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**Chapter 36****Alcohol as an Issue in Papua New Guinea: A View from the Outside**

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It has been aptly remarked that alcohol can be used as a kind of coloured dye, like a blue stain on a microscope slide, that outlines in sharp detail the structures and processes of a social order (Duster 1981). The papers, presentations and discussions at the conference that led to this volume brought us again and again up against the major issues and imperatives of Papua New Guinean society.

My role at the conference was very much that of an outsider, starting from scratch, on my first—but not, I hope, my last—visit, whispering every now and then to those next to me, 'Where is that?' or 'What's that mean?'. My anthropological colleagues will, I know, excuse me if I point out that much of the time I was learning at a second remove, a rank outsider listening to observations and analysis by people who were also outside the cultures and society under discussion. The view of an outsider can often be illuminating; it can teach us something we did not know or notice about ourselves. Many of us have had the experience of going back to the place where we grew up, now as outsiders, and seeing the culture through new eyes. My sense is that the anthropological work represented in this monograph is beyond what any society could hope for in its sensitivity and thoughtfulness, as a series of outsider's accounts struggling to see from the inside.

But there are some things that can only be seen or felt from the inside. And here, too, as a novice I was extraordinarily privileged. Many people from the society shared with us, in the presentations and discussions at the conference, their perceptions and often deeply felt hopes and fears on matters concerning

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drinking. And we witnessed a truly extraordinary event, where those responsible for running the liquor control systems of a nation of 3 million people journeyed to join us from all over the country to tell us of the principles by which they operate and how their part of the system works.

It is my turn now to repeat the lessons back and to ask, 'Have I got it right? Does it make sense this way?'. And perhaps, as people struggle to correct me, we may together move to a new level of understanding about the issues which troubled us at the conference and which this book raises anew.

For a rank outsider, the first and overwhelming impression is of an incredible diversity in Papua New Guinea cultures, concerning alcohol as with other matters. The anthropological work, taken together, convinces me that, if there are 700 languages in Papua New Guinea, there are at least as many cultural understandings of, uses of and reactions to alcohol. There are societies where alcohol is incorporated into traditional rituals, and where it is held apart as a secular activity; societies in which people drink and those in which they do not; societies where women drink and others where women do not drink; societies in which people act predictably and peacefully when drunk and others in which they act *longlong* and belligerent; societies which regard it as a way of burning up unearned wealth and still others which regard it as a waste of wealth. These few phrases by no means comprehend the incredible diversity of cultural arrangements concerning alcohol in Papua New Guinea that is laid out for us elsewhere in this volume.

But a second impression pulls in the opposite direction—towards an emergent unity (see Marshall, chapter 1; Schieffelin chapter 4). There can be few free nations of the world where the channels of public discourse about the society are so unified as in Papua New Guinea, in terms of national newspapers and broadcasting media. There is incredible diversity, yes, but also an emergent unity of national identity and discourse. Those of us who live in other diverse, federated societies that once were new nations will recognize both the perpetual ambiguity between unity and diversity and the societal emphasis on an emergent unity. An American has only to turn over a coin to find it expressed: *e pluribus unum* ('out of many, one'). Those about the task of building a new nation may be concerned to provide for and honour diversity, but they will not allow nostalgia for old ways to get in the way of the task.

To balance the wealth of anthropological data on the diversity, let me give some halting first impressions of the unified national discourse on alcohol. Papua New Guinea is plainly a society that is worried about its drinking. The first evidence of this is the fact of the IASER conference itself and the study of which it was a part. Developing countries do not waste resources on issues of small public relevance, and Papua New Guinea has committed at least as many resources to this study as any developing country has to an alcohol study. The second source of evidence is the newspaper coverage. In the newspapers I read while visiting Papua New Guinea, I was struck by the many appearances of alcohol, not only in stories concerning the IASER conference or in stories specifically on alcohol matters, but also in general news stories. *Niugini Nius* (26 March 1981, p. 1) reported a speech by the Prime Minister on the themes of unity, dedication, selflessness and development. Among the counter-examples he offered of behaviours not in accord with these values were 'the driver who sees nothing wrong with misusing a government vehicle during working hours to sell his beer' and 'politicians who did not consider it wrong to be asleep or

drunk in Parliament'. For another example, *The Times of Papua New Guinea* (20 March 1981, p. 32) had as its '4-OH-6' cartoon a man asking another sitting at a desk, 'Could I see the officer in charge?', and receiving the reply, 'Sorry, he's still out from lunch.' Behind a closed door the officer-in-charge was asleep with his head on his desk, an empty beer bottle on the floor—still, indeed, 'out' from lunch. A more quantitative impression of the societal concern about alcohol can be gained from IASER's index of *Post-Courier* stories in 1979 (Papua New Guinea, Institute of Applied Social and Economic Research 1980). By my count, 100 of these stories were classified as concerned with alcohol, more than for 'agriculture and food supply', 'economic conditions' or 'family planning and population', though less than for 'crime', 'law and order', 'education' or 'health'.

To my mind, these straws in the wind show a national concern about alcohol issues that reaches far beyond the church and women's groups that are identified conventionally as the locus of such concerns—and that, indeed, often may be the only organized groups making representations on liquor issues. How may we characterize this concern and in what sense is it unified? The very different views of the provincial liquor licensing commission representatives expressed at the conference give the appearance of disarray rather than consensus. But it seems to me that, while there is a great diversity of views and plans on alcohol questions, there is considerable consensus on the rhetoric—the language—in which alcohol is to be discussed. Alcohol issues, in fact, are discussed in terms of and lie at the intersections of great national themes. Divergent positions on alcohol issues use much the same repertoire of themes; they just give different priorities to or emphasize different aspects of the themes.

My preliminary list of relevant themes would include the following: unity; autonomy; equality; development and progress; harmony and order; co-operation; health and welfare; and satisfaction.

Concerning *unity*, I have described already how Sir Julius Chan mentioned alcohol problems in a discussion of national unity. To take another example, the strong concern over clan fighting in the highlands, often associated with and dealt with in terms of alcohol (as in the liquor bans; see Piau-Lynch, chapter 9; Talyaga, chapter 10), may partly reflect distress over the visible evidence the fighting seems to provide of a lack of national consciousness and unity. In quite another direction, the breweries seem quite concerned to position and present their products as national drinks for a unified country.

We heard expressions at a number of levels at the IASER conference concerning *autonomy* and its implied partners: freedom, self-control and diversity. At the microcosmic level of the village, we heard that in many of the traditional cultures, there is a strong emphasis, particularly for males, on autonomy and self-control—valuable if sometimes equivocal qualities for a society pursuing a path of development (cf. Nelson, chapter 12). We have heard how this concern for autonomy and self-control interacts variously with drinking, in some cultures mandating abstention (Poole, chapter 15), in others requiring a man to be able to 'hold' heroic quantities of liquor without staggering (McDowell, chapter 20; Chowning, chapter 29), in still others associated with the competitive exchange of small mountains of beer (Warry, chapter 7; Sexton, chapter 8).

At the widest level, Marshall (1980a) has shown how strongly access to alcohol became the symbol and rhetoric for freedom and autonomy in the

struggle of the Papua New Guinean people to escape colonial status. Those of us born in Australia might remark wryly what a peculiarly Australian legacy it was for freedom to be defined in terms of the right to get drunk, but this would in fact be unjust; in many societies, the right to drunkenness has been a prerogative reserved for full citizens and denied to subservient statuses such as prisoners, slaves, children and women (Knupfer and Room 1964; Morgan 1981).

Alcohol and the rhetoric of autonomy and self-control are linked also at levels between the individual and the societal, as Papua New Guinea seeks to accommodate and recognize its cultural diversity. In the move to a federal structure with provincial governments, alcohol control has been and continues to be an important area in which the meaning and implications of decentralization are worked out. Devolution of control to the provincial level seems to have become both a symbol of the transfer of authorities and a means to provide provincial governments with real autonomy in the sense of revenue sources that they control.

We heard from a number of provincial liquor licensing commissioners at the conference how alcohol control becomes, in turn, a symbol of autonomy and self-government at the village level. In the numerous discussions we heard of village drinking clubs as an important new idea in Papua New Guinea in the last few years, a dominant theme was the desirability of giving control of their resources and lives to the villages and clans, in part as a signal of their freedom and self-control (Darrouzet, chapter 22; Sumanop, chapter 30).

The discussions of village drinking clubs have also given an important place to the next general theme, *equality*. Why, it is asked, should not people in rural areas have the same rights and access to alcohol as those in urban areas—the right to drink or get drunk without having to travel great distances? In this view, setting up village drinking clubs becomes a matter of social justice.

There are other ways in which alcohol and equality interact—particularly, as is noted in many of the anthropological analyses in this volume, in the power relations between status differentiations in Papua New Guinean cultures—between men and women, between young men and old men, between bigmen or political elites and men with less status. It is clear that in most situations in Papua New Guinea, men and women do not have effective equality in drinking. At least as important, alcohol and drunkenness have become in Papua New Guinea, as often elsewhere (Room 1980), an instrument and expression of intimate domination of husbands over wives. With respect to power relations among men, alcohol appears to play a more equivocal role, serving sometimes as a medium for those of lower status to challenge and seek equality with those of higher status.

It is clear that the demands of autonomy and the demands of equality often clash. There is no tyranny so strong as a small tyranny, and Poole's example (chapter 15) of the suicides of young men who had disobeyed their village elders reminds us of the strength and effects of inequality in many village cultures. Reay speculates (chapter 13) that there may have been less emphasis on equality for women in the days since Independence. From this we may speculate further that devolution of power to the provinces and villages may likewise tend to reinforce rather than undermine status inequalities.

The importance of the rhetoric of *development and progress* in discussing almost any issue in Papua New Guinea must strike any newcomer as soon as he or she gets off the plane. As we heard throughout the conference, alcohol has

an equivocal relation to development, and helps alert us that there are in fact two images or models of development. One is of hard work, capital accumulation, delayed gratifications, building for the next generation. To this ethic—which might variously be described as puritanical, capitalist or Marxist—alcohol is in many circumstances a threat (hence the title chosen for this book). Working men in nineteenth century Britain, who wanted to signal their desire that they or their children get ahead in the world, became abstainers (Harrison 1971) and we heard at the IASER conference of similar behaviour in Papua New Guinea (for instance, Schwartz, chapter 31). Several chapters describe how efficiently beer operates in the village environment to reduce potential capital to urine; we may expect to find this operating also in the towns. But alcohol is also an opportunity in the light of this ethic—both in terms of entrepreneurs and the creation of retail enterprises at the village level, and at a more national level in terms of capital accumulation. Much of the individual earnings of the ‘coffee flush’ in the highlands, as we learned at the conference, flow through beer purchases into the centralized coffers of the breweries, the national and provincial governments, the wholesalers and distributors.

The alternative image of development and progress is in terms of consumption. Papua New Guineans are by no means alone in their desire for the consumer society, to ‘have it all now’—it is a powerful pull in almost every country in the world. In terms of *this* image of development, alcohol is central, as the ultimate consumable. As noted, it is also relatively cheap, so that it can serve as a kind of place-marker for those who want the whole consumer society but can afford only symbols of it. Certainly, we may guess that were beer advertising again allowed in this country, the breweries would put a major emphasis on beer drinking as a symbol of success and progress in the new consumer society.

As the Prime Minister’s speech cited above tells us, there is a kind of dialectic between these two images of progress, of development versus consumption, working for the future versus enjoying it now. It is in terms of these contrasting images that much of the national discussion about alcohol seems to take place in Papua New Guinea. Yet it is not simply a moral issue. The analyses in this book remind us that village people often turn to consumption following repeated failures of their attempts at development, at building for the future (see Grossman, chapter 5; Reay, chapter 13).

Another important dimension of the national discussion seems to be in terms of *harmony and order*, an inevitable preoccupation of new nations confronted with centrifugal tendencies and limits on central authority and power. We have heard how in a number of village cultures—though certainly not all—drinking in fact is interwoven in harmonious and peaceful local relations (Smith, chapter 21; Carrier, chapter 32). But at the national level, alcohol is seen as contributing to and perhaps symbolizing fighting and discord—in terms of tribal fighting, in terms of tavern brawls and violent urban crime and within the family in terms of wife-beating. We discussed several times at the conference the predominantly cultural rather than psychological link between alcohol and violence (MacAndrew and Edgerton 1969), and it is clear that this link is very much a part of national understandings about the qualities and problems of alcohol in Papua New Guinea. The extraordinary steps of temporary provincial bans on liquor sales, stringent closing hours etc., seem to have as a prime justification the promotion of harmony and order

(Piau-Lynch, chapter 9; Talyaga, chapter 10). Again, we repeatedly heard village drinking clubs justified in these terms—as separating into different drinking places potential combatants (see, for example, Sexton, chapter 8; Sumanop, chapter 30).

I will pass over the other themes I mentioned, of co-operation, health and welfare, and satisfaction, just noting that each of these themes, also, entered into discussions of alcohol in Papua New Guinea during the IASER conference and that, conversely, alcohol figures in the public discussion of these themes.

Sometimes the concern about alcohol in a country like Papua New Guinea is seen, I think, as a hangover (if you will pardon the term) of missionary influence and a colonial past—as a worry of expatriates and outsiders rather than of the indigenous people. The past is, of course, relevant. But what I have just tried to do is to suggest that the past is by no means in command of alcohol issues. There are indeed strong concerns among Papua New Guineans today,—and I have tried to suggest why this is the case—that alcohol issues lie at the intersections of major national issues and concerns, often provide an arena of symbol for the discussion of those concerns and are decided partly in terms of priorities among those concerns. This analysis does not, of course, tell us how Papua New Guineans will move in the future as they make essentially political decisions about the kind of society they want and the place of alcohol in it. To those of us who heard the liquor licensing commissioners from all over the nation, it is clear that there are many divergent views and plans—that the country is in fact in a period of experimentation and uncertainty about how to handle alcohol. For a researcher, it is an exciting time, and I am a little envious of those of you who will be studying what happens—leading, as the old curse has it, ‘an exciting life’.

What it seems to me most useful to do as an outsider is to try to lay out some experiences that other countries have had in facing what seem to be situations analogous to that of Papua New Guinea today. First, let me mention that the experience of constructing a liquor control system at the end of a period of prohibition of alcohol is by no means unprecedented. Canada, the United States, Finland, Norway, Russia and Iceland are among the countries that have been through that experience in the last sixty years. If there is one conclusion that can be drawn from these different national experiences, it is that while the decisions made as the system is set up have enormous consequences for the future, and there is sustained national attention to the details of the system as it is set up, attention and concern tend to decay over time, and it is frequently almost impossible to change the system fundamentally once it is established.

Second, there are also many precedents for a multi-level system of alcohol control, with control shared between levels analogous to the nation, the province and the village in Papua New Guinea terms. Switzerland, Canada and the United States all provide examples—clearer examples for the alcohol control field than Australia. This kind of multi-level structure has clear advantages in a diverse society, allowing flexibility in responding to local situations. But it also has some drawbacks—to the extent that local systems differ, equality of access to drinking is impaired and, as Papua New Guineans well know, bootlegging and other illegal transfers may also occur. Furthermore, rational policy decisions will be hampered to the extent that the costs of alcohol use (the handling of the problems), the fiscal benefits of alcohol use

(taxes and licence fees) and the controls over alcohol use become located at different levels of government.

Third, there has been an enormous wealth of experience in the last 100 years with experiments in alcohol control in a variety of different countries and cultural contexts, and it might well benefit policy makers in Papua New Guinea to draw on those experiments and experiences. Alcohol was an important national issue in the United States during its central formative years of nation-building, in the century after 1830, and was also important in a number of other countries in this period. As countries turned from prohibition to alcohol control, there were experiments with mechanisms very similar to those now being tried in Papua New Guinea. For instance, the ownership and operation of a drinking place by a village resembles the 'Gothenburg system', as it was called, of municipal ownership of taverns, first tried in Sweden in the 1880s. A system of local control of liquor licences and conditions by local 'bigmen' would roughly describe the English system of local licensing magistrates with wide discretionary powers. The provincial-owned stores in Enga sound a lot like the provincial and state monopolies on alcohol sales all over Canada and in over one third of the states in America, adopted at the end of prohibition to try to take private profit out of alcohol sales. Many countries and states have state licensing systems like the dominant current mode in Papua New Guinea. Many also have provisions for 'local option' whereby a locality can vote not to have alcohol sales in its area.

Fourth, there is one characteristic that all these systems have in common—a characteristic that has been driven home to us in a three-year study comparing national experiences from 1950 to 1980 in seven countries: the International Study of Alcohol Control Experiences (Mäkelä *et al.* 1981; Single *et al.* 1981). All these systems create at least a partial monopoly for those inside them, whether they be state or private interests. They are thus usually very profitable for all concerned, and they create large and powerful vested interests in the continuance of the basic system, with gradual liberalizations of control for the benefit of those already inside. It does not matter whether the system is state or communally or privately owned; it comes with a built-in ratchet mechanism. The state has created a property interest in the franchise to sell alcohol. It derives fiscal benefits from the franchise and it is politically painful to extinguish that interest. Usually, it takes a war or a major popular or religious movement centred on alcohol to take away licences or revenues, once granted, on any large-scale basis. In this sense, the three-month bans in Papua New Guinea have been truly remarkable, and I would be surprised if such drastic actions continue far into the future. It is this ratchet mechanism of vested interests that gives such stability to alcohol control systems after their first few exciting years.

I would mention also that in many countries alcohol licensing systems have been ideal vehicles for corruption, bribery and self-dealing, since often-underpaid state officials are put in charge of licences which are valuable commodities. My impression is that Papua New Guinea has a good record in such matters. But Papua New Guineans would be well advised to decide how vulnerable their society is in such matters and design their systems to take this into account.

There is, of course, one easy way to minimize the creation of vested interests and any possibility of corruption: to have no licensing or control system at all. The plan of the liquor licensing commissioner from Enga Province reported at

the conference (see also *Post-Courier*, 10 October 1980, p. 21) comes very close to this, although he proposes still to maintain some vestige of a 'pyramid' of control. This position actually has some support in the Anglo-American scholarly literature on alcohol, where it is sometimes known as the 'socio-cultural position' (Chafetz 1970; Harford *et al.* 1980; Mäkelä 1975; Pittman 1980). This position notes the very strong cultural differences in the nature and extent of alcohol problems, for example, those existing among Papua New Guinean cultures. It singles out some particular cultural drinking styles—often Jewish, Chinese and Italian—and notes that they seem to be relatively problem-free. Alcohol is accepted in the culture and, in the case of Italians, treated much like any other commodity. Controls on drinking in these cultures appear a matter of individual and collective self-control, rather than external state-imposed controls.<sup>1</sup> What we need, instead of state controls or religious prohibitions on drinking, is to teach members of other cultures how to drink moderately, like Jews or Chinese.

This idea is, of course, enormously attractive to those of us who are libertarians and believe in progress and perfectibility. There is only one problem. As I believe my anthropological colleagues will agree, it is not easy, and perhaps impossible, to take one trait like drinking habits and graft it onto another culture. Cultures are much more integrated and whole than that. Perhaps the only way to learn to drink like Jews or Chinese may be to learn to *be* Jews or Chinese. Cultural change comes slowly and hard and unpredictably, particularly if someone is trying to engineer it from outside.

It is, then, true to say that cultures vary in their definition and categorization of alcohol, some treating it like any other commodity, and others assigning it to a variety of special categories—sacred, dangerous, powerful etc. Further evidence on this point is found throughout this volume. It is true, but not very helpful from the point of view of policy. What a policymaker needs to know is how cultures *change* on this kind of dimension, if he or she wants to help or retard the processes of change.

Of course, no culture or society ever exactly repeats the experience of another place or time. But such historical experience is all we have to go on, and may be illuminating. So I want to recount to you some examples that seem to me potentially relevant to Papua New Guinea's present situation.<sup>2</sup> Papua New Guinea presently is going through a veritable explosion in the availability of alcohol. The chief measure of this is the number of licences granted in the provinces, but I believe that improvements in the transportation system and such measures as lengthening opening hours also point in the same direction. Along with the explosion of availability, and indeed preceding it, has been a steep rise in consumption—a rise that is apparently checked for the moment, but which seems likely to resume.

The first potentially relevant examples are Britain (Coffey 1966; Harrison 1971) and the United States (Cherrington 1969; Rorabaugh 1979) in the eighteenth century. These were societies in which cheap distilled spirits became widely available for the first time and in general the licensing laws did not

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<sup>1</sup>There is very little drunkenness among Jewish and Chinese people traditionally, and the argument tends to ignore the substantial cirrhosis and other alcohol-related health problems among Italians.

<sup>2</sup>Some salient characteristics of that situation are presented in Marshall (chapter 2).



control availability strongly. Both governments had a fiscal interest and also a class-based interest (in terms of farmers for whom spirits was a transportable and saleable form of grain) in encouraging consumption. Members of both societies drank more alcohol per capita at that time than any time since—*much* more alcohol. In London, all accounts agree, the result was appalling, particularly in terms of the effect on poor people. ‘Drunk for a penny, dead drunk for two pence’ was a slogan of the gin-shops and there is a famous set of prints by Hogarth entitled *Beer Street, Gin Lane* that graphically portrays such scenes as drunk mothers dropping their babies downstairs. Some of you may have read the book or seen the film of *Tom Jones*, by Henry Fielding. If so, you will know that he was hardly a puritan. Fielding was a London magistrate, and he and his brother, horrified by what they saw around them, laboured for years to get a minimum licensing law controlling the number of gin-shops.

In England, where the poor at the time had little say in their fate, something could eventually be done from above. But in America, it took a major religious revival sweeping through the people, and a temperance movement that dominated the political agenda for decades after 1830, to bring an end to the spree. In England, too, the beginning of the nineteenth century saw a major religious movement among the people. It is relevant to Papua New Guinea’s experience to note that it is out of those religious convulsions that Methodists, American Baptists, fundamentalist and gospel denominations—and eventually, at a second remove, the Salvation Army and Seventh Day Adventists—arose. The positions on alcohol of these churches were formed, if you trace it back, by the experience of the binges of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Britain and America. Both nations eventually responded to the problems in terms of their own internal solutions. But the cultural solutions were long delayed and arduous, and there was much suffering before they came into play.

A second example is France after 1877 (Barrows 1979, 1980). A bourgeois government, terrified of the common people after the Paris Commune, and regarding cafés and taverns as centres of subversion and revolutionary agitation, recalled large numbers of liquor licences. Drinking turned into a political act of protest. In revulsion against these restrictions, after the government was removed, licences for drinking places were made freely available to anyone with a clean civil record who paid a fee of 2½ francs. The number of drinking places more than doubled and consumption went up just as steeply. Except in wartime, France retained from that time until a few years ago the world championship for alcohol consumption per capita—with a liver cirrhosis mortality rate to match, and eventually also a high drunk-driving casualty rate. Alcohol is indeed integrated into French culture, but with a very substantial health cost. No temperance movement in France ever made substantial headway against the fact that a large proportion of the rural population was employed in the production of wine and had a vested interest in high consumption.

The third example is Finland in 1969 (Ahlström-Laakso and Österberg 1977; Beauchamp 1980; Mäkelä and Österberg 1976; Sulkunen 1980). Finland is a rather homogeneous country of 4.5 million people. It has a history of temperance associated with its national independence movement from Russia prior to the First World War, of prohibition in the 1920s and of a very strict state monopoly on the production and sale of alcohol from then on. Even after the Second World War, Finland had prohibition in rural areas, since there were no state liquor stores or licensed restaurants there. While many Finns