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Beek, W.E.A. van

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## KAPSIKI BEER DYNAMICS

par **Walter E.A. van Beek**  
Cultural Anthropology, Utrecht University

**Abstract :** *Beer brewing, selling and consumption is, as in many African societies, of great importance among the Kapsiki. Brewing is a complicated process that has at least two major variations, leading to the “red” and the “white” variety. Both are clearly distinguished and have quite different functions. The red “male” beer contrasts with the white “female” brew in many ways: ritual application versus market orientation, male versus female interests and symbolic versus economic motives. The last decennia have shown a shift in availability of beer for market production, in which women have been able to get access to a formerly male domain of beer preparation. Shifts in production recipes and shifts in ritual use of beer have resulted from this “gender change” in beer. The same holds, to some extent, for the blacksmiths women, who have gained an – admittedly small – proportion of the beer market.*

Beer not only is a central feature of Sub-Saharan daily life, it often has a high symbolic content as well. Here we shall trace the symbolic aspects of indigenous beer among the Kapsiki/Higi of north Cameroon and North-Eastern Nigeria<sup>i</sup>, by interpreting the symbolic connotations from its place in community rituals. As we shall see, “the message of beer” is by no means uniform. Though most of the symbolism around beer is a male dominated discourse which concentrates on bonding and power<sup>ii</sup>, beer will be shown to be also a female power

### THE CONTEXT

The Kapsiki in North Cameroon live in a dry Sahelian-savannah environment, where sedentary cultivation of millet, sorghum and maize can still be supplemented with some husbandry: sheep, goats and cattle. It is a mountainous, relatively densely populated and quite intensively cultivated. Cultivation technology is of the classical African iron-type and working units are small. Subsistence cultivation relies on a broad spectrum of food crops, with some cash crops to supplement the family budget. The Kapsiki have lived in their areas for a long time and their dwellings still echo the continuous threat of enslavement of past centuries.

For safety purposes people formerly built their villages only on defendable spots and cleared fields in the immediate vicinity. The fields of the Kapsiki/Higi were situated around the outcroppings or on the slopes themselves (van Beek, 1987). This picture changed dramatically with the coming of colonisation. The *pax colonialis* of the Germans and British for the Kapsiki opened up the plains and plateau as cultivation areas. This pacification resulted in a rapid dispersal of the population over the formerly dangerous out-fields.

The main, if not the only, socio-political unit consists of the village. Kapsiki village communities have always had a high degree of political autonomy, as they have their own clearly defined borders, authority structures and local histories, in which migration traditions dominate. Politics are not centralised. Village heads have just a few ritual obligations, as have the clan and lineage elders, though their influence in daily life can be larger. Conflict resolution, for instance, is highly informal, not dependent on specific functionaries, though one separate group of specialists does exist: the blacksmiths. Religion is complex and echoes their history and setting. A system of major cyclic rituals, more or less tied in to the *rites de passage* joins a clearly defined set of sacrificial cults, which follow the social echelons of the village: individual, household, ward, lineage, clan, village neighbourhood and the whole village. Sacrifice functions as the central ritual, with crab divination as a steering mechanism, both processes allowing but a limited role for the ancestors.

## BEER AND MALE BONDING

It is in three major rituals, weddings, funerals and sacrifices that the meaning of beer stands out. First we shall trace the way of the beer during a wedding in order to gain some impression of the Kapsiki handling of beer in a ritual, then we describe the different versions of beer, and discuss the ritual meaning of beer in greater detail.

### Beer and the Bride

Mogodé, 14 April, 4.00 am.

In the afternoon of the first full day of her wedding, Kuve Kwanyé, Zra's bride, awaits the "blessing of the bride". About 3 pm, a group of the groom's maternal uncles plus some of their friends and the village chief gather at the back of the compound, hidden from the eyes of outsiders. Zra, the groom, pours beer from his sacrificial jar into the ritual calabash, and hands it to the village headman. At last, people fall silent when he pronounces a blessing over it: 'She has to bear girls, first one and then another one. We give beer to the people who are dead. If anybody wants to harm, let him be restrained. Let the groom marry more women and all be healthy.' He then spills the beer over the floor. The groom fills the calabash for the second time and hands it over to his mother's brothers, who spit in the beer while passing it on. One of them then takes the calabash to the nearby hut of the bride. Clothed just in her iron apron, Kuve kneels on the doorstep of her hut for the blessing. The uncle takes a mouthful of beer and sprinkles it over the kneeling girl: 'You must be healthy, you should bear many children and repay the bride price. You have to bear children one after the other.' Again he douses the girl with beer, and repeats his blessing: 'Please bear your children, not one by one, but one after the other.' Then he hands her the calabash: she has to empty it, drinking a part, and letting the rest run over her body. When the bride's body is wholly washed with beer, the men are satisfied. She is now their nephew's. Though much of the ritual is still to follow, from this moment Kuve is considered as belonging to the house, truly married to Zra, a wife of the lineage.

### Red and white: Male and Female Beer

Two kinds of beer dominate Kapsiki brewing, *tè* and *mpedli*. The first, *tè*, is the ritual beer, the 'red' kind of beer that will be my focus here. *Mpedli*, the 'white' beer is for market use and immediate consumption. The two represent polar opposites: the white beer is brewed by women, has no ritual significance, is made by a quick process and has to be consumed immediately. The brewing procedure is relatively simple (Brolsma 1987). The white *mpedli* beer is considered a new variety, adapted to the exigencies of the local market because of its quick preparation<sup>iii</sup>. In recent years the red *tè* beer has increasingly become a sales commodity for women both at the village markets and in the cities, generally preferred by the men over *mpedli*.

However, the red variety is traditionally a man's brew, following a strict procedure, with numerous prohibitions, and used for ritual purposes. Symbolism is focused on this beer rather than on the *mpedli*, and it is this beer that gives the Kapsiki their name: '*Kapsiki*' stems from the verb *psekè*, meaning to sprout.

The recipe for red beer is essentially the same throughout the Cameroonian north. The millet or sorghum grains (the Kapsiki like both but prefer sorghum) are soaked in water for a night and then left on a roof to germinate. This *tè njine* is closely linked to death and danger, in Kapsiki thought. The sprouts are vulnerable to supernatural attack, so they will not be left too long on the roof. If small quantities of beer are to be made, the sprouts are left to dry inside the brewing hut, covered with a cloth. About four days before the event, the blackened dry sprouts are ground, then soaked again for half a day in a full jar of water and cooked for the first time for several hours. Traditionally a large earthenware brewing pot (*wuta*) is used, but also steel barrels or cast-iron cooking pots may serve the same purpose. In the afternoon, when the mixture has cooled down, the clear part is ladled into other smaller jars standing against the brewery wall. The remaining murky part is cooked again until the evening and is then mixed with the rest of the brew in the other jars to cool. The male brewer waits during the night, tasting the brew until it turns slightly sour, then filters it back into the large *wuta*, and lights up the fire around the large *wuta* jar (which is fixed in the earth) or under the drum. A slow fire is kept burning for the whole night until the next afternoon. The beer now turns sweetish (*tè kwarhèni*). In the evening, the man filters the beer for a second time and cautiously pours the brew into a number of narrow-necked beer jars, *rhewelege tè* (spilling is a bad thing at this moment), and shuts them with a bundle of leaves. The jars are left in the brewery. If no yeast is added, it takes three days for the beer to ferment. The residue used to be thrown away but today is used as garden manure or pig food.

One taboo dominates ritual beer brewing. If the brewer has sexual intercourse, the beer becomes gluey and unfit for drinking. At the end of the second day, the beer may be used for sacrifice. Called *sarerhè* (literally: the blacksmith drinks), blacksmiths do indeed drink it and use it for household sacrifices when officiating (van Beek 1992a). On the third day it is ready to be used for both sacrifices and for the public drinking that accompanies large offerings. The whole process of brewing has been performed in a hut specifically built for brewing *tè*. In Kapsiki architecture, this hut, as a strictly male domain, is usually built into the compound wall, far from the entrance.

Since the early 1980s, women in the cities of north Cameroon have taken up brewing red beer for sale (Teeuwen 1985). Kapsiki women have also tried their hand at red beer as it gets a better price at the market than other brews. They brew at home and, depending on their relationship with their husband, will either use the brewery or install their beer battery outside. Grain for commercial beer production, as is the case for *mpedli*, is kept separate. The women keep their own stocks and do not use the main granary for their grain supply.

*Plan of a Kapsiki compound. The house plan centres on the axis entrance (dabala) and the beer hut (dewe), which divides the Kapsiki dwelling into the male and the female side. The only fixed points are, indeed, the entrance to the house and the brewery.*

In recent years the women have changed the brewing process. In the first place, they have shortened the fermentation period. Instead of pouring the brew into the *rhwelepe tè*, they use open pots and plastic buckets for easier transportation and distribution. The night before market day, they put yeast in a small jar. When that batch is thoroughly fermented, it is distributed over the rest of the cooled brew. Secondly, the women have shortened the first part of the process: they soak the ground sprouts for only an hour before the first cooking. After some experimentation, they have found that this makes for easier cooking and also improves the taste. As one female informant put it: 'The old people did not know it very well', meaning, of course, the men. So, the women have shortened the process from five to three days and they appear to take the taste of the brew into account more than the men do. For them, the main difference with brewing *mpeldi* is the length of the cooking: for a batch of red beer they need wood for CFA 1,000, (Euro 1,50) while white beer takes firewood worth CFA 300. But it still makes economic sense for women: on a 80-100 litre brew of red beer, a woman earns about CFA 1,500-2,000 and for a similar amount of *mpeldi* she accrues a profit of CFA 1,000 (at 1999 prices). Finally, women are experimenting with the grains themselves. Now that maize has become abundant, they mix sorghum and maize sprouts in the *tè njine*, having found out that maize makes the taste lighter and increases fermentation.

These changes affect the gender division of brewing: women brew *mpedli* (though much less) as well as *tè* for the market. For the main rituals, such as the boys' and girls' initiation, the man still is the brewer. Especially for a girl's first marriage (*makwa*), our opening case, the old recipe is followed. One reason is that the ritual follows the pattern of traditional beer brewing: the days of the ritual are named after the brewing phases. Even when the man has to brew large quantities, he will call his lineage brothers for help, not his wives. If he needs more beer during the feast, he will use the shorter process to add quantity. The gender division, in short, has altered but has not disappeared: male brewing is aimed at ritual, market brewing is for women, even if both can brew red beer nowadays.

## Beer and Kapsiki Ritual

Any sacrifice involving a goat or a sheep, i.e. any important familial or village sacrifice, calls for red beer. The *tè* is poured out in an oblong sacrificial cup made of blackened earthenware and sprinkled on the altar as one of the final parts of the proceedings. The altar, in fact, is a beer jar, a special one called *melè*. Several types are available, depending on the personal history of the owner. This special jar provides a link between the brewer and his father. Made to order by a woman blacksmith after the death of the brewer's father, the jar, filled with beer, rests on the father's grave for a whole night during the rites of the second funeral. In fact, the whole cycle of death rites ends when the jar is brought home by the son of the deceased. Addressing the jar, still filled with beer, as 'father', the son puts it in the middle of his compound. He calls in his wives and children, and they all drink, the man first, then the women and finally the children. The jar will remain stored under one of the brewer's granaries, shut with a cow's horn. For each sacrifice it will be filled, together with the normal beer jars. During the sacrifice the *melè* is the centre of attention: some blood, a small piece of liver and cooked mush will be smeared on it 'to have father eat', and the first beer to be tasted both by the jar and the main officiates is poured from this very *melè*.

Thus, any offering involving *tè* is part of a larger social matrix. The final drinking is quite formal. In the early morning ward members, clansmen and friends gather in the forecourt of the house, responding to the whispered invitation of the evening before. Standing in the house's entrance, the brewer then starts to explain why he has called them. He conveys his message in elliptical language, just hinting at the real cause: 'I had a dream, and put some grains in the water afterwards'. The dream points to the divination he has sought, often a series of consultations. Grains in the water represent the brewing process. As most already know why he is sacrificing, no further explanation is needed. But his use of encoded speech is a sign of his maturity and "savoir faire".

Beer drinking is the high point of the sacrifice and the most social aspect of the ritual. All the other activities, killing and roasting the goat and cooking the meal, have already been done in strict privacy behind the high compound wall that shields the family from the view of outsiders. Throughout the day of the actual sacrifice, the hut's entrance will be barricaded by a wooden pole to signal that a sacrifice is in process. Anyone entering would do so at his peril for it is dangerous for an outsider, i.e. someone not closely related, to enter the compound during a sacrifice. The drinking guests do not enter; they stay in the forecourt situated outside the compound proper, just in front of the one and only entrance.

This type of sacrifice, immolating a goat, followed by a meal for a small in-group, and beer for a large gathering of outsiders, is standard in Kapsiki culture. Not only households, but also wards, lineages, clans and even the village as a whole follow this sacrificial pattern. Beer is not always brewed for the occasion, but it is always poured on the altar, and in most cases drunk. Attendance at the final drinking session of a village sacrifice, though, is restricted. This particular sacrifice is shrouded in privacy and some secrecy. People are obliged to stay at home and not work in their fields, while the elders of the major clans accompany the village chief and the chief's blacksmith up the mountain to make a sacrifice at the ruins of the ancestral abode of the village.

Beer figures prominently in other rituals besides those involving sacrifice. A crucial one is the ritual to procure rain (van Beek 1997). Beer is used to 'wash' the sacred objects of rain-making sites. During the rain hunt of Mogodé, several old grinding stones, attributed to rainmakers of old, are washed with *tè*. Where rainmakers still operate, their implements, stones and mortars are washed with beer. Without beer there will be no rain (of course, the reverse holds as well).

## Beer's Meaning

Beer is liminal matter. Not only does brewing demands an inordinate amount of time, but more important, sexual intercourse is taboo during those days and nights, one of the few prohibitions on sex in Kapsiki life. Indeed, beer is a central and polyvalent symbol. In all major rituals red beer figures in moments of separation, sociability and bonding. Beer unites people as well as distinguishing between them as individuals and groups. It socialises the private ritual of sacrifice, separates the bride from her parents and joins her to her in-laws. Beer marks the final separation between a widow and her deceased husband, just as it separates the mourners from the tomb at the second burial. Thus, it is primarily a symbol for social bonding, and as such also closely associated with procreation. In rainmaking rituals, the rain stones are washed in beer, and the old grinding mills are filled with it. By association with rain and fertility, beer represents prosperity. To highlight beer's association with procreation, we return to our opening case, the wedding of Kuve and Zra:

The evening before her "blessing by beer", Kuve has been called by Zra's kinsmen at her parents' home. Before leaving, Kuve knelt in the house entrance, clad in an iron apron and wearing a straw cape over her

head and torso. From his special calabash her father took a large sip of beer, and spat it over his daughter, soaking her with the liquid. He then gave his blessing-in-parting: 'You are headstrong, my daughter, you do not listen. It is not like this that you should go to your husband. I have not laid my hand on you, but a husband is not a father. You are no longer in my house, but will dwell with many strangers. I want things to go well, I want you to become pregnant, and stay in that house till you die.' Again he spat the beer over her and off she went, accompanied by an aunt, towards the house of her groom. (van Beek 1987)

The symbolism attached to red beer is unmistakably male. Brewed by men, *tè* is the link between the generations of a lineage through the *melè*, which represents the late father. *Té* separates the son from the corpse of his deceased father and at a later stage reunites him with his deceased relative. Pouring beer expresses the permanence and strength of the agnatic line, its procreative powers and male authority. The brewer is the one who is rooted, who has the rights and duties belonging to him as an inalienable villager. As part of the lineage that owns the land, his family should generate rain, crops and children. Beer demarcates the processes that generate life, all focusing on the man as part of a larger group of men. Indeed, it becomes clear why intercourse is forbidden during the brewing process: it would be symbolic incest<sup>iv</sup>.

### THE DIALECTICS OF BEER

In Kapsiki society beer is an important, flexible and polyvalent symbol. The contrasting religious settings of the two societies are related to several striking symbolic differences. In Kapsiki culture, *tè* has a large array of connotations, mostly of a religious nature. Beer, for the Kapsiki, is associated with male power, rain and procreation, aspects that easily merge. Both rain and fertility are stressed in a context of continuity of the residing patrilineage. Rain also serves as a discourse on power relations (van Beek 1997). The interdiction on sex during preparation, though fairly common in Africa, is revealing. Male brewing is strictly male, without any female intervention. Kapsiki beer, *tè*, is male bonding.

In marriage and burial, the beer conveys the blessings and power of the patriline. Continuity, local roots, and links with the sacred places of the villages, all are expressed through beer. The fact that mothers' brothers or blacksmiths often voice the blessings adds to the importance of the social fabric of which the lineages form the main structure. Thus, mothers' brothers are important as fertility can only be secured through good relations between structural opposites in the social organisation: own and mother's lineage, non-smith and blacksmith, and of course, husband and wife (van Beek 1992a). Conversely, it is also the bride's father who gives a beer-based blessing, as does her ceremonial father, a kinsman living at close quarters. Their blessing, just like the others, is directed at fertility. They voice that message in terms of 'paying back the bride price'. Thus, beer secures the transfer of people from one social group to another, or from the living to the realm of the dead. Beer is male, and used by males to convey messages to or about females, and consequently, also small children (van Beek 2002, cf. Müller-Kossack 2001:145).

The place of beer in the religion is revealing. In Kapsiki culture, beer stipulates harmony of the lineage structure, the cooperation between the genders, and the complementary positions of non-smith and smith.. There is a pattern here. In Kapsiki culture beer symbolism stresses the antithesis of the normal situation. For the individualist, autarchy-oriented Kapsiki, beer does express the opposite of the daily reality, i.e. the continuity and power of the lineage, as well as the communality between house and ward, ward and village and between villagers and their enemies. As elsewhere in Kapsiki ritual, structure is portrayed as a harmonious whole. Beer symbolism resolves societal contradictions. In actual practice, the deeply rooted lineages as well as the relations between men and women are laced with tension (van Beek 1987). Some violence is endemic in Kapsiki culture, and in fact alcohol often exacerbates this tension. Especially funerals form the arena where some of these conflicts are fought out. Still, despite its contribution to brawls, the symbolic content of beer irons out contradictions within Kapsiki society.<sup>v</sup> The dialectical symbol of beer serves as an inverted mirror of society. Its message contrasts with the main trends in both cultures: the trend towards individualism in the Kapsiki is countered by a beer-induced ritual harmony. Beer symbolism is a meta-commentary on society itself: beer highlights the fact that cultural premises cannot be taken too seriously and provides a slightly cracked mirror for society to laugh at itself.

The symbolic content of beer is male oriented also in another fashion. Women do brew a lot of beer, in fact most beer comes from women. At each market day cubic metres beer are washed away by the men. Brewed by women, drunk by men. This female brew does not entail many taboos at all, be it *mpedli* or *té*, small matter. Though women do try to avoid sexual intercourse during the night of preparation – after all they are up the whole night in the brewery – it is not a matter of ritual interest. Women do make money out of beer and especially for young women this is an interesting option. Usually their husband starts them out in the business with the first millet or sorghum, and then they are on their own, financing the grains with their own revenues. As usual in Kapsiki society, the male and female budgets are firmly separated within the

household itself. A man does not occupy himself with his wife's means to make a buck, and neither helps her nor sponges off her gains. Though a woman may give her husband some beer after brewing, usually he has to buy his own at the market. In fact, it is not unusual to see a man buying beer from another brewer, even if his wife is standing with her pots at the same market.

The red kind, as said, has become increasingly popular, more work, but also more gain and definitely more customers. When money is made, taboos flounder, but the main issue is that difference between kinds of beer no longer is expressed in colour, but in the gender of the brewer and in the occasion for which beer is used. Ritual imbues beer with its symbolism, and the vehicle for the symbolism is the sex of the brewer. So the fact that women have taken up the brewing of *té*, might seemingly have changed the neat dichotomy present in *té* versus *mpeldi*, but in reality has had little effect: the basic distinction between male and female beer remains unhampered.

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<sup>i</sup> The joint name is appropriate as the group lives on both sides of the border between Cameroon and Nigeria. In Cameroon they are called 'Kapsiki' and in Nigeria 'Higi'. For brevity's sake, I shall call the whole group 'Kapsiki' in this chapter. Fieldwork was carried out in 1971, 1972-3, 1978, 1984, 1989, 1994 and 1999.

<sup>ii</sup> The Kapsiki beer discourse on men is quite analogue to the Mafa symbolism ((Müller-Kossack 2001: 112), the female counterpart is quite different.

<sup>iii</sup> Beer brewing brings in a steady income for women of about CFA 1,000 per standard batch. Their total production is limited by their sales network, the size of their pots and fireplaces and the fact that the beer does not keep well (c.f. Tellegen 1997).

<sup>iv</sup> A similar notion is to be found in Dogon beer brewing and ritual (Jolly 1995)

<sup>v</sup> Of course, this is not exceptional. This function of beer is quite comparable with the symbolic position of beer among the Haya, Tanzania (Carlson 1990).