

The Elephant in the Room: Fieldwork, alcohol and ethnography

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Abstract

Cryptic warnings about the prevalence of alcohol consumption are inadequate preparation for ethnographic work in hunter-gatherer communities. Grounding in the literature surrounding alcohol consumption is essential for any ethnographer working in this situation, in addition to a reflexive examination of attitudes to alcohol which are exported to the field. Engaging with the literature concerning anthropology's relationship to the ethnography of alcohol consumption, this article explores in detail the habits around and consequences of the presence of alcohol in two !Xun and ǀAkhwe Hai communities in North-Central Namibia. It illustrates two very different field situations, as well as distinct attitudes from authorities in the form of regional government, national government and farm administration. Additionally, methodological concerns and constraints placed by alcohol are explored, along with coping strategies employed by this researcher.

[T]here are few domains in which being what you are and being what you ought to be are farther apart than where drinking is concerned.

(González Turmo 2001:130)

Embarking upon the initial fieldwork stage of doctoral research among hunter-gatherer communities, I received a number of warnings about the communities in which I work, and their relationship with alcohol. A predecessor on my project referenced her own difficulties “finding people sober enough to speak to”, and while we work thousands of kilometres apart I was nonetheless wary of some of the problems I might face during the course of data-gathering. Alcohol is a thorny subject, yet one which has been engaged with in an anthropological perspective multiple times (Heath 1975, Room, 1984, Heath 1987, Douglas 1987, Dietler 2006, Sylvain 2006 to

name but a few). What this paper will argue is that to ignore or downplay the various influences of alcohol upon hunter-gatherer communities in Namibia is to do them a disservice, however the complex history of alcohol in both inter- and intra-group relationships necessitates a highly nuanced analysis. Nonetheless, we must engage with it. The impression overall that I received from other researchers who have dealt with alcohol is that it is a blight. It is a corruption, and it makes research more difficult. Alcohol, chiefly home-made in the form of *epwaka*, *tombo*¹ or the distilled *onbike*², was indeed a constant presence in my work. I realised very early into my work at my first field site that alcohol would be a regular and recurring feature of the places I was living. This trend continued, although there were marked differences in the effects of alcohol across both my areas of work. I also discovered that far from being some sort of outside corruption, the complex relationships that included alcohol were a useful lens through which to examine the myriad aspects of community life. This paper will engage with the timeline of the anthropological engagement with alcohol, and highlight some of the issues faced when working in North Central Namibia over a 12-month period from August 2014 to August 2015, both methodological and conceptual.

For an assessment of the anthropological engagement with alcohol over the course of the last century, we can look to Dietler's (2006) appraisal. Following on from Heath's (1987) earlier review, he highlights a trend flowing from a 19th Century epidemiological conception of drinking as a pathology. Starting in the 1960s, and running through into the 1980s (Dietler 2006:230) we began to see the first engagements with alcohol as a central subject, often challenging ethnocentric assumptions inherent in the study of alcohol, and focusing on what could be termed "normal drinking" and alcohol as a social artefact or an embodiment of material culture (230). This shift in perception, which Room (1984) examined, could also be said to mirror a shift in the perceptions of anthropologists with regard to alcohol. Room's recommendation is that it is essential to look at the "liberal intellectual" cultural milieu that anthropologists take into the field from their own drinking *habitus*³. This *habitus* is one in which the "natural" state is to be drinking, and anything else, specifically abstinence, is unnatural

¹ Both fermented drinks made with gathered, usually wild fruit.

² Spirit alcohol made by distilling fermented fruit drinks such as *epwaka*, *tombo* and others.

³ Assuming, of course, that the anthropologists concerned come from a society in which it could be said that there is a "liberal intellectual" cultural milieu.

(1984:173). This attitude represents a progression in the arc of anthropology's engagement with alcohol, which Heath and Dietler both note. Early anthropological engagement with drinking, in commonality with many other aspects of early anthropology, fed directly into the colonial project, moralising about colonised peoples' predilection towards "inebriation and disorder" (Dietler 2006:230) with an implicit agenda to justify colonisation. It was very clear that in early anthropologists' assessment, colonised peoples "ought not" to be drinking.

Anthropologists, however, also came to distinguish themselves from other researchers focusing on the topic of alcohol partly by their focus not purely on alcoholism and alcohol dependence as previous research had done, but on what Heath refers to as the use of alcohol "in the normal course of workaday affairs in integral communities" (1987b:105). This progression comes at a time congruent with the careers of ethnographers of the so called "wet generation" (Room 1984:173) who came of age in a time of increasingly liberal attitudes regarding the consumption of alcohol in the US. Room characterises the experience of the ethnographer interacting with the various alcohol consumption as a journey, and sets out in opposition twin notions of problem inflation and problem deflation (178). Correctly, he emphasises that the cultural preconceptions that any ethnographer has regarding alcohol will affect whether they present alcohol consumption as a problem or not. A ethnographer from the UK, for example, may regard drinking after work as a method of relaxation hardly worthy of comment, whether or not this after-work drinking is an unusual phenomenon within the field context. I would contend, however, that such subjectivity is hardly unique to anthropologists or ethnographers. As Agar points out, this notion of "inflation" versus "deflation" also carries with it the problematic assumption that it is possible to present an accurate notion of the "reality" of the situation (178). Leaving this aside, however, Room's image of a journey upon which the researcher embarks, emphasising either the negative or positive aspects of alcohol consumption, mirrors my own experience as an anthropological researcher travelling to the field without specific training in the field of "alcohol studies". Heath's comment on this, which Room cites, is particularly poignant:

One important factor that has shaped ethnographic studies of alcohol to date is their almost uniformly incidental or casual conception. [...]not a single one of the anthropologists in attendance [at a conference on alcohol and anthropology] who had published on drinking patterns had set out originally with that in mind. By that I do not mean that they had changed their focus of research during field work, but rather that they

had studied something else . . . and found, when analyzing their data *later*, that the relations between people and alcohol were important enough to deserve special discussion.

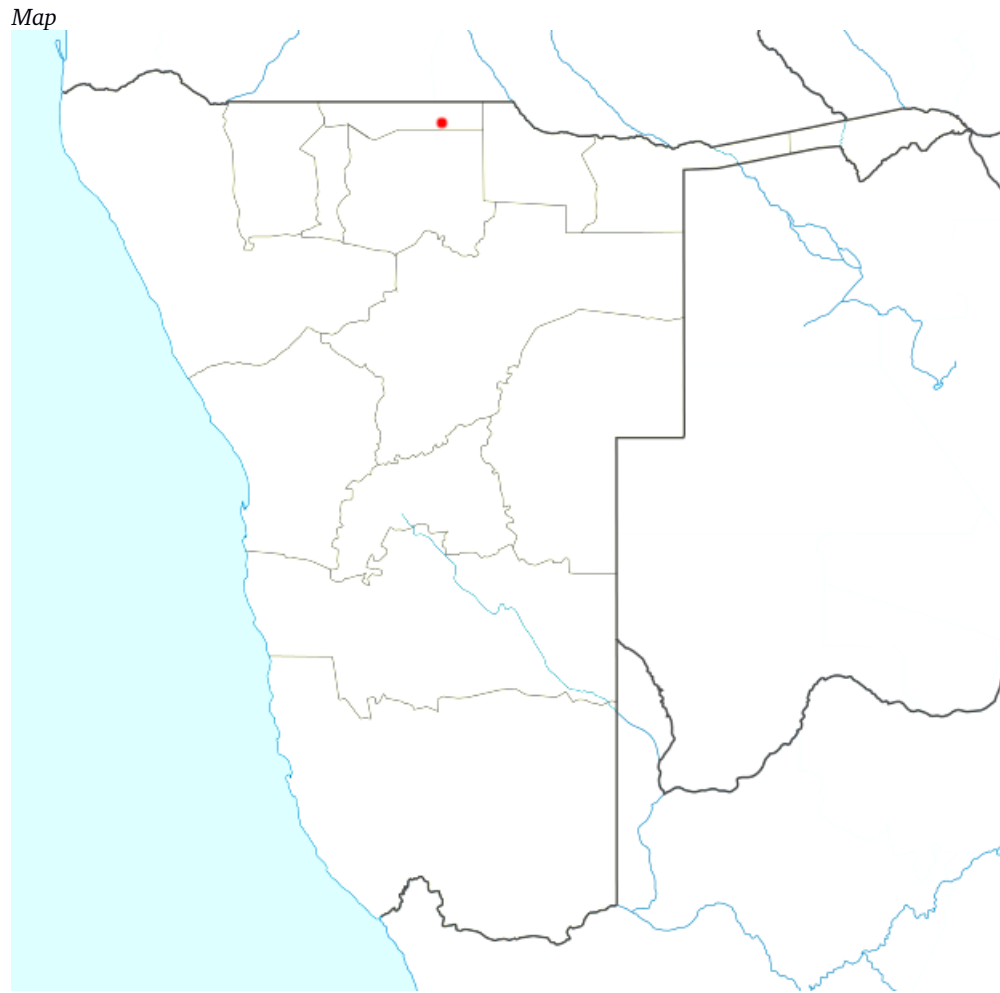
(Heath 1975:60, cited in Room 1984:173)

Room says that this implies that most anthropologists who end up dealing with alcohol are, at the time of fieldwork, “laymen with respect to the alcohol literature” (Room 1984:173). In other words, given that they have no previous understanding of the ethnographic or epidemiological literature on the subject of alcohol, one can assume their attitude to simply be a transplant of that of “the average liberal intellectual of their society and time” (ibid). This perspective, coming along with a criticism of anthropologists as having ignored the more dysfunctional aspects of alcohol consumption in their field sites (Dietler 2006:130), is clear in its delineation of the interaction between *habitus* and field⁴. In other words, anthropologists are wont to ignore the negative consequences of alcohol consumption if they are applying their “liberal intellectual”, “moderate drinking” *habitus* to a field site in which the concept of moderate drinking may not apply in the same way. With regard to my own fieldwork, and the methodological issues caused by the presence of alcohol, this is a useful perspective to consider. Prior to setting out, I had no grounding in the literature around alcohol, and was bound up in ethnocentric assumptions about alcohol as an addictive and socially destructive substance which I took with me from a (broadly Protestant Christian) Scottish culture. As such, my own version of Room's “journey” was one through three broad phases: shock about the extent of “the problem”, denial of the extent of that “problem”, through to the acknowledgement of alcohol as an important sociocultural artefact, as well as questioning its nature as a “problem” at all. Though the primary subject of my field research was not itself alcohol, I also recognise that a prior grounding in the literature concerning alcohol research would also have been highly beneficial.

Fieldwork was conducted at two separate field locations, both in the North-Central region of the country, and with a number of marked differences in their makeup and situation. Ekoka, located close to the border with Angola in Ohangwena region, is a considerable distance north of Namibia's famous “Red Line”, delineating the dominion of the unconquered Ovambo kings and the end of effective white rule during apartheid. The community

⁴ “Field” in the Bourdieu-esque sense of “*habitus* and field”, rather than the “field” of “fieldwork”, although in this particular case they happen to be the same.

is mixed between !Xun and ꞤAkhwe Hai||om members, with !Xun residents forming the majority, and !Xun spoken most often. The community, while governed by the regional government in Ohangwena, is a designated San resettlement project, administered in part by the Ministry of Lands, Resettlement and Rehabilitation. The primary aim of the resettlement project is to encourage farming as a means of production for those settled there (Takada 2015:146), however there is a constant level of minor conflict between the !Xun/ꞤAkhwe Hai||om inhabitants and the Oshikwanyama-speaking Ovambo residents, expressed often in interviews and general conversation. Homesteads, established before the designation of Ekoka as a resettlement project, still exist there. On top of the homesteads' physical imposition upon the area of the resettlement project, herds of cattle owned by the homesteaders require grazing land, which is a source of inter-communal conflict. The local Ovambo headman is described by the current !Xun and ꞤAkhwe Hai||om headman as “my headman too”, and while there is friendship and co-operation between these communities, separation and conflict is also a prominent theme.



The main source of cash among !Xun and †Akhwe Hai| |om residents is the monthly pension income for the over 60s, which increased during the course of my fieldwork from N\$600 to N\$1000. Among a sample of 35 structured interviews over the course of March 2015, 9 interviewees (26%) reported receiving an over-60s state pension. However, due to sharing obligations, of the 31 interviewees who reported having a family member in receipt of the pension, 27 (87%) said that they expected to receive some of this pension money claimed by their relation. This network of obligations means that the arrival of the pension money each month to Ekoka acted as a cash injection for more than simply the over-60s. Farm work provided additional income, though most of this was casual labour or piecework. 46% of those interviewed on the subject (16/35) reported having worked “at the

houses of the Kwanyama”⁵ at some time in the last month, and 34% (12/35) had worked there in the last week. Of the 16 who had worked “at the houses of the Kwanyama” at any time in the preceding month, 9 were women and 7 men, and of the 12 who had worked in the preceding week, 7 were women and 5 men. This indicates a fairly equal distribution of labour among men and women, working within the margins for error present in a relatively small sample size such as this. In terms of payment, 14 of the 16 workers in the preceding month were paid in cash, the other two were paid in *mahango* (pearl millet) flour. 6 of the 14 cash-paid workers were paid in *mahango* in addition to cash.

The current de facto headman of Ekoka's !Xun and ꞤAkhwe Hai||om community, FN, a !Xun man in his mid-forties, discussed some of the problems facing the Ekoka community in an interview with me -- chiefly the local reliance on drought relief for basic sustenance, and the lack of provision in the community for self-sustaining hunting and gathering, horticulture or subsistence agriculture. FN is currently considered the deputy headman, as the actual headman, LN, a member of the ꞤAkhwe Hai||om minority and in his eighties, is blind and less and less mobile by the year. LN has delegated almost all of the tasks of leadership to FN, with whom he has a good relationship. FN is in absolutely no doubt as to where any and all problems facing the Ekoka community come from. I asked him why, when he advocated strongly for the !Xun and ꞤAkhwe Hai||om at Ekoka to use the ploughs, cattle, land and seeds they have been given to begin farming land, that nobody engaged in the practices of farming, after he indicated that lack of farming was a problem for him. I asked about many different possible factors that could cause these problems. He said, very simply: “I know what you are trying to do, to find out other reasons why there are problems, but the problem is simple. It all comes from the same thing: Alcohol”. At Ekoka, I would begin working in the village very early in the morning. I had to do this because there was almost nobody at the houses in the settlement from eleven o'clock onwards. Those in the community that worked for their Kwanyama neighbours stayed with them, returning periodically to see their families. Those present at the village permanently were without jobs. Each day, the residents eat a single morning meal of maizemeal porridge, made from the flour distributed in sacks as part of Namibia's drought relief program. This was mostly accompanied by *Ombidi*, a spinach-like green that grew as a weed on *mahango* plots and which the owners of those plots allowed

⁵ Colloquialism used to mean work on the Kwanyama homesteads, used as shorthand for all work conducted there.

the people of Ekoka to harvest for free. For most of them, this was the only meal of the day. At around ten or eleven o'clock, the *cucashops* ran by the neighbouring Kwanyamas would fill up with people. This has parallels in Sylvain's work in Omaheke region. She notes that "The money given to San workers by their Herero employers is expected to be spent on the beer that Herero women brew." (2006:138) The *epwaka* and *tombo*, the main drinks on offer for prices that Ekoka residents could afford, would be shared and passed around all day, until people went back to their houses at sundown. This seemed to happen every day. On an individual basis, of a voluntary sampling of Ekoka's !Xun and ǀAkhwe Hai|om residents, 91% (32/35) had visited the *cucashops* at some time in the preceding week, 71% (25/35) reported that they drank alcohol at the *cucashops* most days, although only 51% (18/35) thought it was true to say that they drank alcohol at the *cucashops* every day.

At one point, I was surprised in one morning of my fieldwork by a visit from a government contingent, who visited the community to expressly talk about alcohol abuse, as well as the violence and theft that it was supposedly at the root of. They arrived the morning after "pension day", the only time in the month anyone in the community has any money, and the time when alcohol consumption is most prevalent. I was talking to some of the members, who, at seven-thirty in the morning, were already drinking. Despite the meeting's supposed dedication to the "welfare" of the community, it was immediately clear to me by the reluctance of people to attend what the predicted efficacy of such a "welfare" meeting was. Speaking to the policeman beforehand, he said to me in English that the meeting was being held because "the drinking in the settlement has become unacceptable" (fieldnotes Ekoka 2015: 112). Originally, this gave me the impression that this was an extraordinary meeting of some kind, though he told me later that these meetings were held every month. The focus of the meeting was, according to him, primarily alcohol-fuelled violence. Despite the issues, a reasonably representative sample of the community turned up for the meeting, having been chivvied into it by the representatives themselves, who went door-to-door during breakfast. One such attendee was a woman who was very visibly and loudly distressed, alternately shouting and crying. She was described as being "intoxicated" (f.n.E. 2015: 113) to me, though I learned later that she had not in fact been drinking significantly. Those who described her in this way to me were using a reference to alcohol as a way to dismiss her concerns as drunken raving, and to minimise her experience. This description of her in this way, I learned later, came directly from

her husband. It was clear where the sympathies of the eighteen other attendants lay, as it was her husband who went over to “calm her down”, and who returned to the group at large to report that she was drunk, to general muttering and amusement. Her very public distress was, according to frank explanations from one person from the main settlement, her way of dealing with her abusive home life. She was greeted largely with embarrassment from the others in attendance, as the meeting was clearly difficult for her to listen to. She shouted in Oshikwanyama⁶ about the fact that she was “sick of being beaten up by her husband” (f.n.E. 2015: 113), who was also in attendance. Her shouting in the *lingua franca* in this way, despite her native language being !Xun, made it very clear that it was intended that the government officials hear and understand exactly what she was saying. She was making public the private concerns of her domestic abuse experience.

This making public of formerly private grievances can also be seen in stark relief in Briggs' (2000) examination of conflict resolution among an Inuit community in the Canadian Arctic. Here we see a situation in which the fear of conflict, argument and direct person-to-person confrontation is acute enough that members will not attend a meeting regarding a new bylaw out of aversion to arguments which may arise there (Briggs 2000: 117). The meeting I observed at Ekoka, particularly with its confrontational opening premise, would have been intolerable for members of this community. Yet, loaded personal messages, couched in general statements one way or the other, and some of which are emotionally charged and reference direct conflicts, are broadcast in the incredibly public sphere of radio “shout-outs” (119). Briggs hypothesises that the reason that this is allowed to occur is partially to do with the presence of an audience (120). For the woman crying at the Ekoka meeting, the audience here it seems was the government officials, as well as in part me, rather than the community members who were showing no interest in resolving her problem. Citing Eckert and Newmark's (1980) analysis of Central Eskimo song duels, another public airing of grievances, Briggs asserts that by making an accusation public, one deflects the burden of responsibility for criticism, and dilutes the confrontation from their point of view (Eckert and Newmark 1980: 200), thereby removing the risk of making the accusation. By crying openly at the government meeting, the woman in the situation I participated in was expressing her grievances in a way in

⁶ Oshikwanyama, the Bantu-family language and that of the ethnic-majority pastoralist community, was considered a *lingua franca* by !Xun- and Hai||omgowab-speakers when dealing with regional government, whose representatives all spoke only Oshikwanyama both among themselves and to the !Xun and ǀAkhwe Hai||om residents of Ekoka, despite the fact that Ohangwena government officials had reasonable proficiency in English (the official language of government in Namibia).

which she was protected from immediate retribution from her husband (though not, of course, from later retribution in the privacy of the home). Yet, this attempt to turn the community upon her abuser did not work. The husband still acted as mediator between her and the meeting, an arrangement not challenged by anyone else there. This was not challenged due to the fact that the negative connotations of alcohol consumption, explicitly the reason for the meeting being held in the first place, enabled her audience to minimise her grievances and to blame her, falsely attributing her distress to intoxication.

The substance of the meeting, according to the government officials' opening statement, largely boiled down to a fact-finding mission. It began with an accusation, echoing the concerns of the acting headman FN: "You have been given resources here, but you do not use them. You have not herded your cattle, or repaired the fences on your land". "We have", came the immediate reply from one particularly zealous !Xun horticulturalist "but what is the point when they are purposefully broken by others when we do it" (f.n.E. 2015: 113). He was highlighting some of the conflicts that exist at Ekoka between the Kwanyama community and that of the !Xun and †Akhwe Hai| |om community, exacerbated by the fact that much of the land, while technically a San resettlement area, is home to a large number of Kwanyama homesteads and pasture. Some herders have been known in the past to dismantle community fences in order to bolster their grazing land, which they are not allowed to expand upon as the area is for San resettlement. In addition to this, many Kwanyamas make a living at Ekoka by operating the *cucashops* that sell alcohol to both Kwanyama and !Xun and †Akhwe Hai| |om inhabitants, though the majority of their customers are !Xun or †Akhwe Hai| |om. While this part of the meeting was ostensibly about land, a government official made it clear that she thought the problem was at least in part alcohol, and she was happy to apportion blame: "You have time to go to the *cucashops* but no time to support yourselves with the field" (f.n.E. 2015: 114). The hectoring, paternal tone with which these admonitions come reflects to some degree Sylvain's findings with regard to Ju|'hoan communities living on white-owned resettlement farms in Omaheke region, on which "apartheid notions of racially inferior and 'childlike' Bushmen" (2006:131) were prevalent among non-San. Yet there is doublethink here, just as there was under apartheid when "inferior" !Xun and †Akhwe Hai| |om were recruited by the SADF for their supposedly near-magical tracking abilities. In a discussion of the importance of schooling, the Kwanyama government official leant forwards, as if conspiratorially, saying

that “in general, San people have bigger brains and more intelligence than anyone on earth, but because [they] are not being educated all of that is going to waste” (f.n.E. 2015: 116). It was as if he was imparting a secret. At the same time as being “like children” or a wayward relative in need of guidance, the “San” are somehow “better” or “more intelligent”, provided they conform to the idea of the hardworking farmer in independent Namibia.

When it comes to alcohol, it seems that the government's solution is what I would characterise as similar in structure to an intervention one might hold for a drug-addicted family member, yet undercut with a jarring tone of threat. My own frustration as a field researcher from a agriculturally-literate background was also prevalent in my attitudes to the lack of an engagement with farming at Ekoka. The intervention metaphor continued to expand in my mind, as each paternal admonition of “why didn't you plough/weed/repair fences/attend to your herd of cattle?” were met with explanations from Ekoka residents that I characterised patronisingly in my field reports (f.n.E. 2015:114) as “excuses”. This warrants dissection. Conceptually, it is clear that in the context of Room's “journey” (1984: 178) of the field researcher through the various stages of engagement with alcohol, I was projecting my own ancestral and cultural familiarity with farming, and the “liberal intellectual” (Room 1984: 173) conception of alcohol as simultaneously a leisure activity and a vice, onto the community. An “excuse” is a reason to do something that is negatively regarded, with colloquial connotations of illegitimacy in English⁷. To not farm, to not work, and to instead drink, one would have an “excuse”. Yet farming is a culturally specific practice, common in my culture more generally and my own childhood community more specifically, and the idea that one needs an “excuse” not to farm, or an “excuse” to engage in a leisure activity (or a vice) instead of engaging in farming, is entirely culturally constructed.

A key theme of this meeting was that problems were characterised by the Ohangwena governmental representatives as coming from alcohol, rather than being factors causing a drinking problem. The policeman in attendance, after warning that arrests for domestic violence charges would begin “if behaviour did not change” (f.n.E. 2015: 114), launched into a lecture about the negative physical effects of alcohol on the body: “You will

⁷ A common conversational phrase in the discussion of motivation for heinous acts being: “I'm not giving them an excuse, but trying to find the *reason*”. In this context, an excuse is illegitimate, as it makes an act obviously wrong not be wrong, or be less wrong. Furthermore, the primary definition offered for “excuse” in the Oxford English Dictionary (online edition) is as follows: “Seek to lessen the blame attaching to (a fault or offence); try to justify” (OED online: <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/excuse>, accessed 15.03. 2016).

lose the flesh from your bones, and lose nutrients and vitamins essential for your life” (115). He went into detail about crimes he regarded as prevalent: assault, theft and rape, particularly of older men and women by young men. The policeman laid the problems of the community squarely at the feet of the !Xun and †Akhwe Hai| |om members, saying that “the Kwanyamas have taken over the whole place. While you are at *cucashops* finishing the *tombo*, the Kwanyamas are moving on with their lives. Fields are tended and cattle are herded on your land by the Kwanyamas. Because you don't care, you are being left behind” (115). He ended with an ultimatum: They must refrain from *tombo*, they must refrain from violence, and that this is the last meeting on the subject. If he has to come again, he will make arrests. This was where the similarity to any sort of compassionate family intervention ended. The only solution which the government was able to offer: Stop. Stop fighting, or we arrest you. Stop drinking, or you will always be poor. Yet the policeman did not return in the remainder of my visit there, and no arrests were made.

This government response, rooted in the notion of alcohol as a socially destructive force but at the same time emphasising the choice of the individual to engage with it, is firmly in step with the neoliberal deification of choice and responsibility. This is in stark contrast to the prohibitive attitude prevalent among the Finnish missionaries running Ekoka before and during the war, detailed by Takada in a discussion with an informant:

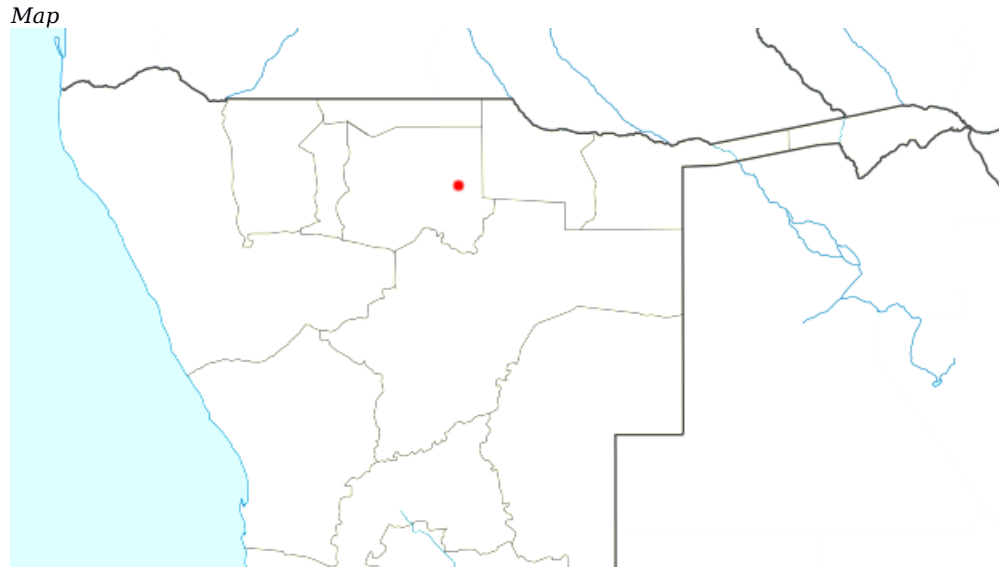
At that time there was no *cucashop* at Ekoka. [...] Because Ekoka is a missionary village, the Kwanyama headman JN and the Finnish missionary Erkki Hyönen prohibited us from making *cucashop* and drinking alcohol. We were allowed to brew *omalodhu* and *oshikundu*, which contained a little alcohol, but it was prohibited to brew alcoholic drinks, such as *tombo*, *katokele* and *onbike*. If someone is found to brew prohibited alcoholic drinks, he or she would be chased away from the village.

(Case 5.10, Takada 2015:141)

Here, alcohol is expressly forbidden. Even the sale of brown sugar during the time of missionary control of Ekoka was prohibited, as it was often used for alcohol production (141). This strict enforcement was backed up by the Kwanyama headman, who cast out a member of the Kwanyama community for selling alcohol in the vicinity of Ekoka (142). The prohibition was clear and unequivocal. In fact, Takada's informant goes on to say that “Nobody made *cucashop* at Ekoka until 1996” (142). During the South African occupation, drinking was further stymied by

the curfew, and only after total restoration of government control over the area, without South African or missionary influence, did *cucashops* begin to diffuse and multiply throughout the community (143). Here, then, we see the contrast in attitudes to drinking and alcohol at Ekoka by two different dominant groups. In the era of “personal responsibility” for one’s own actions, it is the doctrine of choice which allows the government to absolve themselves of responsibility for any problematic situation arising in concert with, or that can be blamed upon, alcohol availability. This is not to argue that alcohol prohibition was somehow “better” for the community. The *diktats* of the missionaries similarly forbade !Xun healing dances and traditional medicine, and today, the *cucashops* still form a major hub for socialisation in the community (Takada 2015:143), as well as opportunities for community organising and discussion about life in Ekoka. What has happened under the regional government is not that different from prohibition in terms of the government’s attitude to !Xun and ǀAkhwe Haiǀom people’s relationship with alcohol, but has allowed almost entirely ethnically Kwanyama *cucashop* owners to profit from what it sees as Ekoka residents’ “bad choices”, while apportioning blame for those bad choices to the residents themselves. A reassessment of why there is a fundamental assumption that !Xun and ǀAkhwe Haiǀom people’s choice to drink is a “bad choice” at all would be a more appropriate response.

My second field site, ǀGomais or Farm Six, is also a resettlement project, however it is part of a wide network of Namibian Development Corporation (NDC) resettlement farms in the Mangetti West area partly designed to provide a sedentary home for ǀAkhwe Haiǀom people since the early 1970s (Widlok 1999:33). Haiǀom people make up the vast majority of residents, although a small number of !Xun people have “married in” and moved there, making it a mixed community. It, too, is north of the “Red Line” in theory, although in practice it exists as if in the rest of Namibia.



Access is through the town of Tsinsabis, and the gate to the farm itself forms part of the veterinary cordon that the “Red Line” consists of. The NDC farmers are Afrikaners, and communicate with farm workers, mostly casual labour, entirely in Afrikaans. This, being the language of pre-independence Namibia, led one of my informants PO to refer to Namibia as being “still under apartheid (fieldnotes |Gomais 2015: 24). It also limits working opportunities to those at |Gomais with a knowledge of Afrikaans, a language not natively spoken by any of |Gomais' ǀAkhwe Hai||om or !Xun residents, as well as not defined in the Namibian constitution as being either official or required (the sole official language of Namibia is English). This reproduces South West African power structures. Hunting for meat at |Gomais is completely forbidden, and the farm has hired armed security to patrol the perimeter of the ǀAkhwe Hai||om settlement at night to deter poachers. Being caught hunting, while rarely prosecuted, is grounds for immediate dismissal from work. The main sources of income are work on the

farm and the pension, which is often immediately used up to pay debts to shop and *cucashop* owners which are accrued through on-credit purchases. 6% (2/35) of a sample of |Gomais residents interviewed in July and August 2015 reported being employed by the farmer permanently, 25% (9/35) reported being in casual work. 69% (24/35) reported having at least one family member in either permanent or casual employment, however only a third (6) of them (none of whom received a wage themselves) reported having money from wages shared with them at any time in the preceding month. 63% (22/35) of respondents reported having at least one member of the family claiming a government pension, however only 3 of these reported receiving any pension money shared with them.

There are a number of differences between aspects of community life between Ekoka and |Gomais. |Gomais could be said to be lacking the chronic intra-communal theft problem that Ekoka suffers from, for example⁸, and for the most part alcohol is not consumed regularly by as large a fraction of the general population. At Ekoka, only 9% (3/35) of the interview sample taken on the subject reported not having consumed alcohol at all (either buying it and drinking it themselves, or drinking alcohol bought by someone else) in the preceding week to being interviewed. Those same respondents reported not having consumed alcohol in the preceding month. By contrast, 71% (25/35) of the |Gomais sample reported not having drunk at all in the last week. 63% (22/35) reported not having drunk alcohol in the preceding month. The most striking and immediate difference in the alcohol consumption itself is that while *tombo* and *epwaka* at Ekoka are sold to the !Xun and ꞤAkhwe Hai |om community by Kwanyamas, with no home-distilling observed, the lion's share of |Gomais' alcohol, and all of the distilled alcohol I found, is made by the ꞤAkhwe Hai |om community themselves. One similarity to Ekoka is that there is also a separate community nearby. In the case of |Gomais it is mostly comprised of ethnic Kavango workers, migrant labour from elsewhere in the Mangetti farms. These Kavango and Ovambo workers also sell alcohol from their homes, mostly *tombo*, and members of the ꞤAkhwe Hai |om community do go there to drink occasionally, though this usually happens only when alcohol is not available in the main village. The majority of the drinking occurs within rather than without the residential area, usually in evening “parties”. In the evenings, if money is there for petrol to fuel the generators, music is playing, and *onbike*, the home-distilled spirit which can

⁸ At Ekoka, only 1 of 35 respondents answered “no” to the question “Do you think theft/people stealing things is a big problem at Ekoka?” with one person declining to answer, whereas at |Gomais the same question was answered “no” 30/35 times, with two declining to answer.

be made from almost anything, and colloquially known jokingly as |Gom| |ame (mangetti water), is flowing. Distilling serves as a primary source of income for families without members in casual employment at the resettlement farm, and allows them to buy food to supplement the diet, chiefly comprised of drought relief and gathered plants from the surrounding area. 22% of interviewees (8/35) reported that the selling of home-made alcohol constituted the primary source of cash income in their household. At the time of year I lived there, gathered resources were mainly mangetti nuts (*Ricinodendron rautanenii*), the biggest bags of which were gathered by those households running stills. In this way, while |Gom| |ame is acknowledged by the community to be “not indigenous” and its production was “taught to us by the Ovambos”, alcohol is now a key part of the immensely important relationship that the community at |Gomais has with mangetti itself. Alcohol production in this way, though exogenous by acknowledgement of the people themselves, has in some respects become an indigenous phenomenon by association with the primary natural resource, the primacy of which has been explored in depth in Widlok's ethnography in the 1990s (1999). This indigeneity of alcohol production is an interesting subversion of what Sylvain writes about in Omaheke:

"Just after independence one of the only ways to make money in the township was to establish 'cuca shops' — the local term for shebeens — where homebrew, called 'tombo', is made and sold. Tswana and Herero women and Ovambo men quickly cornered the market in illicit beer brewing, since they had access to the cash needed to purchase the supplies. The San have few similar opportunities to earn money through informal sector work. Instead, non-San generate income for themselves by selling homebrew to San, who purchase the beer to 'kill the hunger'."

(Sylvain 2006:140-141)

It seems that here at |Gomais, while the Kavango and Ovambo residents were brewing, the ability to make alcohol from mangetti, a resource †Akhwe Hai| |om people are intensely and completely familiar with, and of which the knowledge required to gather and process is widespread, has meant that alcohol production is easier to get into without the cash necessary to purchase supplies. The stills themselves are often made from discarded or junked farming equipment which is repurposed. There is no direct parallel to mangetti I observed at Ekoka. Those selling alcohol would host parties in the evening, and while there was disapproval from some quarters, the

majority of the villagers would attend, although whether they consumed alcohol or not was variable. Key to the relationship between residents of |Gomais and alcohol is the status of the community as a resettlement farm. In her work among San communities in the Omaheke region, Sylvain illuminates clearly attitudes I saw were prevalent in the |Gomais community, which applies here as well as Ekoka, and bears repeating: “although violent labor management tactics are no longer backed by state sanction, there is almost no state presence in the farming areas, and so white farmers continue to govern their farms according to apartheid notions of racially inferior and ‘childlike’ Bushmen” (2006:131). This was interestingly illustrated by the first instance of state presence observed at |Gomais, at least from a sitting government official.

During the time in which I was present, |Gomais played host to a visit by the current Deputy Minister of Marginalised Communities, Royal /Ui/o/oo, who spoke English, communicated in Khoekhoegowab through a translator and invited pre-approved questions and problems to be brought to him by community members. One of the white farm administrators was also present, and sat alongside the government contingent, arranged as if a panel discussion. “Where is our independence?” one particularly vocal member asked him in English, “the country is independent, but not this farm” (f.n.G. 2015: 24). A muttering of assent met the translation of these words. The source of the ire, in this case, was the frustration that the Farm Six resettlement project was, in the words of some of its †Akhwe Hai||om residents, meant to exist to benefit the †Akhwe Hai||om people living there, which included available work on the farm for those able to participate. Instead, the farmer imported Kavango-speaking workers for the jobs on his farm, due to, in his words at an interview, the fact that the †Akhwe Hai||om “could not be trusted”. This lack of trust is partly related to workers turning up drunk, though this only tended to happen once per worker, as it would mostly simply result in a dismissal. The amount of available workers far outstrips the number of jobs available to †Akhwe Hai||om residents (usually fence repair and other labouring work) and as such the farmer can afford to fire workers regularly. The majority of the work available is casual, and the majority of |Gomais residents are unemployed. Restrictions on life at |Gomais result in party drinking, less as a pathology or addiction but simply to pass the time. What is worth considering at this point is the timing of alcohol consumption at |Gomais. *Cucashops* selling *tombo* run by those outside the †Akhwe Hai||om settlement were a feature, as evidenced by the debts accrued by some of the pension recipients to the shop

owners. Certainly there were some people in the community who drank all day, every day. This was not considered normal, however. One reason for this could be that there was a clearly delineated space between celebratory drinking, or “normal drinking”, which occurred at sanctioned parties, and the individualised consumption of *tombo* at *cucashops*, which was “out of the way”. In this case, this was literally in a separate part of the community which was not in any way a centre for other community activities. This is in contrast to Ekoka, where there was no production of alcohol within the community, for parties or otherwise, although some alcohol was brought back to the community for consumption within the home. At |Gomais, it seemed that because alcohol was produced within the community, it was deemed necessary for there to be specific times at which drinking was considered acceptable.

Conclusions

What we see through the contrasting examples of alcohol use at Ekoka and |Gomais are some of the different ways that alcohol can impact upon a community. At Ekoka, alcohol-related theft, violence and other anti-social behaviour is a major issue, but to conceptualise a sort of community-wide clinical alcohol addiction would be a mistake. I discovered this due to the fact that Ekoka has the benefit of a health clinic, with a nurse on duty most days and nights. While the health centre often treated victims of domestic violence, the nurses did not report treating alcohol addiction at all, or fetal alcohol syndrome, and characterised them as “not a problem”. While an in-depth epidemiological study of the prevalence of these diseases would certainly be helpful at Ekoka, as it would in various situations across the globe among indigenous former hunter-gatherer populations (Bray and Anderson 1989: 44), preliminary suggestions from my own work, and the explanations offered by the nurses themselves that “the alcohol is not strong enough” to cause addiction or birth defects, are that the community problems with alcohol are not as much chemical as they are social. At |Gomais, where the alcohol sale is at least in part intra-communal, we see alcohol made using folk knowledge that the ꞆAkhwe Hai|om have had as hunter-gatherers for longer than they have distilled *onbike*. Alcohol here is not drunk every day, and is largely not drunk in the village while the sun is in the sky at all. This drinking resembles that of Room's “wet generation”, the “normal drinking” that Heath, Dietler and Douglas discuss. Problems do arise from alcohol, but to reference Sylvain's work with Ju|'hoansi once again:

The San typically do not see drinking itself as a problem (see Douglas 1987); it becomes a problem when it leads to fighting, unemployment, and involvement in criminal activities. Drinking is an ambiguous activity: it is at once a coping strategy and, when done to excess, a form of self-harm; it is a mode of festive sociality, and a source of conflict and division. Similarly, the reasons San drink and fight are not straightforward: motives are rarely unitary and moods are rarely stationary. What often starts off as a celebratory and festive form of social bonding can turn, in a matter of minutes, into a combative exchange. Even when San see a connection between drinking and fighting, unemployment and criminal behavior, they rarely single alcohol out for special causal attention.

(2006:144)

Contrast this with the words of the !Xun headman at Ekoka: “The problem is alcohol”. Here, he roots the problem squarely with the alcohol itself, and this is echoed in other interviews with Ekoka's residents. This is partly related to the role of alcohol in the exploitative relationship that the !Xun and ꞤAkhwe Hai |om at Ekoka have with their Kwanyama neighbours, which stems in at least one way from the fact that the alcohol consumed every day is not made by the community themselves. At Ekoka at least, the idea that “the problem is alcohol” warrants further study.

Practically, as a researcher, alcohol can certainly be considered a damaging influence upon the ability to gather data, most noticeably in my own work when I was at Ekoka. Direction-finding experiments and structured interviews were rendered almost useless after mid-morning there. Attempts to find a representative sample to perform an experiment to determine the prevalence of absolute or relative navigation among !Xun and ꞤAkhwe Hai |om residents led me to the *cucashops* as the only place where people could be found, and the state in which I found most of my respondents would not have been able to provide useful data for the task at hand, although undoubtedly the data gathered was interesting in its own way. Methodologically, I was faced with a choice to either engage with the *cucashop* drinking as a part of my research or to push it aside. Upon arrival, I was determined that any interest I might have had in doing research at *cucashops* would have had the effect of encouraging people to go drinking, and that any data at all that I would get there would be useless and unrepresentative. Heeding the warnings I was given at the beginning of my work, I considered alcohol to be a corruption and blight upon the community, and something I saw as a hindrance to ethnographic research rather than part and parcel of it. This was a huge mistake, and the importance of engaging with the rich community

surrounding alcohol at Ekoka was made clear when I finally decided to visit the *cucashops* and be present there myself. With regard to engaging in the structured interviews, my presence at the *cucashops* was important evidence for my informants that, in their words, I wasn't "testing or judging them either way for their drinking". The structured interviews from which I obtained my samples, framed as they were as a repetitive series of yes/no questions, also had to be conducted sparingly and with care. My respondents were understandably wary of anything that was framed too much as any kind of "test", particularly the sections related to alcohol consumption and crime, as there was understandable worry that I was simply documenting crimes for the benefit of the local police. My integration into the daily activities at *cucashops* made taking these interviews a great deal easier, as it was clearer to them that I was interested more in how Ekoka residents conceptualised themselves, and the choices they made in their lives, rather than as test subjects for a theory I was attempting to prove. It was also clear that by sharing in one of their primary leisure activities with them, I was unlikely to regard it as a problem, and unlikely to tell tales to the local police and government, an increase of trust that I appreciate enormously and continue to wish to reciprocate. This mirrored my own transition in the "fieldwork journey" through to a more realistic picture of alcohol consumption than I had upon my arrival.

While at |Gomais there was less regular consumption of alcohol,, the effect upon the social fabric of the village was evident most obviously in the arguments and fights that would break out approximately once or twice a week, and during my period living there emergency situations arising from alcohol-fuelled violence caused me to have to act as an ambulance to the local clinic in Tsinsabis twice. Police presence from Tsinsabis also occurred once, when evidence was being gathered for a case of particularly serious domestic violence and a threat of murder. As a field researcher in this situation, one becomes involved unavoidably when one of the principal issues facing the farm is the lack of transport, and the hour-long drive to get medical attention. This was especially true when, repeating what I saw as good practice at Ekoka, I often joined an evening "party" at someone's house, (where the drinking itself was thankfully entirely optional) and therefore many of these problems played out in the public theatre of the party, and thus in my presence. As |Gomais was the second field site I worked at, I had been prepared for the realities of alcohol consumption in the community, and my informants at Ekoka had aided me in confronting my own prejudices around alcohol consumption in hunter-gatherer communities. Nevertheless,

some of the arguments and fights came as a shock, particularly where injuries were concerned. Contrary to my experience at Ekoka, however, I had no “time limit” on when I could conduct interviews. This was partly because a lesser proportion of the community actually drank regularly, but also was because the drinking, when it occurred, often occurred within the main housing area itself. I was able to conduct interviews, observe events, and ask to be shown things for a much greater proportion of the day without worrying as much that nobody would be at home when I arrived at the fireplace.

There are some problems, but these problems are far from being unique to the !Xun and ǀAkhwe Hai||om community. What is essential to recognise is that alcohol is conceptualised differently by different bodies of people. The government, and one of the two headmen I interviewed, share the notion that alcohol is the root of community problems, when that relationship is not necessarily simple. Alcohol can also not simply be characterised as an exogenous corruption. The distillation at |Gomais will continue for as long as there is fruit to gather, ferment and distil. At Ekoka, the Kwanyama community running *cucashops* are not about to stop doing so, and alcohol has become a major part of life there. As long as the pension money keeps flowing in, the *cucashops* will continue to exist. How do we, as anthropologists, respond? Anthropologists know that alcohol exists as a social feature, and know how large the impact it has is on the communities in which they work. The difficulties associated with discussing alcohol are partly related to concern over misrepresenting the communities as being broken in some way, or corrupted, by alcohol use. While problems exist, the idea that alcohol use itself is a problem is an ethnocentric assumption born of a particular cultural background. At both Ekoka and |Gomais, “normal drinking” was occurring, and the problems that were put down to !Xun and ǀAkhwe Hai||om people “choosing to drink” were social problems related more to their situation of marginalisation than the consumption of ethanol. The initial shock of being unable to perform field research because of alcohol came entirely from my own lack of preparedness in the literature surrounding alcohol studies. We return at this point to Room's idea of the journey of the ethnographer. Key in the journey is the notion of the “green researcher”, who comes to a community without having engaged with literature about alcohol, and instead applies their own assumptions and cultural baggage, conceiving of alcohol as simply a methodological problem rather than an integral, and indigenous, fact of life. This was certainly the experience of fieldwork from my own point of view, and I would

take care in future to prepare further studies in the light of the complex role of alcohol in the communities I work with.

Notes

My deepest and heartfelt gratitude goes out to the people of Ekoka and |Gomais. Their honesty with me about the realities of life in their community involving the many facets of my research, including alcohol consumption, was the most important academic resource for my work. Their realistic and pragmatic attitudes to the questions that I asked, as well as the questions they asked of me, helped to shape my attitudes to as well as my knowledge of their lives in the !Xun and ǀAkhwe Hai |om communities.

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