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The History of North American Indian Alcohol Use as a Community Based Phenomenon

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In order not to "sail under false colors," I should state first off that I have never done any systematic research on drinking patterns among North American Indians. However, I have done field work in many parts of North America, and I have been socially a part of one kind or another of Indian community or social group, most of my life. This paper, then, is almost by definition, reflective in nature. I suppose one could charitably say that I am presenting an explication of a fairly firm hypothesis.

I am going to speak about North American Indians, which means that my argument will be on a very high level of generality. North American Indians are a category that includes a great many distinct peoples with unique cultures, histories, and languages. They are a category and a minority only vis-à-vis the rest of North American society. Most individual North American Indians still have a very locally based identity. They are much more, say, Pomo than Indian. More, they may be aware of themselves as a submerged, small nationality; but most Indians have little awareness of themselves as a member of a racial grouping which is a minority in two large nation-states. Therefore, the dynamic of being a minority, insofar as North American Indian peoples are concerned is an important dynamic surely, but it is probably not more important than many others. In any case, I intend to speak on a very high level of generality about the history of Indian alcohol use. My interpretation of the history of Indian alcohol use is based on what seems to me to be the nature of the North American local group as a social system and, conversely, the nature of the individual Indian who is part of that social system. Of course, the complete description of these local groups as a general type of society and
person would fill volumes, so I will focus on those aspects which are pertinent to my presentation.

To begin with, the majority (and I want to exclude particularly the Pueblos and Hopis from my discussion, because they seem to be very different from other Indians) of North American Indian local groups varied in population size between 60 - 600, hunting bands being in the lower range of population and semi-agricultural villages nearing the 600 limit. These were face-to-face communities, no larger than the largest unit which could use consensus effectively as a social mechanism. That is to say, when a local group reached the 600 population limit, general agreement was difficult simply because of size. And consensus is a very important social mechanism in North American groups, perhaps because there is so little authority vested in individuals or roles. The relationships among individuals in these small social systems are personal, systematic, fixed by birth and descent, structured, agreed on, and predictable. In other words, this is a group of kinsmen who lived in intimate association with one another over time. Further, this group of kin lived in direct relationship to the natural environment and the organizational form of the kin group, the economy, many customs, religious notions, etc., seem to be a direct response to living in a specific natural environment. The experience over time of this group of kin was lodged in a body of sacredly sanctioned tradition. The need for harmony among kin, the sacred proscriptions of tradition, and the wisdom of the elders were the social cement of such a group.

Needless to say, an individual socialized in such a milieu would tend to be very responsive - not passive but responsive - to kin, to consistent traditional rules, to the natural world, and simply to what is going on around him. He is not a person who stands apart from life and makes rational choices among alternatives, nor one who continually assesses the
consequences of his individual actions. Rather he or she is immersed in his own immediate life, particularly his social life. Guides, cues, controls and sanctions are external rather than internal.

Let me give you an example which I think encapsulates the above kind of person. I have a friend of mine who was the first full blood Cherokee to graduate from college in this century. He graduated from college around 1950. He is a very competent man, a talented politician and administrator. He and I worked on a project together in Oklahoma in the 60's. He went through a period of heavy drinking, which is unusual among Cherokees and which results in very severe negative sanctions being applied to the errant individual. He was in very difficult circumstances. In a space of one month he "toted" three cars. He said, "This has got to be more than a streak of bad luck. Somebody is conjuring me (using bad medicine), I am going to an Indian doctor tomorrow." Now consider his view of his situation. He is not a man who sees himself as responsible for his own actions, certainly not responsible for any of those wrecks. He did not link together in any causal way the facts that he was dead drunk and the wrecking of those cars. In fact, the "cause" was external to him.

Such a person flourishes well in a context of loved and loving kin, a consistent and unquestioned body of tradition, external guides and cues of sacred sanctions to which there are no alternatives, and the guidance of prestigious elders who speak with the wisdom which comes from an understanding of tradition and a fully lived life. And only an Indian elder experienced most of life and come to understand the consequences of individual actions. If Indian elders do not have prestige in an Indian community, young Indians appear disoriented.

It is my contention that I have not only presented a portrait of early Indians but such is the "nature" of most modern Indian communities and individual Indians. To be sure, there have been a great many changes in the last 200 years or so. Western civilization has almost replaced
the natural world as the environment for Indians. And Indian communities have responded and tried to adapt to this new and overwhelming social environment. In the process Indian groups have taken over a great many European ways, but perhaps more importantly, tradition has been weakened and called into question, the relations between kin disturbed, the moral prestige of elderly eroded and so forth. There, I submit, lies the difficulty.

I am sure that all those who now North American Indians have heard the above analysis, in different prose perhaps, many times from Indian elders. They use different words but the import is the same. Indian elders have been consistently critical of permissiveness in Indian schools. They have been fearful of the social harm which could come from the imposition on their communities of western social forms such as republican form government. If you think about the need for harmony among tribal kinsmen, you will understand what social harm majority rule and secret ballot can do to this kind of people. Indian elders are concerned about the confusion created by competing Christian sects among their people. Some are doubtful about an educational system which is secular and which competes with their own explanation of the universe. Nearly all opposed the repeal of federal laws which prohibited the sale of liquor to Indians. Unfortunately many of their objections conflict with the middle class liberal ethic and ideology which views all humans as basically individual choice-makers and sees progress as a process of widening the arena of choice for individuals and increasing the number of alternatives from which to choose. Even more unfortunate, such liberal notions are an integral part of the self-image of many Americans and Canadians so that the above kind of statement by Indian elders is usually discounted. Such statements are not seen as coming from a lifetime of astute observation of Indian behavior, but as outmoded ideological notions of the nature of Man.
Now with the preceding statement about the nature of Indian individuals and communities in mind, let me briefly discuss the history of North American Indian alcohol use. Alcoholic beverages were unknown in most of North America before European contact. However, in almost every Indian group I know about, the initial response to alcoholic beverages was the same – a drunken orgy. When the first White man opened the first keg of liquor, nearly every Indian in proximity proceeded to get up uproariously drunk and continued drinking as long as the liquor held out. Drunken fights were usually a feature of the party. Indian’s desire for alcohol was so strong that it was a stock in trade of the fur trade in northern United States and Canada. In some areas, drunken parties were institutionalized and a few men were appointed to stay sober and oversee the party. One of the foci of every nativistic movement among North American Indians from Pontiac to Tecumseh to handsome Lake to Smohalla to the Peyote movement has been the control of alcohol use.

Why such a response to alcohol? Firstly, I think simply because drinking is very pleasurable for North American Indians. I might hypothesize at this point as to why drinking is so pleasurable for North American tribal. Indians are very cued in to their fellows. Interaction is tenuous, at best. One is always trying to achieve a state of harmony and good feeling with others. Social life is thus a little intimidating. It is intense and exhausting. The other is so definitive that one's existence is almost in the other's hands, so to speak. This is, of course, a fearful condition and Indians are a little fearful of each other except in very structured circumstances. Drinking blunts this intensity and fearfulness, while the rewards of interaction remains. It imparts a spirit of social recklessness, confidence, and courage. One even has the courage to express resentfulness openly and without fear of future retribution. Quarrelsome Ness will be forgiven as only "the liquor talking," not the fault of the individual. Drunkenness even
partakes of the aura of a religious experience to North American Indians. Extreme drunkenness does resemble that state of consciousness in the vision quest, just before one receives a vision. Secondly alcohol was a new factor in Indian life, so that there were no external controls or checks on its use. Thirdly its socially destructive consequences were not clearly perceived until late in each people's response to European contact.

Most of the eastern Indians in the United States were able to control the use of alcohol in the late 1700s or early 1800s, by reforming their aboriginal religions, so as to build in strong social and religious sanction against alcohol use or else by developing a native Christianity which accomplished the same purpose. I am thinking here of peoples like the Iroquois, Choctaw, Creek, Winnebago, Cherokee, Kickapoo, etc. At a later time in history some tribes of eastern Washington and northern California were able to develop a similar sacred containment of alcohol use. Of course, these peoples were independent societies when they undertook their reforms. In a large sense, these peoples were fortunate to have had this necessary autonomy in the early history of their contact with Whites. And most of those peoples are still free from excessive alcohol use, particularly the eastern tribes. Some of the Great Lakes' Indians had been so eroded institutionally by participation in the fur trade economy that they were unable to create the necessary social controls. They did develop new institutions such as the Midewiwin, a semi secret society of shaman-priests, but destructive drinking was already out of control by that period.

However, it is in the Western portion of the United States and in Canada as a whole that tribal groups have generally been unable to deal with heavy alcohol use. At the very time most of these peoples were meeting the problem of alcohol abuse head-on, they were placed on reservations, their affairs were completely administered by the federal government, their
religions and cultures were attacked and discredited, and their children placed in schools. The school was designed to "de-Indianize" them.

In the process their whole institutional structure collapsed. Their religion and elders were discredited. The Christianity introduced among them has remained in the control of the "colonial establishment," so it has never become a native institution. Needless to say, the possibility for the revamping of tradition by elders to control alcohol use among these groups was effectively precluded. Many communities in the western Great Lakes region, northern Plains, Northwest and northern Canada have lived with the destructive use of alcohol now for almost 100 years. The destructive abuse of alcoholic beverages is almost always correlated with crime, family trouble, and even suicide in Indian communities. A cursory look at the statistics coming from reservations near Seattle, some of the Paiute groups, the Kootenai of Idaho, most of the Sioux and Chippewa reservations, and nearly all the reserves in Canada tell a story of a rather dismal community life. As a friend of mine once said about his home community, "You can't get a night's sleep around here for the drunks either coming waking you up and fighting in the yard or else killing themselves on the highway."

Since World War II the problem has in testified on many reservations. Even the isolation of reservations in the Southwest has broken down. Education and income have shot up dramatically in most Indian areas and with it the incidences of social ills has shot up dramatically - family break-down, juvenile crime, and alcoholism. Many Indians now find themselves on the receiving end of a bad minority situation vis-à-vis their White neighbors. Their fathers might have shrugged off such a condition of life if indeed they would even have perceived it. But young Indians do not live in a closed bounded world as did their fathers. The autonomous tribal world is beginning to break down. White no longer do as they do because of their nature and
Indians do as they do because of the way God created them. Many young Indians are now part of a general humanity and white opinions about them are definitive to some degree and not out of the range of their emotional response. Modern Indians are just now emerging from the tribal world and as yet have no defense against the negative opinions of "respectable" Whites, and many are very hurt in this process. Further, life on most reservations gives one a view of one's self as a member of an inadequate people, and ergo an inadequate human being.

In response to this new condition of life even some of the Indian peoples, some of those in eastern Washington and Oregon and others in the Midwest, who had made a satisfactory adjustment in earlier days by the building of sacred social controls to contain excessive drinking collapsed before the onslaught of the 20th century. The problem was not simply one of social control after World War II. It was, also, necessary to insulate the tribe from social erosion and to mediate many outside influences. Many Indian peoples, especially those of eastern Washington and Oregon, had lost too much of their political, emotional, and intellectual autonomy to attempt this insulation and mediation. Those peoples who not only had a history of sacred reform but who also had strong "priesthoods," some autonomy, a generally resistant attitude to outside White influence, and perhaps some social or physical isolation were able to hold together and not succumb to social breakdown and excessive drinking in this era.

In recent years there have been two new significant, for our purpose, developments on the Indian scene. One, many Indian "Tribes" have developed great governmental bureaucracies which seem to be in the process of giving the final coup de grace to local Indian communities much more effectively than older colonial style establishment ever could have. Bureaucratic alcohol use programs have preempted any possible local initiative by community leaders.
The second new development is that large numbers of individual Indians have moved to cities. The city is the antithesis of the tribe as a society and style of life, and thus either increases difficulty for Indians in regards to drinking or else sometimes creates a drinking problem. But a surprising development is happening among Indians in cities; one I would not have predicted. Indian AA groups are having a great deal of success. The Indians that I know in AA programs are persons who have become partially transformed by their experience in the cities. City life has, in some degree, made them choice-makers rather than persons who simply react appropriately to social circumstances. This kind of Indian has a notion that his individual action has consequences and that he or she is causal in what happens to themselves. They understand what commitment is, a very sophisticated urban notion, and they are able to make a commitment of self. Of course, the social aspect of AA is important to them as well. Unfortunately, AA seems to work less well for less urbanized Indians in the city, that is, Indians who are still more traditional in their outlook; nor does AA have much success in rural Indian areas.

Now, let me turn to the individual Indian heavy drinker and tell you the types of heavy drinkers I see. I will be implying "cause" in these types, of the kind that permeates my analysis so far. I hope you will see how these types fit into my general framework.

The first common type I see is simply the tribal Indian who likes to drink and who lives in the city or else in a community where there are no sanctions against such behavior. Such a drinker is simply hooked on pleasure. If there are no cues to the contrary a tribal Indians will do what he enjoys. Most tribals like themselves very much, unlike most middle class Whites. Since they feel that they are really great, then they deserve something great. Drinking is great. So they may proceed to drink until their liver collapses. The second type of heavy drinker is one
whose social life is organized around drinking. This type is very common in cities where Indian bars are the only source of social life or among young reservation Indians. Like the first type, he may also become physically addicted to alcohol.

Thirdly a significant number of Indians appear to drink in order to overcome or dull feelings of inadequacy. I don't think that this type is as common as the first two types, but it is fairly common. Many times these feelings of inadequacy are rooted in being an Indian, in one way or another. Further, it is this type of drinker who seems most drawn to the Indian Power movement and "The Indian religion."

There is a fourth type, I see among young educated Indians. Many seem profoundly closed off and cut off from social life and classically alienated. They appear to have been over-institutionalized by their school experience and are "way inside," as young people term it. Many have also feelings of inadequacy, but they appear to drink in order to "come out" and be able to have some kind of genuine relationships with others. I would guess that this is also a common type among young middle class Whites. To be concerned with one's own goals, thoughts, and self is not an unusual condition for civilized, urban people. However, this means that such a person is, to some degree, cut off from others and lives inside of "his own head," so to speak. For a significant number of young urban Americans it is necessary to retire inside before the onslaught of modern life in order to retain some integrity and autonomy of self. Many young Americans prefer to have indirect personal relationships with others through music or by way of drinking without having to relate directly to another, without a face-to-face confrontation. Further, urban people tend to let others see their selves only partially and open up slowly. Older, tribal Indians either completely close off, as with strangers, or completely open up, as with kin.
But life in the modern school has had a profound impact on their grandchildren. These young Indians resemble their white school mates in significant ways.

Fifth, and lastly, there is a type which is becoming more and-more common in my experience. Many Indian couples drink heavily during their early years of marriage and may neglect their children. Children may be left alone for long periods during a drinking bout or else shunted off on an already overburdened grandmother. Some of these children get a sense of being unwanted and unworthy of love from this experience. In some families this pattern has gone on for three generations now. Alcohol related child abuse is such a problem in some states that one-fifth of all Indian children in those states have been taken by the court and placed in foster homes. Then the next generation drinks in order to bear their pain of an unwanted childhood and the drinking becomes a vicious circle. But in recent times, I see a new twist to this general pattern. In their thirties, a couple may slack off drinking, try to make up for the early neglect of their child by indulging their now teenage boy or girl. In this stage the adolescent comes to believe that life should be wonderful. The feeling of being unworthy of love and at the same time thinking that life should be wonderful is an unsolvable dilemma for most except by looking at life through the rose-colored glasses of alcohol. One sees a significant number of young Indians now who are this type of drinker.

Now this typology is rather off-handed, to say the least, and these are probably not the only common types of drinkers. Further, these “pure” types are a distortion and some Indian drinkers show aspects of more than one. But this typology is not really central to my paper. I am simply briefly presenting it to illustrate where my analysis leads when applied to the individual qua individual.
Let me return to the main body of my paper which is to look at drinking in the context of the tribal community. It should be obvious to the reader by this point in my paper that I believe that Indian drinking does not have a "psychological" cause, in the ordinary sense of the word. Rather, it is caused, given the nature of the tribe and the tribal personality, by the socially disintegrating impact of western civilization on Indian societies. Such Indian drinking is simply a matter of lack of the necessary sacred social controls. Even in cases where Indians drink to deal with some human pain, the difficulties lie much more in the realm of community life and relationships than strictly internal to the individual. Further, American and Canadian society seems determined to keep Indian communities in a perpetual state of social breakdown by over controlling and over administrating them. Some way must be found to help Indian societies help themselves and "cure," in their terms, such problems as excessive drinking. Some Indian groups have made valiant efforts, in recent years, to deal with their drinking problem. In the 1960's the San Carlos Apache integrated Protestant fundamentalism into their life and thus slowed down excessive drinking considerably. But they managed this largely in spite professional Whites in the "helpings professions. There is some bowing in the direction of the Navaho Native American Church, the followers of the Peyote road, effort to halt destructive drinking among the Navahos, but as a whole such efforts are ignored by official helping agencies. In fact, one must ask the question as to whether official "helpers," White or Indian, do not add to the difficulty since they are agents of a civilization which promotes secularity and individuation, and pre-empts local initiative?

The city Indian scene is much more complex than the rural areas. One hears much talk about the "Indian community" in the city, but Indians in the city are very far from being a community. Most Indians in the city are not kin, were not raised together, are not even from the
same tribe, and most in fact are strangers to one another. Most live as scattered single individuals or in small nuclear family groups. There are not even very many older people around. Most city Indians are still oriented toward "home," the rural community. Of course, this leaves most Indians of the city who have drinking problems in a social vacuum, or else the local Indian bar becomes the only possible social life. But a more genuine Indian community life in the city would certainly ease the drinking problem for many individual Indians.

Now let me broaden my concerns by suggesting some more general ideas.

American Indians are not the only tribal to have had difficulty with alcohol. The story of Lot in the Old Testament is our first recorded case of such a difficulty. That difficulty was solved by Lot removing himself and his family from Sodom, from external temptations a typical tribal solution. Later Jewish response was prohibition by definition; another old tribal technique. That is to say, drinking is un-Jewish and a characteristic of non-Jews; therefore if you drink what are you? Later in the Middle Eastern history, Arabic religionists built strict prohibition of the use of alcohol into the Muslim religion; a religion which faced the concerns of tribal Bedouins. Many east African tribes have structured drinking so it becomes a reward for a lifetime of service and the exclusive domain of elders only. North European tribals simply suffered the curse of excessive drinking and violence for many hundreds of years until they ceased to be tribal societies; and even today the rural areas of Ireland and Scandinavia still grapple with that problem. Some North American Indian people, particularly those of eastern United States, have built a strict prohibition against alcohol use into their sacred life with severe social sanctions against the use of alcohol. Most tribes have not been able to deal with the problem, for various reasons. At this point in history, it would be my prediction that the general American society will not allow Indian communities the autonomy to deal with destructive drinking. I doubt that
reform by Indian elders with "clout" is now possible, even though this has been the traditional, and successful, solution among American Indian peoples. Not only are most Indian communities in too "weak" a social condition to undertake such a reform but American society may now only allow Indians the single option of secular, bureaucratic, programmatic solutions which deal with the individual, not the community. Such efforts, which deal with the individual per se, will only weaken relations and aggravate the problem. Many Indian communities may have to suffer with destructive drinking for hundreds of years, as did north European tribes.

I would also respectfully suggest, that if my analysis of the dynamics of tribal society and tribal persons is valid at all, it may also be valid to a degree for other small communities which are tribal-like or folk-like - working class ethnics in American cities, rural Southern Blacks, Appalachian Whites, Latin peasants, ghetto Blacks, etc. If nothing else, I hope that my "explication" has given the reader a new look at an important facet of human behavior.

Addendum

I should have added examples of what I meant by strong social and religious controls on drinking in those tribes which have "handled" drinking. For example, as Lionel de Montigny mentioned in his article on alcoholism, Kickapoos simply define a heavy drinker as a non-Kickapoo (non-person) with the implied threat of social ostracism. Some tribes say drinking ruins the "medicine" of a ceremony. Creeks will literally tie a drunk to a nearby tree if he comes to a ceremony. Cherokees shun a drinker somewhat in the manner of the Amish. Choctaws will expel a drinker from Sunday school and/or church which functionally means social exile.