Xhosa Beer Drinking Rituals

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Power, Practice and Performance in the South African Rural Periphery

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The material in this book is based on many hours spent at beer drinking and other rituals in Shixini, an administrative area in the coastal part of Willowvale (Gatyana) district in South Africa's Eastern Province. Without the tolerance, generosity and good humour of the people of Shixini this would not have been possible. They shared their time, their knowledge and their beer with me. My particular debt is to the people of Komkhulu section of Folokhwe sub-ward, where I was based and among whom I lived as a resident at the homestead of Nothusile and Mzilikazi Tshmese. To Mzilikazi and Nothusile (both now dead), their immediate family, other kin and neighbours, especially Masilingane Tshemese, I am extremely grateful for friendship and hospitality. I am also grateful to Shixini's chief and headman, Chief Mandlenkosi Dumalisile, for allowing me to work in the area and for his assistance and hospitality. Similarly, successive sub-headmen in Folokhwe sub-ward, particularly Kenedi Balile, facilitated my work there.

Most of my research in Shixini was conducted while I was employed at Rhodes University Grahamstown, South Africa, first as a member of the Department of Anthropology, from 1981 to 1990, and later as Director of the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER), from 1991 to 1996. I would like to acknowledge the support I received from the Board of Management of the ISER, and the role played by my former colleagues in the Department of Anthropology, particularly Michael Whisson, whose encouragement and support were important in enabling me to maintain my involvement with Shixini people over the years.

Some of the ethnographic material presented in this book has appeared in other forms, and I am grateful to the following publishers for permission to use sections of earlier published work: African Studies Centre, Leiden; Institute of Social and Economic Research, Rhodes University; *Ethnology* (University of Pittsburgh); Taylor and Francis (U.K.).

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Finally, I would like to thank the editors of this series, Andrew Strathern and Pamela Stewart, for their careful reading of the manuscript, and for their helpful comments.

Series Editors' Preface

Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart

Patrick McAllister's study of Xhosa Beer Drinking Rituals provides a link for our Ritual Studies Monograph Series with a long tradition of detailed and insightful work on African themes that characterized British social anthropology in the post World War II context. While much of this work was done in the synchronic analytical mode of the mid-twentieth century, a vigorous tradition of historically informed work grew out of the applied studies conducted through the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and by other anthropologists coming from, or working in, Southern Africa in general (See Schumaker 2001 for a history). McAllister's own work grew out of the earlier ethnographic work among the Xhosa people by Philip Mayer. As McAllister explains, it was Philip Mayer who first suggested to him the 'location' of Shixini in Willowvale District among the people historically known as the 'Red Xhosa', i.e., those who had maintained a mode of life that they themselves considered to be 'traditional', by contrast with the 'School Xhosa' who had embraced an urban and 'modernizing' strategy.

Philip Mayer established this contrast in the ethnographic literature with his study of *Townsmen or Tribesmen*, published in 1961. The contrast became classic, expressing the dilemmas, struggles, and divisions in many areas subjected to the imperatives and opportunities of colonial and post-colonial existence (see, for example, Brookfield 1973; Brown 1995, both on the Chimbu [Simbu] people of Highlands Papua New Guinea). John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff (1992) have aptly dubbed the compromise social configurations that arise out of such struggles as 'neo-traditional'. It is just such a neo-traditional context that McAllister has deftly explained in the present book, pointing out that categories such as 'traditionalist' and 'modernizing' should not be overessentializedas representations of reality, but should rather be regarded as in-

tertwined nuances or tendencies in the fabric of social processes (see Strathern and Stewart 2004 for another discussion of these topics as viewed from ethnographic materials on Papua New Guinea).[1]

With this perspective McAllister succeeds in updating Philip Mayer's earlier work, both in empirical and in theoretical terms. The Xhosa with whom McAllister worked have been engaged in the kind of delicate and sometimes fragile balancing act that encompasses the lives of many people incorporated into the capitalist world: trying to gain what benefits they can while trying also not to pay too high a cost for those benefits. Their lives become simultaneously 'traditional' and 'modern'; but these two categories are still in many ways cognitively opposed and must be kept separate in people's perceptions. The ritual beer drinks accomplish this separation and mediation of opposites.

McAllister's study shows in fine-grained detail the working-out of a neo-traditional texture of local life in a social formation characterized by the predominant practice of labor migration, a pattern earlier set in hand by the exigencies of colonial demands for labor in South Africa, counterbalanced against the Xhosa drive to maintain their own forms of social life and values. The result of these contradictory forces is their mediation through ritual: the rituals of departure and return for the mostly young and male migrants who leave Shixini for work elsewhere and who are reminded on their departure of the expectation that they will work hard and return later, and on their return are greeted and formally reintegrated back into their local area. Both departure and return are 'rites of transition', in which the migrant is seen as exiting from one social world and entering into another. (In similar contexts of migrant work in Papua New Guinea we have termed these transitional processes or movements 'trans-placements', see Stewart and Strathern 2004a.)

The rituals that are detailed here punctuate this process, stressing the normative view that the migrant's own community of origin is the really important social context; and the rituals of beer drinking performed for a returning migrant emphasize aspects of rank, etiquette, precedence, and placement within a gendered social universe, acting as a mnemonic 'refresher course' on what life in the settlement is about. The 'calling out' to recipients to accept a drink parallels the actions at pig-killing festivals in the Pangia area of Papua New Guinea at which the killer of a pig distributes its parts, loudly calling out to kinsfolk and partners, and runs to each recipient in turn, speeding across the communal ceremonial ground to deliver an individual gift (Strathern and Stewart 2000a). The gift is individual; but the context is communal and public, and there are always interested spectators.

While rituals act to partially stabilize and reframe the processes of social action and events in general, McAllister's focus on ritual does not mean that he simply anchors his account in the idea of continuity. Far from it. The rituals he discusses are themselves evidence of historical changes and further affect the pathways of such changes. McAllister's theoretical concerns lead him to relate beer drinking to its historical transformations and to delineate a shift from a kin and family based system of agricultural work to an emphasis on the wider neighborhood as a source of help with ploughing and other tasks. This shift, itself caused by labor migration, is made central to McAllister's analysis: beer drinking occasions reaffirm the importance of neighborhood ties and therefore help to maintain co-operation across kin and household divides.

At the same time, we may note that senior kin are pivotal in these rituals: for example the relationship between a father and his sons is often highlighted. Sibling relations are also at work: the initiator of a 'beer drink' for a returnee may be a younger brother as well as a father; or it may also be a wife. Women in any case carry out the work of brewing the beer. Sons-in-law and affines are favored in the distribution, and on the occasions themselves close kin usually speak first. While, therefore, beer drinks emphasize the neighborhood, they do not deny or obliterate kin ties but incorporate these into a wider emergent structure of relations.

McAllister carefully explains the context of beer drinking in general among the people he worked with. Women brew the beer and their labor in doing so is essential to the ritual use of beer, even though on many (but, significantly, not all) occasions men appropriate control of it for distribution. Its alcoholic content is not high, and it is regarded as a form of nourishment rather than primarily as a means of intoxication. It is domesticated, belonging to the locality as one of the locality's products, and it is therefore suitable for communicating and embodying aspects of local 'morality'. All this must surely be in contrast with the contexts in which migrants consume alcohol in the towns where they go to work.

In the Papua New Guinea Highlands there was in the pre-colonial past (prior to the 1930s) no tradition of brewing home-made alcohol. Consequently when alcohol consumption was permitted from the 1960s onward by the Colonial Australian Administration, the results were devastating, with excessive consumption, aggression, and disorder, only partially muted through the incorporation of cases of beer into inter-group ceremonial exchanges (Strathern and Stewart 2000b, see also Strathern and Stewart 2003).

The situation among the Xhosa (and many other African peoples) is closer to the place of millet wine in the traditions of the Austronesian-speaking indigenous people in Taiwan, where the ability to drink quantities of wine seems to have been a part of male 'initiation' rituals (nowadays represented in performances as a part of 'cultural revival' movements (see both Stewart and Strathern 2005, and Strathern and Stewart 2005 on these movements).[2] Millet wine use among these indigenous Taiwanese groups was, and remains, also important in libations to the ground and in blowing to the air for spirits to partake of during ritual ceremonies.

McAllister mostly stresses the reintegrative social purposes of beer drinking rituals; but an aspect of communication with spirits, as a part of the reintegration itself, is present. He makes this clear when he notes that beer drinks may be intended to thank or appease ancestors, for example at harvest; or to ensure good luck for a migrant setting out to work elsewhere. The favor of the ancestors was, and is, seen as important for success in all kinds of work. And when McAllister asked if the beer used in the *umsindleko* ritual was for the ancestors or the living people, one man told him, with that expressive flair that is so often met with in the context of such discussions: "I bind them both with one rope". The image of the 'rope' here is one that translates well into Papua New Guinea contexts that we are familiar with. In Mount Hagen, for example, a ritual to pull back the spirit of a sick person and bring them again into the world of the living was called *min kan karemen*, "they straighten the rope of the spirit", in the local Melpa language.

McAllister explains that *umsindleko* is the term for a ceremonial beer drinking to welcome back a returning migrant. The term is similar to *umhlinzeko*, referring to the earlier custom of the sacrificial killing of an animal (a goat or ox) for the same kind of occasion, accompanied by an address to the ancestors. This sacrifice was a relatively private affair, centering on agnatic kin and the cattle byre. *Umsindleko* are much larger affairs, reflecting the shift from extended homesteads centered on kin to smaller extended homesteads linked in neighborhoods. The ritual change thus reflects a historical change in social morphology, exogenously induced; while it also recaptures and carries forward the feature of communication with ancestors. This combination of continuity and change is mirrored at the linguistic level by the similarity between the terms *umhlinzeko* and *umsindleko*, coupled with their differing etymologies, the former referring to 'slaughtering', the latter to 'having a narrow escape' (i.e., from the dangers of leaving home to work elsewhere).

The dangers involved in migration seem to cut two ways. There is first the danger to the migrant himself, that he might fail at his work or suffer mis-

fortune. Second, there is the danger that the migrant might be changed, and bring back 'a snake', i.e., a form of witchcraft that could be dangerous to his own father—a dramatic representation of the potentiality for inter-generational conflict resulting from the son's role as an earner of money and the father's authority in the home context (for a recent review of contemporary notions of 'witchcraft' ideas in Africa see Stewart and Strathern 2004b). Beer drinks dissolve that potentiality for conflict through the medium of ritual expenditure. Since in some ways beer and money are thus opposed, it is easy to understand why there is ambivalence toward the practice of selling beer for money. In other social contexts of this kind around the world money itself becomes domesticated through its incorporation into ceremonial exchanges, such as in Highlands New Guinea (Strathern and Stewart 1999); or money is used to purchase beer, which is then used to promote social relations. (We were particularly struck by customs of beer drinking and toasting on convivial occasions in academic circles on a lecturing trip that we made to Mainland China in October 2004.)

In addition to his rich ethnographic analysis, McAllister provides important theoretical perspectives on his materials. We mention two of these perspectives here. One is his use of performance theory; the other is practice theory. For the first, McAllister's starting point is Victor Turner's concept of the social drama; for the second, Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field. The social drama is an arena of performance, the making public of versions of social reality in situations of conflict, supporting, resisting, or subverting the status quo. McAllister points out that Turner's approach breaks out of a functionalist framework by recognizing ambiguity and uncertainty in outcomes. Process is the key concept here, since process is not chaotic, but it is also not over-determined, and allows room for the expression of agency. McAllister brings these ideas interestingly into the same frame of analysis as Bourdieu's concepts by pointing out that Turner was essentially moving toward practice theory. He also stresses, contra some critics of Bourdieu, that Bourdieu's notion of habitus is flexible and does allow for the consideration of change.

Applying these synthetic ideas to his ethnographic findings, McAllister goes on to stress the performative capacities of rituals to recreate order, not necessarily by denying change, but by embracing it. The beer drinking ceremonies do this by creating a social context for the reincorporation of migrants back into neighborhood life; and historically they have been instrumental in change though the shift from animal sacrifices to communal consumption of beer. The common element that is preserved is the sense of danger. Migrants are

said to be going out to war. 'Analogical transfers' in ritual contexts are thus ways of mediating change. This useful concept can be applied also to contexts of religious change such as are involved in religious conversion processes.

Part of the performative work in beer drinking rituals is done by oratory, and McAllister provides interesting examples of eloquent speeches made on these occasions. Speakers point out that actions are not enough, and they use speeches to 'explain things properly'. While the mouth consumes beer, the most important thing is that it can produce words. And consensus is not automatic, but negotiated and provisional. Words are also used to contain conflict. As one speaker said, "Boys settle things with violence, men with words".

The Xhosa view here resonates strongly with the idea of speech in Highlands New Guinea. In the Hagen area, for example, in the 1970s, leaders would say that people should eat first at feasts, but after this they should talk. And pre-eminent leaders, known for their dispositions of wealth, would nevertheless stress that their power lay in their creative control over talk (see for example, Strathern and Stewart 2000b).

Patrick McAllister has certainly exercised a creative control in his absorbing presentation of materials in this book. The book will be of particular interest to scholars in ritual studies, religious studies, cultural anthropology, African studies, and colonial and post-colonial studies.

March 2005
Pittsburgh, PA, USA

Endnotes

1. Much of our own research work, over many years, has been conducted in Highlands Papua New Guinea in the Hagen area among the Melpa-speaking people, in Pangia where the language is Wiru, and in the Duna area where the language is Duna.

2. Since 2000 we have had an active research program in Taiwan, returning regularly for further work.

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