquor have already been demonstrated; it simply is not economically sensible to sacrifice your alcohol to someone who has little potential for, or history of, reciprocity.

Frequency and Duration

Though I have no empirical statistics in this area, I do have many references to individual drinking activity in my notes. These references cluster together in two ways: days of the month and months of the year. The first cluster occurs primarily between the 4th and 14th day of each month. This corresponds roughly with the arrival of various agency support checks. The second cluster occurs in June, July, and August, 1974, and January, February, and March, 1975. The summer cluster corresponds very roughly with fishing season, and the latter cluster included Russian Christmas, as well as the coldest months of the year. Drinking activity was high in May, 1975. This corresponds with Russian Easter (5-5-75) and tax refund checks.

Drinking is intense when it occurs but the duration is irregular. An individual may drink for one evening or for three weeks. The same person may evidence both of these extremes at different times, and apparently alcohol supply is not the only factor determining this range in duration.

Drinking Behavior

Drinking behavior itself is the third element in the drinking system of Village X. This discussion will include a description of concrete drinking behavior, intervention into this behavior, and the role of the young in the system of drinking behavior.

Description of Drinking Behavior

Drinking is a process of consuming cumulatively increasing amounts of alcohol. This results in an increasing degree of intoxication. The process of intoxication in Village X may best be conceptually represented by a continuum. This continuum ranges from sober to extremely or profoundly intoxicated. Movement along this continuum may be measured behaviorally, rather than chemically.

When sober, the person is circumspect. He or she is quiet, reserved and contained. He may be distantly friendly, polite, or cold, depending upon his relationship with you. Joking and card playing occur, but with indirectness and restraint. Personal appearance and home interiors are orderly and well kept.

When mildly to moderately intoxicated, composure "relaxes". The person may become warm, jovial, generous, affectionate, talkative, and expressive. People are quick to joke and laugh, and motor activity may become heightened; often there is much card playing, or walking or riding around the village. Homes and personal appearance are left unattended and become somewhat disheveled.

Extreme intoxication may be represented by violent, destructive, hostile, aggressive, or belligerent behavior. Threats and challenges may be exchanged. Withdrawal may substitute for violence or aggression in middle-aged to elderly males. Eventually, in every case, cognitive and motor ability becomes reduced, movement and speech become slow, and thoughts are difficult to organize. Personal appearance becomes very disheveled and home interiors become very disorderly and unkempt.

Perhaps most characteristic of the Village X drinking process is that once begun, this process of intoxication is pursued to its full completion. Once drinking has started, it is not terminated until the person has moved through the entirety of the drinking behavior continuum, or the supply is exhausted. I have often observed people support another person's progress along this continuum

knowing that the outcome not only would be violence and aggression, but that they, themselves, may be the target.

Intervention

Intervention occurs into the drinking behavior as distinguished from the process of intoxication. Intervention was avoided and withheld as long as possible, and occurred only in the face of physical danger (this is consistent with the traditional Athabaskan respect for the independence of the individual). When intervention did occur, the violent behavior was the focus of the intervention, not the drinking. Physical aggression was restricted, but not the drinking which preceded it. Even after a violent episode, once the violent person had calmed down, he was allowed to continue or resume drinking, until such time as he presented another unavoidable threat.

Intervention would occur when a person became so aggressive as to present an apparent serious threat either to his own safety or that of others. The form that this intervention took seemed to be determined by sex roles. Women would attempt to intervene if overt, physical aggression appeared imminent, but had not yet occurred (The aggressor referred to here is always a male. With the exception of two teenage girls, I never observed active physical aggression on the part of women.). Female intervention would take the form of reasoning, persuading, physical restraining efforts, and threats, both joking and serious. A male could respond to female intervention without losing face; whereas male intervention of this type would merely intensify the aggression, or cause the male intervenor to appear feminine. Males would intervene if actual physical aggression, beyond the limits tolerated by the group, was occurring. Male intervention took the form of physically separating the combatants and trying to persuade them to cool down. This type of intervention was the last resort and used only when a safety issue was involved; the degree to which safety was an issue determined the degree of intervention. Females, primarily, but males also, would remove the potential weapons (knives, guns, scissors, etc.) when it appeared that the safety of the individual or the group was at risk.

Role of the Young

Children are a significant factor in the drinking system in Village X. When the parent may become incapacitated through intoxication, the children maintain and manage the household. Older siblings feed, clothe, and care for younger siblings, protecting them from neglect. They possibly take care of the helpless parent (s), and occasionally protect the family from the violent outbursts of the drinking parent. Under drastic conditions the children may leave the home and stay with relatives or friends temporarily.

Children also occasionally assist with the preparations for drinking. I observed three boys, ages 10, 14, and 14, loading and unloading alcohol from a car trunk to a kitchen, and heard the owner instructing them as to where and how to hide and protect the liquor. Having assisted with, or observed, the preparations for a party, the youngsters then wait for the drinking activity to begin. When alcohol is left unattended, or the adults are too intoxicated to care, they take full advantage of their opportunity to indulge. When the party (and hang overs) is finished, the children also assist in the clean up of the house. This assistance is rendered whether or not the youngsters engaged in the drinking.

Effects of Drinking

While it is difficult to demonstrate cause-effect relationships between drinking and certain events, a number of correlations may be identified in which alcohol is a present factor. These correlations include employee turn over, family discord, aggression, and deaths.


Of the villagers that are employed, employee turn-over in which alcohol is believed to be a present factor is 80%. This figure is the estimate of various members of the village council and other members of the village. With regard to marital and family discord, I am aware of two young women, each having one child, who have left their husbands because of their drinking. There are other cases of family breakdown in the village in which alcohol is present.

Aggression was not always present with alcohol, but alcohol was always present with aggression. The only fighting among men that I observed always included the presence of alcohol, as did the one instance of fighting among two teenage girls.

As determined from conversations with two members of the village, alcohol is believed to be present in the majority of deaths occurring in the village. This particularly holds true for violent deaths, such as shootings, drownings or snowmobile accidents. Approximately 10% of the village population (about 27 people) have died in the past 13 years. Of these, 40% were violent and were known or strongly believed to have alcohol as a present factor. If the cases of violent death in which the presence of alcohol is questionable are included, the figure becomes 60%.

Conclusion

This paper has described social systemic aspects of drinking behavior in one rural Athabascan village in Alaska. It has shown that drinking behavior is patterned systemically; and that implicit rules (and values) prescribe how alcohol arrives, how it is managed, and when, where, and by whom it is consumed. Though touched on only slightly here, economic, social, and religious factors in the drinking system were also identified.

This system of drinking behavior is powerful and pervasive. It ranges from the socialization of children to expressions of what it means to be a man or woman in this village at this time. Additionally, this system is supported by economic, social, and religious factors. All of these aspects together constitute what I call the cultural dimension of drinking behavior. This cultural dimension must be acknowledged; particularly by alcohol rehabilitation programs that aspire to be seriously effective. And not only is acknowledgement necessary, but also integration of this perspective with the medical and psychological models of drinking if we are to achieve a genuinely adequate understanding of drinking behavior. 

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