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## SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL IMPLICATIONS OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES AMONG THE ABAGUSII OF NYANZA PROVINCE IN KENYA.

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### ABSTRACT

*Alcohol drinking has been part and parcel of the Abagusii culture since time immemorial. Indeed, it ought to be noted that alcohol consumption is a practice in almost all parts of the world. All societies have their own form of alcohol. Douglas (1987) and Gefou-Madianou (1992) observe that the uses of alcohol, and the meanings attached to it, vary widely, while the act of drinking is present in every society. Alcohol has been used for changing one's mood and as a socializing agent especially during times of ceremonies. Among the traditional Abagusii, their alcoholic drink is called **busaa**. This is a drink made from fermented sorghum grains that are ground to produce flour that is mixed with fermented maize flour, smoked and then dried using sunlight for one to two days. The drink that is made from mixing the two types of flour what is called **busaa** in **Ekegusii**, the language spoken by the **Abagusii** community. Its alcoholic content is estimated to be between 3%-5% (Silberschmidt 1991:63).*

***Chang'aa** is a much more purified form of **busaa**. It is mixed with balls of sugar and then heated and its moisture is passed through traditional filters before it comes out as a colourless liquid that is then called **chang'aa**. This drink has a much higher alcoholic content than **Busaa** estimated at 60%-70% pure alcohol (Silberschmidt 1991:63). On rare occasions some brewers mix the alcohol, that is **Busaa** and **chang'aa** with opiates such as methanol, pethine and fentanyl. It is believed that alcohol with these opiates acquires some therapeutical properties such as that of being a pain killer, suppressing coughs, preventing diarrhoea and reducing anxiety.*

*During the traditional period (pre-colonial time) alcohol drinking was reserved for the elderly and the respectable members of the community. Other members of the community could only be allowed to drink alcohol during special occasions such as wedding, circumcision and funeral ceremonies.*

*However, in the recent past alcoholic drinking has been transformed into an economic and social activity. Beer brewing and selling has resulted in a booming business out of which many parents have earned money for the education of their children. In spite of this positive aspect, the beer business carries with it a number of negative aspects, emanating from processing and selling procedures observed by the people who participate in it. This paper intends to examine critically the socio-economic and cultural implications of alcoholic beverages among the Abagusii, a Bantu community living in Nyanza Province in Kenya. It would also make recommendations on the future of this beverage among the people.*

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## Introduction

Consumption of alcohol among the Abagusii carries an economic and social implication. The brewers of the local beer are usually women who brew it in their households and sell it from there. In a number of cases the women convert their private homes into private bars. This practice greatly compromises the privacy of the members of their families, bringing about a proliferation of family conflicts. In a number of cases the majority of customers who come to buy beer are men. Some of them end up causing disturbance within the homestead once they become drunk. Some even end up fighting with family members. In brief, selling traditional beer from the households creates a conducive environment for family conflicts.

In addition, it raises suspicion and accusations of immorality between spouses. A number of men frequently accuse their spouses of engaging in immoral practices with some of their male customers. Divorce cases are also quite rampant among families that sell beer in their homesteads, because of such accusations.

This study utilized key informants and participant observation methods in collecting the information. A number of key respondents I interviewed during my research, such as religious leaders, community development officers, and health officers condemned beer brewing and selling business as being a major cause of immorality and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. One education officer had the following to say concerning the beer selling business: "It is responsible for the low educational standards in this district because once children get exposed to alcohol consumption while they are in school, this interferes with their academic progress. This often makes them drop out of school because of their low academic achievements".

A health officer I interviewed said that the business is a great hinderance to the improvement of health standards in the area. In particular he condemned *chan'gaa* as a brand of alcohol with a very high level of alcoholic content, that made people too drunk and that generally damaged their health. A previous study by Silberschmidt (1991) established the alcoholic content in *Chang'aa* to be as much as 60% -70%, while that for *Busaa* was 3% -5%. In order to induce inebriation some people add pepper, and even substances from radio batteries and molasses (brown sugar), during fermentation. Children whose mothers devote all their working time to beer brewing and selling are usually malnourished; some have even been admitted into Family Life Training Programmes (FLTP). These are centres where malnourished children together with their parents are admitted for a period of 21 days. for rehabilitation purposes.

## The Economic Implications Of Alcoholic Beverages

A number of people in the Abagusii community derive their livelihood from selling of *busaa* and *changaa*. It was reported by some respondents that the minimum earnings for a casual labourer was Ksh. 1500/= approximately \$ 20.3 which most beer brewers considered too little since they could earn a minimum of Ksh 5000/=, approximately \$67.6 per a month.

This made them prefer selling beer, in spite of the risks involved, because most of them did not have the permits for conducting the business. It ought to be noted that this is the main reason why the beer brewers and sellers prefer selling it from their households.

## Social Implications of Alcoholic Consumption

As noted earlier, the consumption of alcohol was mainly done during ceremonial occasions, such as during weddings, circumcision and funeral ceremonies. Only respectable men and women and the elderly were allowed to drink alcohol in the pre-colonial era. However, in the recent past drastic changes have occurred in the etiquette of alcohol consumption, resulting in young married men and women engaging in heavy drinking. Paparoufali (1992:48) observes that in many civilizations, women are excluded from taking strong alcohol, and prohibited from experiencing the pleasures that accompany relative tipsiness. Similarly, Friedl (1967) points out that hot and pungent substances were usually drunk by men, while women were expected to drink softer drinks such as fruit-flavoured liqueurs. These examples drawn from developed societies show that restrictions on women with regard to alcoholic drinks is not confined to the Abagusii community, but could be a cultural universal.

Traditionally women were not allowed to drink *busaa* and *changaa*. Unmarried girls (*abaiseke*) and even the newly married women (*abasubati*) were strictly prohibited from consuming any form of alcohol. The main reason was that they could ruin their family's honour. It was anticipated that once the women got drunk they might become easy-going, making it possible for drunk men to take sexual advantage of them, thus ruining the reputation of their families. Women were thus strictly prohibited from engaging in beer drinking, even though they were the main brewers of the drink. It is perhaps for this reason that beer brewing is associated with illicit sex, especially nowadays that women seem free to drink beer in the company of men other than their husbands.

Kisii district is located in Nyanza Province. Its population was 248,539 in 1969, increasing to 300,756 in 1979, thus growing at a rate of 4% per a year. Between 1979-89 the population grew at 2.7% per annum and it was projected at 392,571 in 1989. The population has been growing at 3.1% since 1989 and, as of 1993, it was projected at 443,561 and was expected to grow at the same rate up to 1996 (Republic of Kenya, 1994).

In the traditional Gusii society, it should be pointed out, women's drinks were normally soft drinks such as milk, porridge and warm water. Milk was particularly recommended for women and children, and a married man who did not have a milch cow was automatically considered to be a poor man (*omonto omotaka*).

In the more recent times, however, the common drinks for women and children among the Abagusii community are *echai* and *ekahawa* which are taken when they are mixed with milk that is white tea and coffee.

Information obtained from about 10 key informants indicated that cases of domestic violence have increased nowadays, due to the fact that an increasing number of the women folk have taken to the habit of drinking alcohol, an activity which was a strict preserve of men in the traditional period. Note that the key informants comprised women who are involved in brewing the local beer as well as administrators in the area, such as Assistant Chiefs Head men.

### *Busaa* and *Changaa* Drinking Time

In the traditional period *busaa* and *chang'aa* were usually taken during the afternoon hours when people had completed their tasks for the day. These beverages thus marked the transition from work to leisure, or from normal time to special time. It was considered a

sign of maturity for a man to be able to drink large quantities of alcohol without losing self-control. It was based on a belief in male dominance. Furthermore, drinking alcohol helped to enhance social solidarity among the men, especially because it helped bring friends and relatives together. It fostered friendship and masculinity. It was a kind of ritual for men who were friendly to meet in each other's homes and engage in drinking made for them by their wives. This enhanced social harmony.

According to Pitt-Rivers (1977:10) "Food and drink always have a ritual value, for the ingestion together of a common substance creates a bond". Furthermore, he emphasizes that drinking not only creates a bond but also serves to reinforce existing bonds and express the cultural substance of social relationships.

However, nowadays among the Abagusii, beer drinking has come to be increasingly associated with domestic violence. During our interviews, a number of women said that their husbands usually quarrelled with or even beat them, when the husbands came home drunk, after applying most of their resources in buying traditional beer in the homesteads of some other women. The phenomenon of domestic violence against women is a commonplace feature among the Abagusii.

It ought to be noted that in almost all countries and cultures, women have frequently been victims of abuse by their intimates and by strangers (Davidson, 1977; Freeman 1990). They have often been battered, sexually abused and psychologically injured by persons with whom they should enjoy the closest trust, in places considered the 'safest', e.g. their homes. Many more women, live constantly with the threat of domestic violence, whether battery, rape or emotional abuse. This is a worldwide problem that affects all women irrespective of their age, economic status, colour, creed or place of residence. Note that in the traditional African Society, wife-beating was acknowledged but never seen as a serious problem (Brieness and Gordon, 1983), because women were never considered equal to men.

Studies by Davidson (1977) indicate that there is a close relationship between alcohol, the abuse of women and other forms of domestic violence, and that it is often used as an excuse for such acts as beating and rape. It has also been indicated that women are usually beaten by their husbands only when the husbands are drunk (Gayford, 1975). This observation indicates that there exists a close association between the consumption of alcohol and domestic violence; this is because excessive consumption makes people drunk, a condition that makes them lose their sense of self-control.

### ***Busaa* an Illegal Alcoholic Beverage**

The criminalization of *busaa* brewing and selling used to cause a lot of problems for those involved, until very recently when the Kenyan Parliament made a recommendation for the legalization of traditional alcoholic beverages. Brewing and selling of *busaa* during the days when it was criminal to do so, was done under very unhygienic conditions, such as in the banana plantations where they could not be easily caught by law enforcement agents (such as chiefs and administration policemen). At times they hid beer in pots in holes concealed from law-enforcement officers. In such cases dust easily settles on the drink, making it unhealthy for drinking. This occurs when the brewers do not use appropriate lids to cover the pots. Furthermore, the criminalisation of the business results in many disadvantages for the brewers; for example, the refusal to pay by consumers who are aware that the sellers will not report them to the police, for fear of being arrested for engaging in an illegal business.

Furthermore, the alcohol was prepared in unhygienic conditions, and the alcoholic con-

tent could not be ascertained by the government because of lack of standardization of brewing methods. This means that most of the people who consume this drink expose themselves to health risks, because of the high alcohol content in the drink. As noted earlier, the estimated alcoholic content in *changaa* is between 60% - 70%. The literature obtained from local daily newspapers indicates that apart from the domestic violence that comes out of drinking, high road accidents in Kisii district do occur because of drivers who drink *busaa* and *changaa* before setting out. An average of 70-100 people die each year from accidents associated with driving under the influence of alcohol.

Consumption of *busaa*, as with all other forms of alcohol, results in fatigue, weight loss, irritability, insomnia and gastritis. Thus, drivers should be conscious of these side-effects before they decide to drink.

### **Etiquette Associated with *Busaa* and *Changaa* Drinking**

In the traditional *Abagusii* community, beer drinking was a social norm practised by almost all adult males. It was a behaviour associated with being sociable and masculine. A person who abstained from engaging in beer drinking with his colleagues without good reasons for doing so was viewed with suspicion; he was accused of being unsociable. The community had various sanctions against such a person: gossip, and the reluctance of friends and relatives to help such a person with heavy tasks such as clearing his fields in preparation for the planting of crops. However intoxication was looked down upon. A "real" man was one who drank, and yet maintained self-control. Therefore, a man who easily became drunk lost face among his colleagues. It is important to observe that drunkenness was not tolerated among the men, even on ceremonial occasions. Thus, alcoholic beverages were highly valued as socializing agents, whose main purpose was not to make people drunk but to enable them to socialize and to accomplish some tasks such as clearing the land, weeding for the crops and harvesting them. Beer could only be taken after the completion of a major task.

### **Recent Changes Concerning the Consumption of Alcoholic Beverages**

It was established from key informers that there have been notable changes in the consumption of *busaa* and *changaa*. While in the traditional period only the elderly members of the community were allowed to drink alcohol, nowadays the youth have joined the elders in the consumption of the traditional alcoholic drinks. The reasons given for this change in behaviour were varied. Some of the informers said that these days the youth get married at a considerably early age. This makes many of them feel that they are now mature enough to drink alcohol. In the traditional past by contrast young men got married when they were 30 years and over. Today young men of 20 years do get married. Another reason that was given is that there are many young men idling around, because of lack of gainful employment opportunities in the rural areas. Most of these youth find consolation in the consumption of alcoholic drinks. According to Kisii District labour officer, 30-40% of the youth who have completed their secondary level education are not gainfully employed. Some of the elders attributed this change in the behaviour of the youth to the influence of western culture which has greatly contributed to the erosion of traditional cultural values. They emphasised that the youth nowadays have no respect for the elders.

Others attributed this change in behaviour to women's liberation movements saying that this has resulted in women joining men in the drinking of alcohol, as a way of undermining

the dominance hitherto enjoyed by their male counterparts.

### Conclusion

Although *busaa* as an alcoholic beverage is quite popular among a significant number of the Abagusii people, it poses a number of problems related to processing and selling. The Kenya government has taken decisive moves in streamlining this business, by legalizing it and thus ensuring that people prepare and drink it in a harmonious environment. This is a welcome move because of the fact that the role of traditional brew as an entertaining, relaxing and economic commodity ought to be recognized and appreciated. I recommend that apart from legalizing the *busaa* business, the Kenya government need to prescribe age limits for those who may buy and drink it. Twenty-two years should be the right age for people allowed to drink *busaa*. The women who sell it should not do so in their private homes, but in market places so as not to interfere with the privacy of their families. The people ought to be exposed to more advanced methods of brewing so that the alcohol content of the drink may be capable of ascertainment.

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