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“These young chaps think they are just men, too”: redistributing masculinity in Kgatleng bars

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Abstract

In the 19th century the BaKgatleng polity was a chiefdom with a redistributive economy based on mixed agriculture. Sorghum beer was symbolic not only of the patrilineal core of their descent system and of the ideologies of reciprocity and redistribution, but also of masculinity and patriarchal control. With the establishment of a market economy, an industrial brewery and individual access to income, both beer and the act of drinking have been symbolically reconstructed. The ideology of redistribution was well suited to the support of the BaKgatleng gerontocracy via alcohol production and consumption. The limits on production and consumption of beer inherent in the agricultural cycle and the control of young men's access by elders made alcohol an effective symbol of managerial competence from the limited context of household authority to that of the chiefdom as a whole. Today, young men's greater control of cash income has given them access to beer beyond the control of elders. As a result, the contrasting ideology of market exchange and competitive distribution of beer has contributed to the degradation of the power of seniors. After reviewing the historical background, this paper explores those changes. It argues that while the observed infrastructural changes have had a predictable impact on drinking behaviors and the symbolic structure of “seniority/masculinity”, constructions of the “masculine community” in BaKgatleng bars demonstrate continuity in key areas of men's identities. If as anthropologists we see obvious discontinuities in behavior and ideology, the BaKgatleng build selective bridges to “tradition” which seemingly ground the experience of change in relatively seamless continuity. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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One event is always the son of another, and we must never forget the parentage — a MoTswana chief (Tylor, 1871)

Introduction

In 1984, at the close of my first year's research in Mochudi, Botswana, I asked the women who had tolerated hour upon hour of my interviews what topic they would like for me to pursue when I returned for further research. Repeatedly, I was told that alcohol

consumption needed investigation. I was not particularly surprised. Indeed, earlier in that year I had asked questions about a growing reticence regarding marriage and was commonly told, “Why would I want to get married? A man will just drink my earnings.” (Suggs, 1987)¹

It is not that the women are concerned about alcoholism becoming a huge problem. The problem is not uncontrolled drinking; it is consistent — even if moderate — drinking *in a cash economy*. Elsewhere (Suggs, 1996) I have suggested that the construction of gender in alcohol consumption among the BaKgatleng presents the act of public drinking as definitionally

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¹See Gulbrandsen (1986), Dow and Kidd (1994) and Molokomme (1991) for similar data from elsewhere in Botswana.

masculine behavior and that men consider drinking to be a right ascribed in masculinity even if achieved by adulthood. From the women's perspective, the maintenance of that belief is simply wasteful in a cash economy. Also in keeping with "tradition", they see alcohol consumption as a privilege earned (albeit by income rather than by age).

If BaKgatlwa men and women are negotiating the relevance of tradition to gendered drinking patterns today, so too are the older men and the younger men contesting the terrain of appropriate age-graded consumption within the boundaries of masculinity. If the realities of "gendered alcohol consumption" center chiefly around the tradition of patriarchy and its maintenance, those of "age-graded alcohol consumption" center around the tradition of gerontocracy and its dissolution (Suggs, 1996). The first reflects the political and economic control of women's labor in the patrilineal descent system; the second reflects the power and control of linear elders established in redistribution. This paper explores the way that "drinking traditions" are made meaningful to changes in the age structure of masculinity and the way that traditions of masculinity are re-constructed in acts of public drinking. While the cash economy is largely responsible for framing the context in which such changes occur, the economy itself is made culturally meaningful by individuals opportunistically constructing continuity to a selective past.

The data for this work derive from two separate year-long research periods: 1984–1985 and 1992. Most of the material from the earlier period is based on observations recorded in personal field notes and structured interviews with 60 women in the town of Mochudi, Botswana. Since that research period was dedicated to life-course analysis, the alcohol-related materials are incidental. The data from the more recent period were collected with alcohol use as the focus of analysis. They are based on an estimated 200 h of observation and conversation in the bars of Mochudi, augmented by interviews both structured and unstructured, as well as on opportune personal conversations outside of the formal bar context.

It should be noted at the outset that Mochudi, located 40 miles from the capital city of Gaborone and the administrative/legislative center of Kgatleng district, is in very few ways representative of the nation of Botswana or its people as a whole. Mochudi is quite economically developed when compared to the more westward and more rural villages and towns. A relatively sizeable portion of its population works in Gaborone; paved roads span the quadrants of the town; it has banks, law offices, a district hospital, and numerous schools of all varieties save that of a university. It has a supermarket with frozen goods and produce from South Africa, as well as items imported from throughout the world. One can find coffee from

Brazil, rice from Pakistan, soy sauce from China, and a population with sufficient economic means to warrant their presence via purchase. In the future, the more rural areas would make an interesting and important contrastive study to this one.

Alcohol in the agricultural and cash economies²

Molamu (1989) suggests that sorghum beer has been an important part of the diet of southern African peoples for at least 500 years. At Great Zimbabwe, one notes clay structures built into the floors for the purpose of holding pots of beer. Several ethnographers of southern Africa have commented on the significance of alcohol in the social life of Bantu-speaking peoples. In particular, Colson and Scudder's (1988) excellent discussion of alcohol use among the Gwembe Tonga serves fairly well as a generalized description of its place in the life of most of the region's Bantu-speaking groups.

Writing specifically about the BaTswana, Schapera (1960, 1966) noted the ceremonial value of alcohol in ancestral veneration, as well as its social value in the bonding of patrilineal groups. It was a food item which was much prized, a drink which, when shared, cemented marriages between patrilineages and rewarded labor cooperation within patrilineages. In this sense, alcohol was a symbol of the social wealth which derives from common descent and family membership. Distributed in quantity according to age and social rank (Haggblade, 1984), beer was also a privilege of the esteemed. It was in this sense a symbolic indication of social wealth acquired via seniority. Produced by women, it was consumed primarily by men. Thus, it represented not only the power of women's productive and reproductive capabilities, but also the power of senior males in the control and distribution of life's blessings. As Colson and Scudder (1988, p. 65) note, "[alcohol.] even more than food . . . represented the basic reciprocities of social life. . . . [It was] a 'key symbol' linking almost everything that . . . people thought important".

In the pre-capitalist economy, the brewing of beer was an inexpensive way to diversify the diet: traditional sorghum brews are not filtered and are quite nutritious as a food item. Even so, brewing — and consequently drinking — followed a feast or famine pattern of sorts (Haggblade, 1984, p. 144). That is, when the harvest was coming in and grain was plentiful, people brewed in plenty. Later in the year, when grain was less readily available, beer brewing also became less common. This seasonality then established a pattern of fairly routine drinking at one point in the year and drinking almost not at all in others.

²This section draws heavily off and significantly augments Suggs (1996, pp. 596, 597).

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