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## Drinking, Prestige, and Power Alcohol and Cultural Hegemony in Maji, Southern Ethiopia

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The sociohistorical study of alcohol use in the context of power relations and public policy has markedly increased in recent years, although much of it has focused on cross-cultural varieties of alcohol abuse or delinquency (cf. Molamu and Manyeneng 1988; Molamu and Kebede 1988) and on ritual contexts (Karp 1980; Rekdal 1996). Predictably, the broad field of alcohol studies emerging since the early twentieth century is grounded in the idea that alcohol use is inherently problematic, as something associated with lack of self-control, unpredictable behavior and violence (Heath 1987). Such qualifications are often part of a social process of ranking and distancing, and often applied by people to some other group than their own. Alcohol, apart from its potential for "generating trouble," can be used as a theme to belittle, patronize and differentiate people, often in subtle ways. This happens especially when different kinds of beverages are accorded a different status across social and ethnic groups in society.<sup>1</sup>

The Ethiopian case study presented in this chapter highlights cultural aspects of social inequality and ethnic stratification by tracing the ambivalent connections among alcohol, power and cultural dominance. The Maji region of southern Ethiopia is a culturally diverse society, which offers a fruitful setting to analyze such phenomena. Its "drinking situation" reflects the area's history of divergent ethnocultural traditions and exposure of people to state narratives of civilization and governance.

# KATIKALA'S APPEARANCE IN THE PROCEEDINGS OF MAJI LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Maji region is a politically and economically marginalized area where various ethnic groups meet. Local indigenous people have witnessed the influx of settlers from Ethiopia's northern highlands, notably the Amhara, Tigrinya and Oromo-speaking settlers of mainly Christian belief,<sup>2</sup> who came as traders, farmers, soldiers and administrators. The latter are located in villages founded about a century ago. Historically, the local people, among them the Dizi, Me'en and Suri, were deemed politically and culturally less civilized by the central state and the northern immigrants. The Suri people, as agro-pastoralist lowlanders, were considered especially coarse and unrefined in their mannerisms and livelihood pursuits.

Under Ethiopia's new federal state instituted after May 1991, these local groups were given a measure of local autonomy, with corresponding cultural rights and a political voice, at least in name. A new local self-government unit, the Surma Local Council, was instituted for the Suri people. This Council, formed in 1994, is a body of about eleven Suri men, assisted by a few other Ethiopians sent by the Zone, the higher administrative unit, and the regional state government. It is designated as the main administrative body of the new Surma *woreda* (district), which has within its borders almost all Suri-speaking people. Befitting their status and responsibilities, the Council members are paid a government salary, which is an entirely new phenomenon for the Suri. With this regular cash income, Council members can buy presents for family and friends, acquire extra cattle, and, as I observed in 1995–96 during fieldwork, procure almost daily deliveries of strong liquor, called *katikala*, from Maji village.

*Katikala* is not a traditional drink for the Suri. A relatively recent import, it is consumed in substantial quantities. Allegedly intoxication is a frequent phenomenon within the Council premises, leading to fights and occasional shootings. The record of the Council is said to be dismal. Alcohol (ab)use is explained by many non-Suri northerners in the neighboring villages as another example of the Suri's still uncivilized or "backward" social behavior—they "cannot deal with strong liquor." It is said that their problems will only be remedied with time, when they gain literacy and education and become sedentarized.

This chapter explores the basis of such remarks and what they reveal about hegemonic relations and group prestige. The next section provides background on the geopolitics and economy of the area. The different types of alcohol that are produced and consumed by the area's various

ethnic groups are then reviewed before examining the alcohol economy and its prestige rankings in more detail. The conclusion compares *gesso*-beer drinking and *katikala*-drinking as cultural-political statements.

## THE MAJI AREA: ETHNIC INTERACTION AND STATE AUTHORITY

The Maji area is a fertile but economically underdeveloped area comprising two main ecological zones: (1) a highland range (at places up to 2600 meters) inhabited by indigenous agriculturalists with an ancient history (the Dizi people) and descendants of northern immigrants of mixed origin; and (2) a surrounding savannah lowland, inhabited by Suri and Me'en agro-pastoralists. The region's economic role in southern Ethiopia is limited, due to its remoteness, lack of transport facilities (only one precarious dry-season motor road for big trucks), and relative lack of natural resources and export crop production. The only products that are sold to outside agents on a small scale are coffee, honey and, since about 1990, alluvial gold.

Gold is panned in the various rivers of the area by indigenous people (mostly Suri) and immigrants from the North, who have flocked to one especially promising location just north of the Maji area. Here, Dima, a new frontier town with some 3,000 inhabitants of very diverse origins, has emerged on the banks of the Akobo River in the last ten years. The Suri are frequent visitors to this new town and sell their gold to traders with connections in the capital.

Though there are notable differences in ecology, economic activities, language and culture between the highlanders and lowlanders in Maji, they are dependent on each other for the exchange of food products, utensils and livestock. There are six small villages-cum-towns in this region, of which Maji and Tum are the administrative centers. The population of these six towns (less than 10,000 people combined) consists largely of state-employed officials, teachers, administrators, traders, barkeepers, police or militia, and local people who work as domestics, beer brewers and builders. Among town-dwellers Amhara are predominant, but their actual "ethnic profile" is hard to characterize because they represent a complex ethnic mixture, with about 60 percent hailing from the Amharic-speaking Shewa, Gojjam and Wollo regions, whereas the others originate from ethnolinguistic groups, such as Kaficho, Gurage, Oromo and Tigrawi.

Before the inclusion of the Maji area in the Ethiopian state in the late nineteenth century, the local people were politically autonomous. The Dizi

people (some 26,000) settled on the mountain ranges were organized in several chiefdoms, based on mixed agriculture, beekeeping and forestry. The Suri (about 28,000 people) and Me'en (about 65,000) were autonomous agro-pastoralists grazing their herds in the lowlands but also practicing shifting cultivation of maize and especially sorghum, and hunting and gathering. To this day, very few Me'en and Suri have settled in the small towns and villages, which has contributed to the ethnocultural divide along ecological and altitudinal lines that is typical of southern Ethiopia.

The gradual expansion of village society and the cultural models—among them Christianity—brought by the northerners, many of whom were state representatives, led to a system of cultural ranking in which the customs and traditions of the local people were considered uncivilized. Beginning in the days of the Ethiopian revolution from 1974 onwards, many were declared to be “harmful customs” (Amharic: *yegodjee bahil*). These included people’s “lack of” clothing, certain rituals of cattle sacrifice, body scarifications, and specific food habits, as well as the consumption of certain types of alcohol.

Since the toppling of the Mengistu regime in 1991 and the establishment of the EPRDF regime,<sup>3</sup> Ethiopia has entered a new political phase, in which ethnicity and cultural difference are explicitly recognized. The country’s administrative map has been redefined, largely along ethnolinguistic lines, and the officially stated policy aim is to avoid political hegemonism of one “ethnic group,” notably the Amharic-speaking, predominantly Christian highlanders, as was the case in the past according to the perception of the present EPRDF leadership. Sovereignty in the new “ethno-federal” system is constitutionally vested in the “nations, nationalities and peoples” of the country (Cohen 1994; Abbink 1997). The political organization of Ethiopia as an ethno-regional federation is a very significant departure from the past and is at present redefining group relations and national identity. Nonetheless, while cultural differences are now officially acknowledged and sanctioned, the traditional civilizational images of highlanders (who still dominate the present government)<sup>4</sup> toward the local population remain in force and have political implications. At the local level, distancing and ethnic ranking persist.

Cultural ranking has not, of course, prohibited contacts between groups. Economic, social, sexual and marital relations have led to partial assimilation, yet cultural ranking remains. Alcohol is one element that has become emblematic of group distance and civilizational images that people have of each other, even if they are blurred in actual social practice.<sup>5</sup>

## ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES IN SOUTHERN ETHIOPIA

Among the indigenous people of Maji region (Me'en, Dizi and Suri), the only alcoholic drink before the arrival of the northerners some hundred years ago was the local maize-sorghum beer. There are reports that Me'en and Suri people had their own honey wine, called *boké*, somewhat similar to the highlander drink *t'ädj* (see below), but it is difficult to say whether it was made independently or derived from the example of *t'ädj*.

In the second half of the twentieth century, alcoholic drinks from the highland culture began to be available. These various beverages spread to Maji and within Ethiopia in general, by the processes of group contact and migration of mostly Christian highlanders. The alcoholic drinks in the area under discussion may be categorized into three main types.

The first are *t'älla* and *t'ädj*,<sup>6</sup> the “good ones,” considered to be harmless social drinks consumed mainly during communal and family gatherings. The *t'älla* beer is of low alcohol content (ca. 6 to 7 percent)<sup>7</sup> and has a somewhat smoky taste. It is usually made by women, but men also prepare it in monasteries and church compounds. The production of this beer demands considerable skill, and a good brew is a source of pride. It takes more than a week to produce *t'älla* and several weeks for *t'ädj*, not counting the gathering of the ingredients. The *t'älla* beer is almost never produced or sold in bars.<sup>8</sup> It is a mainly a beverage for family occasions and Christian religious days and is very popular and highly valued.<sup>9</sup> *T'älla* is not generally considered a beer on which people get drunk, although this is often more a prescriptive norm than reality. Even Orthodox priests are alleged to get drunk on *t'älla* during religious festivals.

The *t'ädj* is the typical Ethiopian honey wine or mead, made of water, honey or occasionally sugar in the cruder blends, and crushed buckthorn<sup>10</sup> leaves as a fermenting agent. Formerly, it was drunk mostly by the upper classes, but it is now widespread among all social groups, drunk on secular holidays and weddings, and served in bars and small cafés all over Ethiopia.<sup>11</sup> These places owe their name to the drink: *t'ädj-bet*, house of the *t'ädj*, whereas there are only very few *t'älla bets*. Traditionally it was largely ceremonial and not a beer to get drunk on, but now *t'ädj* is often sold in bars in a diluted form using sugar instead of honey as its base and has lost some of its prestige. The alcohol content of *t'ädj* can vary from 8 to 14 percent.<sup>12</sup> It has become the main drink of most Ethiopians not only in the towns, but also in the southern countryside bars. The *t'ädj-bets* are places where people tend to drink and get drunk and spend a considerable amount of money. On market days in the South, a significant portion of the

cash that the rural sellers in the market acquire from village dwellers for their foodstuffs and other products is converted back again into the village economy through drink sales.

The second genre of alcohol is that of the "local beers," subsumed under the name *bordé*. These are made from fermented maize, sorghum and sometimes barley or a mixture thereof and are typical for southwestern Ethiopia. *Bordé* is a thick and heavy beer, almost a fluid porridge that can serve as a meal in itself. The Suri term for their own beer similar to *bordé* is *gèso*.<sup>13</sup> The production of these traditional beers is always by women and is a laborious process, taking from eight to ten days. The alcohol content has not been measured scientifically, but is estimated to be around 6 to 9 percent.

Among the Suri, there are four kinds of *gèso*, according to quality and alcoholic content: first, the *jendáy*, a warm, very fine filtered beer and the strongest and most alcoholic variety; second, *nyána gid'anga*, and second in alcohol content; third, the *chállá*; and fourth, the *b'oru*. These traditional beers have low prestige in the eyes of the village and small-town people and of the people connected with the state administration. When they visit the lowlands they are jokingly advised by the others to take their own *t'ädj* or *katikala* and not to drink much *gèso*.<sup>14</sup> This attitude of mild disdain or scorn implies that "civilized people," that is, those in the village and connected with the wider Ethiopian culture,<sup>15</sup> should not drink this beer, at least not in large quantities and not too publicly. Only on a long walking journey in the countryside for trade or other purposes would one drink it for lack of other food and drink. Here again the ambivalent attitude toward these "native beers" surfaces. They are drunk when there is no choice, but ridiculed when one is back in one's town or village. Nevertheless, for the Suri the consumption of *gèso* was and continues to be a social activity par excellence, and an example of what Mary Douglas (1987) called "constructive drinking," to be detailed below.

The third and more problematic drink is the local *araqé*, or *katikala*, a homemade distilled drink originating from the highland areas, and now also found in the Maji area. It is made from germinated grains, especially maize (*Zea mays*) or finger millet (*Eleusine coracana*), sometimes mixed with wheat (*Hordeum vulgare*) with added agents like sugar and the leaf *kosso* (*Hagenia abyssinica*) (see Ethiopian Nutrition Institute 1980 for a traditional recipe). It can have an alcohol content in the range of 30 to almost 50 percent.<sup>16</sup> There are imported and factory-produced varieties, but these are not considered as good as the homemade ones.

Other strong drinks available in some bars in the villages in the Maji area are imported whisky and Ethiopian-produced gin, ouzo and cognac, drinks for the elite that are not popular among the rural people in Maji. *Araqé* and *katikala* are more expensive than any beer, and seen as very strong and challenging to the drinker. The best *araqés* are reputed to be the *mar araqé* (made on a basis of honey) from the Debre Berhan area and *dagim araqé* from the Gojjam region (Central Highlands). While the real *araqé* from these areas is seen as a real treat and to be consumed with care and enjoyment, the related *katikala* is viewed more ambivalently. Even though it is accepted and widespread among the rural highland societies, it has the aura of being dangerous, a sure and quick way to drunkenness, and a cause of violent, uninhibited behavior. In contrast to *t'älla* and *t'ädj*, it is a "bad drink," moreover considered by the people themselves to be highly addictive: an example of destructive, not constructive, drinking. *Katikala* is nevertheless popular all over the Ethiopian countryside, and its alcohol content there can be estimated at some 35 to 40 percent.

Its production requires special equipment and skills, usually possessed by Christian village women living in the Maji area. The Suri and other people of the Maji countryside do not know how to produce it. But they all buy *katikala* in the village bars and transport it to their distant home areas in bottles owned by the village producers.

#### THE ECONOMICS OF LOCAL BEER PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

The production of alcoholic drinks in this area of Ethiopia is situated within a local economy where market exchange is not widely prevalent and many activities are based on the direct appropriation of natural resources. There is still no problem of land and firewood scarcity in the Maji area. All farmers of any of the groups mentioned can get sufficient land for cultivation. Even returning soldiers from the former army of the Mengistu regime could easily start farming in the Maji area in 1991–1992, unlike most other areas of Ethiopia. Suri and other groups maintain the fertility of their land by rotating crops and shifting cultivation.

Nonetheless, poverty is rampant, and due to pressure by the state for tax payments in cash, there has been a growing demand for money over the past thirty years. Up to the mid-1960s, tribute was often paid in kind (cattle, grain, livestock, honey, etc.) or in labor services. In the later years of the Mengistu regime (1980s), the taxes increased significantly. After Mengistu's

fall they were abolished for a few years in 1991–1993, but they are now back again in full force under the new federal government.

In order to pay taxes the local people often sold their livestock during Emperor Haile Selassie's time up to 1969, but at present the state administration has not been able to effectively enforce taxation. Tax collection is hampered by the lack of an appropriate infrastructure of roads and government services in the area, difficulties of transport, the remoteness of the lowland areas, feared because of malaria and other diseases, and the lack of food supplies there. Furthermore, Suri are often on the move and difficult to track down, especially when they hear that government administrators or soldiers are arriving. Among the Suri, strong pressure to find alternative sources of rural income outside the agricultural or agro-pastoral economy has yet to surface.

Since the 1940s, when economic and market integration of the Ethiopian southwest started, there has been an expansion of beer brewing and alcohol sale as a business on which the producers can sustain themselves, but *only* in the region's six small market towns. Beer brewing was never a source of cash for rural people. In virtually every Suri household, the women now and then make *gèso*, but only for ritual purposes or to lubricate work parties when beer is exchanged for labor. Households are "self-sufficient" most of the time, and the noncommercial production and consumption of local beer for limited social or ritual reasons within Suri society short-circuits the local market for alcohol.

Transport problems also militate against the commercialization of local beer, as carrying the big clay beer jugs to places of demand is virtually impossible. The few smaller calabashes that are brought to the market towns by some Dizi women (never Suri) yield on average no more than about fifty to eighty Ethiopian *birr* profit per market day.<sup>17</sup> In any case, Suri (and Me'en and Dizi) beer brewing has not yet become a commercial business that could provide a source of income for women beer brewers. Women dominate beer brewing and the production of other drinks, not unlike in other East African countries. However, the big difference in the Ethiopian situation is that the alcohol sales in the small market towns, where thousands of people of various groups gather twice a week, are controlled by village women who are descendants from earlier migrants from the highland north, and not by those from indigenous groups of the area. Local Suri and Me'en women never own bars.

In the town of Maji, with a population of only 1,617 people (Central Statistical Authority 1996), there are at least twelve *t'ädj-bets* and two *bordé* sorghum beer cafés. Whether the bars are supplied on a particular day can

easily be recognized by a tree trunk or stool placed outside on the path, on which an empty can (meaning *bordé*), a small cup (*katikala*) or a bottle (*t'adj*) is placed. In Maji town, only one of the bars (for *bordé*) is run by a Dizi woman and is patronized by Dizi people. The rest are operated by others, mostly of northern or mixed descent, who are, however, considered to be locals rather than immigrants. The clientele they serve are from the surrounding countryside, the population of which is estimated at 30,000, of which perhaps one-third are adults. On market days twice a week, every bar is full throughout the day, and the profits can be substantial. It is an economy of drinking which thrives on the clientele of the local rural population, but which nevertheless remains confined to the small market towns and villages in the area and does not spread beyond.

#### SOCIAL ASPECTS AND ASPIRATIONS EMBEDDED IN ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

What *t'älla* and, to a lesser extent, *t'ädj* are for the Amhara and other highlanders, *gèso* is for the Suri people, perhaps even in a deeper sense: a social drink celebrating commensality on occasions calling for coming together. *Gèso* drinking in itself signifies relaxed social relations and peaceful or conciliatory intentions. It is always drunk in a group and in public, rather than being consumed like food in silence and solitude in the family hut. It is always drunk while seated, never when standing. Men and women drink it together.

Its most frequent and obligatory use is during agricultural work parties called *gasa*. The Suri practice hoe rather than plough agriculture, and such collective work parties are an essential part of the work process, especially in the heavy stages of clearing a field and harvesting. *Gèso* has a high nutritional value and is usually taken as the lunch meal. Any person, male or female, who decides to clear and cultivate a piece of land must first prepare beer, spread the word, and then be ready for a big turnout of laborers. Among the Suri the rule is where there is no beer, there is no work. A Suri work party starts about 8:30 A.M. and goes on until about 10:00–10:45 A.M. Then there is a break for drinking *gèso*, after which they return to work until 3:00 P.M., whereupon the remaining beer is drunk.

The farmer's mother or wife (and in the case of a female farmer her mother or sisters) sits together with other women, chatting and joking while the men do the work, impervious to the men's calls for refreshments until a substantial amount of work has been completed.<sup>18</sup> Women often

serve themselves before serving the men. They also decide who gets any *gèso*, because the beer drunk during a work party implicitly stands for the recognition of the mutual dependence of households, especially of and through women, who organize the work parties and make the beer. Even though there may be conflicts and arguments during the consumption of the *gèso* beer (among the Suri certainly), it always brings people together. The ritual leader of the Suri (the *komoru*) is invited to all work parties in the neighborhood.

It is noteworthy that in the other main branch of Suri economic life, the herding of livestock, beer was not traditionally drunk. The Suri have cattle camps that are located at some distance, often about a day's walk, from their villages and hamlets, and while the young men take food with them, they only rarely take *gèso* beer. Beer is solidly associated, both economically and symbolically, with agricultural, that is, female, activities. In the cattle camps, the young men drink blood and milk from their animals.

Hence, the *gèso* beer can be seen indeed as one of the fuels of the rural economy, but not for the purpose of earning money. Only in the last four to five years have some Suri women started to sell *gèso* in their own compounds, but irregularly, and with very marginal profits. If beer is left over from the above-mentioned work parties, the women may decide to sell it to other people.

*Gèso* beer is drunk at all festive occasions, the main ones being a name-giving, the conclusion of a day of ceremonial dueling, the inauguration of a new field for crop cultivation, weddings, and the initiation of an age-group. This points to its use as a ritual drink. Its social significance is further underlined by its use in reconciliation. After a dispute is resolved, the mediators, who are of another clan or family group, have to bring local beer to seal the reconciliation. The two opponents have to drink it cheek to cheek from one calabash.<sup>19</sup> This is never done with *katikala*.

Tellingly, at several important political occasions in Suri society, such as public debates, divination from intestines, funerals, and during homicide compensation talks, beer is never drunk (Abbink 1998). Therefore, one can note many sociocultural restrictions on the actual use of *gèso* beer, which refutes the ideas that it was drunk "all day by almost everybody," as some northerners claim.

*Katikala*, however, is changing the picture, due to its extraneous origin and functions. It is becoming the new status drink among the Suri and other indigenous people in the Maji area. People say they simply like it because of its physical effect: giving a feeling of warmth and strength, at least initially. They often take it before traveling, which usually means a

long walking journey back to their home area. Undoubtedly, other familiar reasons apply here: suppressing hunger, forgetting immediate worries, group pressure, and so on. But social reasons are also relevant. First, *katikala* is expensive, and thus a drink given as a present by people to important friends and guests denotes status. To give a good bottle of *katikala* is a sign of generosity and/or wealth, and is highly esteemed by the receiver. Second, in local rural society, it is a drink located outside familiar social categories, originating from the sphere of trade objects and commerce. It is neutral and objectified. This contrasts markedly with the status of local beer.

In Suri society, *gèso* beer served as compensation for participation in agricultural work parties and was never sold until recently. It functioned as an incentive for the Suri, who had no other means of labor recruitment in a labor-scarce society. The increased acceptance of *katikala* reflects the expanding monetization and market integration of the Suri economy into the wider regional economy. In this sense, the introduction of this hard liquor has signified the coming of modernity. *Katikala* drinking has become a habit throughout rural Ethiopia, predictably connected to emerging notions of strength and masculinity (cf. Heald 1986), although Suri women also enjoy the drink.

*Katikala* drinking is developing alongside rather than in place of the traditional *gèso* beer drinking in Suri social life. Still largely uncommercialized, it will continue to function as a socializing agent and as compensation for agricultural work. *Gèso* is associated with food, life and procreation, while *katikala* is not. *Katikala* has no positive qualities yet, apart from its physical effect of warmth and excitement. It is surrounded by ambivalence. *Katikala* appears mostly in social contexts that are structurally located outside the local moral economy, at informal meetings of male friends in small groups visiting the villages, and also in the cattle camps, but never at work parties or at rituals.

It can be said that in the period before the import of new alcoholic drinks, the number of drunks in the Suri or Me'en communities was not socially significant. All my informants from the Suri, Me'en and Dizi agree that constant problems of drunkenness and even of liver disease started only in the last fifteen to twenty years. For the Suri the phenomenon is even more recent, dating back to around 1989, when *katikala* production and consumption increased markedly. This may be a biased view on the part of the Suri people, the majority of whom came into close contact with the highland town culture only in the last decade. However, the records of the local health clinic in Maji over the past decades confirm it.



For the Suri, unlike *gèso*, *katikala* has no traditional, spiritual or social meaning. It is still unclear in what terms they will ultimately incorporate *katikala* in their drinking culture. While it is now indeed a prestige object given and shared between people as a sign of respect, wealth or virility, it may be that people, especially women, will not remain impervious to its negative side-effects, not least being the frequent state of male drunkenness and its expense, which drains household cash reserves, and the inevitable brawls and physical violence.

Alcohol abuse is associated with the increased consumption of *katikala*, both by the Suri and by the town people who sell it to them, but who also blame them for drinking too fast and too much. This brings us back to the different, and partly paradoxical, valuations of alcohol and its use between the local population groups of the Maji area.

#### GÈSO AND KATIKALA CONSUMPTION AS CULTURAL-POLITICAL STATEMENTS

The Suri's changing alcohol use and its valuation in many respects mirror the experience of groups in other parts of Ethiopia and East Africa (e.g., Rekdal 1996). Ethiopia is interesting in that there is no direct colonial legacy and corresponding alcohol policy with which people have had to deal; nonetheless, there are oppositions, often imagined, between several kinds of groups. The most salient is that between the culturally dominant Christian highlanders and other local, indigenous groups of various ethnic or social backgrounds. Southwest Ethiopia was only included in the Ethiopian empire in 1898 and has, in political and economic terms remained marginal, though not isolated, ever since.

A moral rejection of the local population's alcohol use by colonial or settler elites is not uncommon in Africa (cf. Partanen 1991; Crush and Ambler 1992; Diduk 1993; Siiskonen 1994; Akyeampong 1996). At the same time these elites tend to show a laissez-faire attitude toward use and abuse, because such alcohol usage allowed them to further ground their hegemony in a civilizing narrative and to expand their economic influence over people, especially through the import of new kinds of drink. Recent studies have also noted the interrelations between changing political and economic conditions and ideas and attitudes about indigenous beer and its cultural referents (Colson and Scudder 1988; Hutchinson 1996). Hence, alongside economic mechanisms, we simultaneously see ideological ones at work. Clearly, alcohol is always embedded in relations of valuation: eco-

nomic, but even more significantly, political and moral-cultural. Viewed in this light, there is no such thing as a history of alcohol in Africa. Alcohol's existence and use cannot be separated, not even analytically, from its social conditions and "constructions."

In Ethiopia there is no government policy restricting or regulating the import or consumption of alcoholic beverages except with respect to taxation. Regardless of the federal government's policy of ethno-federalism, which is intended to promote ethnic parity, the expansion and inclusion of alcoholic beverages in a local pattern of cultural valuation have served to rank drinks and drinkers along old political fracture lines of highlander and lowlander. Drinking patterns are perceived as the measure of "being civilized," whether or not this is matched in actual behavior.

In the Maji area, ethnic hierarchies structure alcoholic hegemonism. The culturally dominant townspeople, largely of northern descent, want to have the best of both worlds. Their types of alcoholic drinks, so they say, are the best, and they think they know how to use and not abuse them. In their view the Suri are still caught in their traditional drinking habits of their local *gèso* beer and cannot handle the greater alcoholic strength of *katikala*.

It is in this vein that they comment on the inefficient and sometimes chaotic Surma Council, where heavy drinking inhibits serious policy-making. That the townspeople themselves have commercially introduced *katikala*, supplying it to the Suri, is not mentioned, or at least it does not make them feel in any way responsible for the trouble. They have succeeded in spreading the consumption of the new alcoholic drinks (*t'ädj* and *katikala*) and derive substantial economic gain from it.

This attitude is, as such, an unwitting part of the expanding domain of the state and of the wider Ethiopian society, which still tends to devalue local traditions, including local types of alcohol like the "crude *gèso* beer." Tolerated as part of "Suri culture," *gèso* drinking is looked down upon, ridiculed, and seen as the root cause of alcoholism, despite the fact that it represents a tradition of moderate socially constructed alcohol usage. Suri interpersonal violence is often explained by reference to "their habit of always drinking too much beer." When villagers see the Suri drink there, they often say that "too much money is thrown away again by these people," suggesting that, in contrast to themselves, the Suri cannot drink in a controlled, civilized manner. But Suri beer drinking is not a social pathology, at least no more so than among any other group in the Maji area. What the townspeople do when they speak with disdain about *gèso* beer is make a statement about difference, about social prestige, about the Suri way of life and their solid group behavior.



The introduction of *katikala* has led to a new form of drunkenness and uncontrolled behavior in settings where tensions may easily be triggered. At funerals and dueling places, and also at collective gatherings such as the meeting of the Surma Council, *katikala* is becoming more common, and according to both Suri and other informants leads to heated verbal exchanges and even physical conflicts.

Views on heavy drinking at Surma Council meetings differ. Townspeople see a dereliction of public office in the councilors' regular drinking on the job, whereas in Suri eyes the Surma Council and *katikala* are both northern imports to the area and part and parcel of the town culture that they now engage in politically as well as economically. *Katikala* drinking and council meetings are culturally entwined.

For the townspeople, the Suri's failure to distinguish the demarcation of work and leisure, and public responsibility and social enjoyment, provides all the more evidence that the project of political, and especially cultural, integration of people like the Suri is far from complete. As for the Suri, their enjoyment of alcohol in the Surma Council represents political and cultural integration in Ethiopia's new ethno-federal system.

## NOTES

I am very grateful to the bar owners and customers of Maji town and to the Suri women beer producers for their hospitality and willingness to answer questions over the years (1991–1999). I also thank the editors of the journal *Northeast African Studies* for permission to use material from an article published in 1999 as the basis for this chapter.

1. A pioneering collection in this field is Gordon 1978.
2. Muslims are a minority in this area.
3. The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, which took over power in Ethiopia in May 1991, having emerged from the insurgent movement, the Tigray People's Liberation Front.
4. People from the historic core region of Tigray dominate the present government and are self-conscious about their civilizational status. The program of the EPRDF has also inherited much of the social-revolutionary outlook and rhetoric of the Socialist regime (1974–1991) in matters of "national progress," development and the removal of "harmful customs."
5. In recent years, another party has also presented itself in the local moral discourse on alcohol. Since 1991 Christian missionaries of a Protestant denomination, with both foreign and Ethiopian backgrounds, have settled in the Suri area, where

they have established a school, a medical post and a church and where they do language research and Bible translation. The missionaries reject all forms of alcohol, including the Suri *gèso* beer. Even the socioeconomic role of *gèso* parties in the agricultural process is devalued and rejected, and no Suri or other local person who drinks alcohol may work for them.

6. Amharic terms with no equivalent English words.
7. In the research of Belachew Desta (1977) an average of 6.07 ethyl alcohol percentage was found.
8. Although some restaurants in Addis Ababa have started to serve it.
9. Imported beer or bottled beer from factories elsewhere in Ethiopia is scarce and only available in some bars. It is drunk by the political, educational and civil servant elite only.
10. Locally known as *gesho* (*Rhamnus prinoides* L'Hérit).
11. When the drink is not yet fermented, it is called *birz*, a kind of honey lemonade.
12. Desta (1977) gives an average alcohol percentage of 13.36.
13. The Dizi term is *muugu*, the Me'en term *sholu*. They refer to the same thick and strong brewed sorghum-maize beer.
14. However, beers somewhat similar to *bordé* or *gèso* are found in the Northern and Central Highlands as well. Among them are *korefé* in the Gondar area, made from barley, and *shaméta* in the Gurage area, which is, however, lighter in alcohol content, made from roasted barley. A nonfermented grain drink is *buk'r*, in the north Shewa, Gondar and Gojjam areas, which has virtually no alcoholic content but is produced from barley, and drunk during religious holidays. These beers are not drunk as food, unlike the *bordé* in Southwest Ethiopia.
15. Which basically refers to being Christian or Muslim.
16. In Belachew Desta's research, the average alcohol percentages of *t'erra-araqé* and the *dagim araqé* were found to be 34 and 47 percent, respectively (Desta 1977).
17. In 1994–95 this was about US\$9–11, in 1999 US\$6–8.
18. On these occasions the women can sit back, having already done most of the weeding and other work between the work of preparing the fields and harvesting.
19. The same is true for the local *sholu* beer among the related Me'en people (cf. a similar custom among the Iraqw, Rekdal 1996).

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