
NOTES AND REVIEWS

DRINKING AND DRIVING IS SO MUCH FUN

Arctic Workshop at the University of Tartu in Estonia May 31 – June 1, 2013

Drinking and Driving Is So Much Fun is an unusual title for an anthropological workshop. It has just the right provocation to induce serious reflections on something that anthropologists usually reserve for the famous ‘corridor talk’ during conferences, when they discuss ambivalent fieldwork experiences difficult to integrate into the success stories of anthropological research.

The drunken native is such a powerful stereotype in the Russian North, serving mainly disrespect and marginalisation, that it is quite a risky endeavour for outsiders to discuss drinking in Siberia. The theme is such a blind spot in the anthropology of Siberia that it is high time that we skipped the superficial and stereotypical images and developed some deeper understanding of the manifold aspects of native life linked to alcohol.

The presentations of the workshop took up the task of challenging these stereotypes by careful ethnographic description and analysis, and also by understanding the powerful role stereotypes play in public discourse. Art Leete traced them back to antiquity, where the northern barbarian neighbours of the Greeks were believed to be heavy drinkers of undiluted wine. He followed this image of drinking northerners through Montesquieu up to the ethnographic literature of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Explanations for this north-south distinction in drinking changed over time but were always linked to some kind of ‘nature’ of the North or northerners. Today the most popular and widespread of these ‘natural’ reasons for the deviant drinking habits of northern people was taken up by Aimar Ventsel. His presentation shed light on the belief that the lack of an enzyme or gene

dooms the indigenous peoples of Siberia to suffer from serious alcohol problems. He was not the only one during the workshop who made the important point that stereotypes are not only used to marginalise indigenous groups. They also serve the arguments of ethnic movements that criticise alcohol by declaring it to be foreign to their groups and an instrument of colonial domination. Genes that influence the ability to metabolise alcohol were also mentioned in the keynote speech of Jaanus Harro. He revealed that in certain populations in Asia the percentage of people with a genetically determined lack of particular enzymes is higher than in Europe. This slows down the metabolising of alcohol and causes these people to feel the effects of alcohol more strongly. Substances that block the same enzymes are used in therapies for alcohol addiction in order to cause an aversion effect.

Anna Stammer Gossman investigated the role of stereotypes in national self-stylisation. She used the term “alcoholity” to describe how self-image, and also state regulation, determine different conventions linked to alcohol consumption in nation states. One of the main anthropological insights into the human consumption of alcohol is that even the most uncontrolled and deviant drunken behaviour is framed by expectations and conventions in the respective social environment. The “alcoholities” of nations like Russia or Finland set the reference points from which the drinking habits of minority groups are judged.

Most of the research presented centred either on the Khanty and Nenets of Western Siberia and the northern Russian tundra,

or on cases from the Republic of Sakha/Yakutia. Ina Schröder, Karina Lukin, Kirill Istomin, Laur Vallikivi and Stephan Dudeck described drinking cultures from the Republic of Sakha/Yakutia. It became obvious that practices emanating from excessive or almost self-destructive drinking (described by Schröder, Lukin, Istomin and Dudeck) to the temperance of women (described by Dudeck) or protestant converts (described by Vallikivi), structure the internal distinctions of gender-, age-, and local groups as well as the differences between heavy drinkers and mainstream society. They determine even settlement geography and the movements of the nomadic reindeer herders, as Kirill Istomin exemplified. Drunkenness enables dangerous contacts with the dead and is a source of humour, as Ina Schröder reported. It produces persistent negative images that seriously influenced ethnographic fieldwork in the case of Karina Lukin. Stephan Dudeck focussed on the impact of transgressive behaviour that aims at the joint loss of face.

For Yakutia Tatiana Argunova-Low and Yuri Zhegusov used sociological and anthropological methods to describe ethnic differences in drinking and how concepts of agency and responsibility for alcohol related problems are influenced by the dominant therapy of alcoholism in the Russian Federation, called "coding". Norman Prell and Eleanor Peers described very different social contexts in which alcohol and the absence of alcohol play an important role. Norman Prell discussed communities of migrant workers on a construction site and Russian settlers on the road from Yakutsk to Magadan. Eleanor Peers focussed on the role of drinking in the main Sakha ritual, the Yhyakh festival, and how the nationalist revival promoted an alcohol ban during the festival.

Only Laura Siragusa presented an exclusion of these two regional foci with her talk about the Veps minority of the Russian

North. Drinking problems are often considered to be the result of assimilation processes. Laura Siragusa's future research will test this hypothesis by exploring the link of language and alcohol in a broader sense, going beyond the focus on language shift and the negative consequences of heavy drinking.

Joachim Otto Habeck's presentation touched again on an overarching but often neglected theme connected with drinking practices – the hangover. Like Jaanus Harro he provided important insights from medical research that provide the background for a better understanding of the rich folklore and popular practices relating to how to evaluate and treat a hangover. The hangover is probably also connected to a very specific drinking pattern called *zapoï* in Russian. The periodic and episodic drinking formerly associated with the medical concept of dipsomania was mentioned several times as a common and even accepted drinking phenomenon. Another current theme was the link between feelings of guilt, inferiority, and shame associated with drinking and also appearing with the hangover. Shame as a guardian of behavioural borders linked to social reputation and respect is often involved in drinking that transgresses these borders. The phrase "Do you respect me?" as a means to force others to keep on drinking is well known to all (male) researchers in Russia. It prevents the invited person to induce a shameful situation of unequal drunkenness. I observed this pressure to join excessive drinking mainly among young males who suffer from feeling of status insecurity that arises while consuming alcohol. Shame serves also to keep information about drinking practices and the practices themselves hidden inside narrow social groups. In this way shame helps to maintain the boundaries of drinking groups as collectives of complicity and enables the ritual inclusion of outsiders in these collectives by drinking.

Does alcohol as a potent drink have agency itself? And if so what kind of agency? This was another important question raised during the discussion. Alcohol obviously has the ability to influence the possibilities and responsibilities of human action significantly. My impression is that the allocation of power to alcohol itself only obscures the agency of social relationships that are at work when people engage in drinking. I would consider alcohol only a catalyst for these relationships which reinforce their power or deprive other social relationships of their agency. In the same way in which agency attributed to money hides the power of economic relationships that define the monetary system, social relationships are hiding behind the agency of alcohol or the treatment of alcoholism. It will be the future task of anthropological research in Siberia to investigate the correlation of alcohol and agency more deeply.

The discussion revealed many other themes that were not, or only superficially, touched on in the papers and deserve to be discussed in detail in a future workshop. Such peculiar places for drinking parties as the Russian sweat bath *banya* as well as the summerhouse *datcha* were not discussed. Characteristic drinking traditions like the practice of *otmyvat'* (wash) achievements and acquisitions and the episodic *zapoi* were touched only briefly in the discussion. The eminent influence of the drinking habits of settlers and migrant workers, which is so influential for local drinking cultures in Siberia, was only touched on in Norman Prell's paper. Aimar Ventsel briefly discussed the present changes in gendered drinking practices, the on-going switch from vodka to beer, and the diversification process in drinking habits. Tatiana Argunova-Low pointed out the methodological difficulties that research and writing about alcohol constitute for anthropologists working in Siberia. Stereotypes about marginalised social groups and the morally charged

discourse about alcohol make it difficult to write about drinking. The physical and social effects of alcohol and personal security make it difficult to engage in the participant observation of drinking.

There is a lot to do in the research on drinking in Siberia and I hope that the ambivalence of fun and hangover and the moral taboos will not prevent anthropologists from focusing on this topic. The workshop in Tartu was a wonderful opportunity to get an impression of how huge and unexplored is the field of alcohol studies in Siberia. The anthropology of drinking in Siberia was taken out of its 'corridor talk' niche in Tartu, which was also the perfect place to discuss very personal experiences of Siberian fieldwork with good friends under the influence of the one or more glasses of vodka or alcohol free beverages in the evenings. As the majority of participants I am very much looking for a follow up to *Drinking and Driving Is So Much Fun!*

Stephan Dudeck