

DRINKING IS NOT JUST FUN

PREFACE TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Art Leete, Aimar Ventsel

This special issue of the Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics is composed on the basis of papers presented at the University of Tartu's 5th International Arctic Workshop, titled Responsibility and Authority in Drinking (May 30–31, 2014). We have held annual international Arctic workshops at the University of Tartu, Estonia, since 2010. The first three workshops were dedicated to problems relating to movement in the North (see Leete and Ventsel 2011; 2012; 2014). We considered the topics discussed rather comprehensively and started to search for a new theme. We found a challenge in positioning our workshop to relate to problems surrounding drinking in the Arctic.

Our first meeting about the role of alcohol in sociocultural practices in the Arctic in spring of 2013 appeared a solid achievement (see Dudeck 2013; Leete and Ventsel 2015). We asked the participants to concentrate on drinking both in indigenous and non-indigenous communities. The reason is that the High North is notorious for the excessive use of alcohol, which is associated primarily with negative themes such as alcohol related injuries, violence, suicide, a decline in indigenous traditions, culture shock and other misfortunes that result from binge drinking. Despite the scholarly take and the efforts of state institutions to limit alcohol use, many people still continue to over-consume alcohol, an activity associated not only with death and loss but also with leisure, pleasure and celebration. Another factor is that alcohol is deeply embedded within many rituals, such as greeting an honoured guest, demonstrations of masculinity, and with religious ceremonies.

Inspired by lively discussions at the first alcohol workshop, we decided to continue with the same topic from a slightly different angle. The aim was to widen both the scope as well as the geographic area covered by the next workshop. Our particular interest lay in the dimensions of morality and power related to the use or non-use of alcohol and the concept of (ir)responsibility both inside communities as well as in state discourse. We invited scholars to talk on how individuals, groups, NGOs, churches, the alcohol industry and the state conceptualise 'moderate' and 'excessive' alcohol consumption, to what extent people are held responsible for their actions when intoxicated, how culturally varying concepts of personhood are reflected in the discourse of drinking, what kind of social partnerships emerge and disappear, how drinking patterns influence other social and cultural aspects of a functioning community, and similar issues. While previously we concentrated on the phenomenon of 'Arctic drinking' (whether it exists or not), at the 2014 workshop our aim was to include more researchers (anthropologists, sociolo-

gists, researchers in alcohol policies, medical experts) from other-than-Arctic areas in order to take our comparative endeavour further in understanding social and cultural aspects of drinking.

During our second alcohol workshop we hosted twelve scholars from Russia, Germany, Finland, Belgium, Netherlands, Canada, and Estonia. Although the Arctic topic dominated the scene, our attempt to expand the geographical reach of the presentations was still successful. Most importantly, the general background to drinking in Russia was discussed, thus providing a valuable frame for the themes related to the Russian Arctic that remained the primary concern of our workshop. In addition, the global context of so-called northern drinking was also outlined by reports about drinking in Sweden and Canada. The workshop was summarised by the discussant whose role was brilliantly performed by professor Nikolay Vakhtin from European University at St. Petersburg. Only about half of the presentations have made their way into this collection, but we hope to publish more material later. This special issue enables our readers to get a rather adequate impression of the main lines of discussion covered during our workshop.

Andrei Tutorsky composed the first paper of the volume, outlining how his research concerns the attitudes of the Russians and non-Russians of the Russian North towards drinking. Tutorsky analyses the role of alcohol in Russian culture in general with ethnographic insights that recount situations in the north-western regions of country. Tutorsky gives an overview of various approaches to the cultural role of alcohol. Initially, Tutorsky describes the option to consider vodka as a currency that facilitates social coherence. Secondly, he puts alcohol into the context of colonial encounter, relating it to power and friendship, honour and respect. It is also possible to treat alcohol consumption as an indicator of moral crisis in a society, and Tutorsky discusses alcohol as a device for reproducing imagined social consensus in the Russian North.

Igor Mikeshin concentrates his study on the Baptist rehabilitation ministry in the north-western part of European Russia. Mikeshin reflects on the understanding alcohol addicts have of their problems in comparison with drug abusers and the Baptist way of dealing with both addictions. In these rehabilitation facilities the elders teach people with alcohol and drug addiction Baptist theology, direct them to repent and to take Jesus into their hearts. The main existential problem in the rehabilitation process is that addicts in Russia are accustomed to considering alcohol a very normal part of life. Alcoholics recognise their dependence more reluctantly and at a later stage of addiction compared to drug users. Because of this, the Baptist ministry is less successful rehabilitating alcoholics than drug addicts.

Kirill Istomin discusses in some way similar problems associated with the passive or fatalistic attitude of the Nenets people towards their drinking habits and alcohol-related suicides. Istomin's paper is based on his ethnographic fieldwork among the Tundra Nenets in the Yamal Nenets Autonomous Okrug in the western Siberia. Istomin concentrates on culture-specific ways of conceptualising responsibility for one's actions. As it appears from Istomin's study, the Nenets recognise little personal concern when compared with the other people in the region (Russians, Komi). This culture-based psychological orientation makes the Nenets people not active when it comes to quitting alcohol consumption. At the same time, this "external locus of control" provides them some adaptive tools for handling their drinking practice.

Lyudmila Khakhovskaya explores drinking in the Koryak community in the Magadan Region. The author analyses treatment of alcohol in the context of the traditional practice of using a hallucinogenic substance, the amanita mushroom. Khakhovskaya demonstrates that, in the contemporary situation, the Pentecostal missions are the most successful agents in the anti-alcohol campaign. Khakhovskaya investigates the alcohol addiction of the Koryak within the framework of the culture-specific arrangements. In the dialogue between the local archaic animistic world understanding, and the Pentecostal ideology that has been introduced to the Koryak community, numerous cases of abstinence from drink have occurred among the Koryak people.

Laurent Legrain's article takes us to another Siberian border area and a completely different alcohol-related cultural domain. The author discusses the tradition of using alcohol to facilitate good relations between humans, and as a medium of communicating with spirits in Mongolia. Legrain demonstrates how drinking is engaged in the singer-audience encounter. He explores the magic of singing and language use that creates a soundscape for social harmony. Drunkards, on the other end, produce noise that spoils the sonic frame of social and spiritual coherence. Drunkards are considered to become vessels for evil spirits because noisy speaking attracts undefined evil forces that are potentially dangerous to the drunkard and his or her kin.

Anastasiya Yarzutkina's report (based on the paper she presented at our workshop) on trading networks on the Chukchee Peninsula enables us to understand the social mechanisms by which alcohol spreads in the region. The initial results of the study indicate that this approach may also be applied in the other regions of the North as it is logical to assume that similar social agents function elsewhere.

Alcohol-related problems have a global character and similar driving forces shape the social field in different areas of Russia. The interests of producers, legal regulations and administrative measures significantly influence people's behaviour. But when we look more closely, culture-specific issues also occur that play certain roles in the development of alcohol consumption in various regions. The way in which economic pressure and the legal framework are integrated into local traditions and ideologies plays a decisive role in the treatment of alcohol by different ethnic and social groups.

This dialogue between more general political, economic and social developments and the way in which alcohol is perceived in particular communities highlights the problem of responsibility. People are not just victims of a global alcohol conspiracy. They have their own cultural tools with which to treat drinking practices and shaping attitudes towards it. As we can see from the case studies published in this volume, these local ideas and practices may be rather nuanced and can be detected only in the course of careful examination of cultural mechanisms. Furthermore, even if one adequately understands local rules and rituals, it remains unclear how we could apply this knowledge in order to improve the situation. This remains an important question, as scholars, being an authority of a different kind, also feel the need to understand and act responsibly.

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