



CHANGING SIGNIFICANCE of HOME-BASED BREW

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ABSTRACT

Alcohol dependency by youth has occupied large space of research and social discourse across cultures and time. In the case of alcohol use, it has been a central issue in almost all cultures from the Neolithic times to present day. This article expounds certain generalised social and cultural constituents in the use of alcohol- IMFL and home based brew. The learnings are based on research undertaken among the college students. The research adopted mixed method within explanatory sequential and nested design. The quantitative data were gathered from 400 college students while the qualitative data came from a group of socially informed and involving individuals. The study, besides unravelling the perceptions regarding the origin of the use of home made brew called apong among Galo tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, discloses the variety of views that the community holds regarding the purpose and merit of its use. These are termed as cultural, religious, medical or health and agricultural 'facets of Apong'. The data tells that there is a 67 percent apong using and 54.5 percent alcohol using population among respondents. The study divulges that the purpose and need of apong use is undergoing significant changes in the present day.

Key Words: Apong, Alcohol Use, IMFL, Galo, Kebang

INTRODUCTION

Alcohol use, a universal phenomenon across civilizations (Vega., Zimmennan., Warheit., Eleni., & Gil., 1993) has been a central issue in almost all cultures since the Neolithic times so much so there are people to argue that development of agriculture was for cultivation of grain for beer as much as for bread. Its universal presence through human evolution indicates that it could have had certain significant benefits. From time immemorial, drinking has been a social activity and hence production, consumption, and associated behaviour have been subject to social control. Attempts at prohibition have never been fully successful, except when imbedded in terms of religious cultures (Social Issues Research Centre – SIRC, 1997-2014). Certain societies deify it, while certain others deride it. Either way, the implication is that society is moved by it and expresses its concern through sociologists, anthropologists, and health experts; each of them raising one or the other aspect of its multidimensional influence on human life.

Studies on the topic endorse that social and cultural factors like acceptability, indifference and permissiveness to the use have positive correlation with use of both alcohol and tobacco, irrespective of communities and countries. Two general classes of variables that have been identified as critical in substance-use initiation in early adolescence are social factors, that include peer as well as parental influence, and intra-individual factors (Joseph, 2015; Joseph, & Pereira, 2014). Alcohol use by the

adolescents is greatly and positively linked to influence of socio-cultural environments and the attitude of the socially influential persons towards the users (Joseph, 2017). A permissive attitude is bound to promote and increase the number of alcohol and tobacco users (Stigler., Perry., Arora., & Reddy, 2006; Desai, 2005; Poulsen., Osler., Roberts., Due., Damsgaard., & Holstein, 2002). From violent and anti-social to peaceful and harmonious behaviour, there are cross-cultural variations in the way people behave when they drink. Sociologists attribute these differences to different cultural beliefs about alcohol, expectations regarding the effects of alcohol, and social norms regarding drunken demeanour. Social researchers on the subject claim that the effects of alcohol on users' behaviour are more determined by social and cultural factors than by the chemical actions of ethanol (SIRC, 2014). This article recaps the understanding gained from a study among the college going students of the Galo tribe, a distinct and leading tribe, of Arunachal Pradesh.

Influence of Socio-Cultural Factors

Various investigations in the past have researched the influence of socio-cultural factors in risk taking human behaviours. Endorsing the findings of Aral (1991), Mane (1994) argued that society provides the context in which behaviour is shaped and conducted. There are four important factors related to beliefs which effect change in risk taking behaviour patterns. They are: the seriousness of the problem, awareness about one's personal vulnerability, perception about the personal benefits of taking preventive action, and the personal cost of taking such an action. Drinking and smoking are often associated with good life, a symbol of wealth and social status. Cultural factors often increase the possibility of relapse when lifestyle modification (normal behaviour) occurs. Speaking of its social functions, Vega et al., (1993) observed that alcohol use is a ubiquitous component in the social life in many civilizations. Social events often revolve around alcohol which is consumed before and during meals. Alcohol is often seen as a social lubricant or tension reducer that enhances social events. Investigators have pointed out the role of socio-cultural factors in the high rate of alcohol use, abuse and dependence among people. Explaining the Theory of Triadic Influence (TTI) Flay (1999) and Daurah (2004) say that the starting points for the personal, social and cultural-environmental streams of influences are the general cultural environment in which adolescents mature, the immediate social situations in which adolescents regularly find themselves and intrapersonal differences among adolescents.

Socio-Cultural Undertone of Apong

Apong, a home based brew, is prepared from a mixture of cooked rice and starter. Earthen pot, wooden containers, utensils, teak or banana leaves may be used for holding the mixture for fermentation. The clean or milky produce is apong. Some other types of fermented beverages are opo, madua, rakshi, mingri, lohpani, and bhangchang. The first three are said to be prepared and consumed by almost all the tribes in Arunachal Pradesh. Apong and opo are rice-based beverages whereas others are millet-based fermented beverages. These fermented beverages are an important part of their daily life and meal as much as in different social and cultural ceremonies and functions. This is served to people of all age groups, including children, below five years (Shrivastava., Greeshma., & Shrivastava, 2012).

The apong of the Galos and the Adis has been studied by the department of anthropology, the Government of India, and found that while the alcohol content was small, it enriched the nutritive value of their diet approximately by 10 per cent of calories, 5.5 per cent of protein, 5.3 per cent of calcium, 11 percent of phosphorous, 29 per cent of iron, and 8 per cent of niacin.

Therefore, the use of apong, when perceived from the social and cultural background, is not an alcoholic drink for them. Rather it is a nutritious drink that is essential to the food habit (Elwin, 1964). Choudhury (1994) explains that the food that the Adis (The term 'Adis' included Galos too at that historical time), live on are mainly rice, maize, finger and fox-tail millets, vegetables, meat, fish and rice beer (apong). The rice beer brewed mainly from rice and sometimes from millet or maize, is the most favourite drink of the people. It is an indispensable item of food taken regularly. The apong is offered to guests as a gesture of hospitality. It is an essential element in religious and social functions. It is not merely an alcoholic drink but "an essential item of food, taken by the people regularly for nourishment especially during social and ritual functions and festivals" (Choudhury, 1994 p. 302). Along the same line, Mohan and Sharma (1995) caution that though the usual mean alcohol content of

tribal beers is 3-5 percent, the alcohol content of double distilled alcohol of tribals of North East India is as high as 70 percent.

Facets of Apong Use

The qualitative data disclosed the variety of views that individuals in the studied society hold regarding the origin, purpose and merit of the home made brew called apong. These are cultural, religious, medical or health and agricultural facets of Apong use.

Apong Use in the Present Times

This study among the 400 college students of West Siang district showed that 95 (23.8%) respondents 'never used' *apong* while 57 (14.2%) had 'quit using' thereby leaving 248 (62%) to be consumers of apong. Of the 248 (62%) consumers of apong, there were 189 (47.3%) who were 'occasional' consumers, 51 (12.7%) who consumed apong 'often' and 8 (2%) who consumed apong on a 'daily' basis. In terms of gender, 62 women and 33 men were 'never users', and 33 men and 24 women had 'quit' consuming apong. Thus, among the 248 (62%) active users, 149 (60%) were male (109 occasional users, 34 often users and 6 daily users), and 99 (40%) were females (80 occasional users, 17 often users and 2 daily users). If we consider the ones who quit using apong (14.3%) along with the (62%), 'present users' as apong users the total users would stand at 76.3 percent.

When the qualitative informants were asked about their personal view regarding its use in the present day society in general; 42 percent approved it, 33 percent completely disapproved it and 25 percent approved its use only on social occasions. They also said that the community elders do not approve its use in personal life. Thus, the views were well divided with more numbers tilting towards pro-use. The quantitative data revealed a similarly divided view with 69.5 per cent (19.1% completely approving and 50.4% partially approving) approving the use and 30.5 per cent disapproving its use.

With regard to the onset of drinking the study showed that 58 percentage of users began drinking apong or alcohol between 15 and 20 years of age, and 25 percent began between the age of 10 and 15, while 17 percent began using them even before they reached the age of ten. Studies have noted that there is greater risk of a user becoming an addict, if the onset of drinking is before the age of 12 (Berman & Snyder, 2012; Lal, 2005; Agarwal, 1995).

Apong Use as Cultural Practice

Most interviewees attributed the use of apong in the community to cultural, traditional and social practices. All but one (88%) viewed it as culturally linked to the people, though many of them could not elaborate any further, as to what, why and how this link originated or came to survive through ages. To cite one of the interviewees: "People say that without apong, no celebration is complete. But I do not know why the use of apong is so common or when it was started".

It was also noticed that the use of terms such as culture, custom, tradition and practice were interchangeably used by them to explain the use of apong in the community. All these terms stand to mean that its use began with their ancestors and that the practice is followed up to present day and that its use is integral to the lives of the people, at family and common gatherings, at festivals of joy (marriage) and occasions of sadness (burial). The views of the young, regarding the reason for the use of apong is summed up by an interviewee as follows: "Exactly I do not know. However, our ancestors have started this practice. It has been our tradition. Making apong, wine and using tobacco leaf ("patha") are all our legacy..." As the interviewee affirms that it is her culture, she also told that 'overusing' of it was never part of Galo culture. The cultural foundation on which it is held by the present day population is made clear from the words of a respondent, "Though elders advice young ones not to use, people use it. On occasions of merry making, construction of new house, festivals, etc., it is used. The new ones (children and youth) also learn its use. Unless and until we change our belief system in the society we cannot avoid it from our lives. Even though we want to avoid it, it won't go away".

The three perspectives that came up from the study are that *apong* is used for (a) religious purpose, (b) medical purpose and (c) agricultural purpose. This is discussed in certain detail below.

Apong as Religious Substance

With regard to the use of apong as a religious object at religious functions, an interviewee had this to say: “In the early days apong was considered to be a ‘sacred object’ and was reserved for the deity. Later, it came to be reasoned that if that is given to the divine, why don’t we have a little of it? And hence people began to drink it themselves besides using it as a religious offering.” The philosophical explanation of its association to religion was expressed as “it has got only an association with religious practice, and no other religious significance.” This view is upheld also by some others. However, there are some who view that it is a ‘holy object’ for them and that it is inevitable at religious rituals.

Apong as a Medical or Health Drink

Some respondents attributed the use of apong in the community to its health and medicinal properties. They considered apong as healthy beverage having nutritional values and health benefits. In addition to the basic health benefits, some mentioned that daily intake of apong resulted in maintaining good health as it helped build immunity against common colds, fever and other diseases. Thus apong is seen as a nourishing beverage.

Interestingly, there was another explanation for the use of apong as a medicinal drink. According to one of the interviewees:

In some families where the nursing mothers who could not produce breast milk on time or could not produce sufficient breast milk, the mother was forced to give something to the child... and they used to give fresh and healthy rice beer to children because in those days, alternative milk was not available as milking of cows was not practiced by our people. Hence, in emergency situations, they used to prepare rice beer and feed the children like milk....”

Apong Use as Agrarian Life Style

A third view that emerged from one of the interviewees is that in the early days the ancestors were all farmers and their hard and laborious lifestyle prompted them to take apong in the evenings. This became a common practice. However, they did not drink excessively or else they would not have worked so hard every day. He argued,

“... people, after a day’s hard work, used to make apong and consume in small quantities. It was because of our agricultural background. Apong was needed to fight the tiresomeness and fatigue of walking long distances, often climbing hills and reaching the fields and working the whole day. It helped them to relax and sleep well after a hardworking day. Its use was only in a controlled way since they had to be fresh the next day for backbreaking work.”

The underlying reasoning behind the traditional use of ‘apong’ was its use as a relaxant at the end of a tiresome day. It was used to relax the muscles, to replenish the exhausted energy and to have good sleep in the night in the agrarian society, both in the past and even in the present, as ‘it is tasty’ and ‘stress relieving’ (Shrivastava, Greeshma., & Shrivastava., 2012).

Views of Women on Apong Use

The entire process of preparation and production of apong is the exclusive domain of women (Pegu., Gogi., Tamuli., & Teron, 2013). The women folk of the community gather together at a place for the preparation of the beverage months before the festive occasions. This is said to promote unity, integrity, interaction, friendship, and affection among families and members. They believe that only a few persons are supposed to prepare it, and the whole process is done openly and normally, by using hands (Shrivastava, et al., 2012).

Among the 12 interviewees, four were women, and it is interesting to note that all of them are tolerant to the use of apong at home. “It is okay to make it at home. Only few are excessive drinkers...”. One of them sees it only as a social drink. Another response was more welcoming and compared it with ‘amrit’ (nectar). According to her, “Knowing how to make good apong is a quality that a woman should

possess. It is not possible for all to make good apong”. She viewed the skill of apong making in line with ‘cooking’. “As cooking tasty food is a special quality and an art mastered by only some women, making good apong also is a special quality and an art.”

According to one interviewee, the unmarried girls seem to consider making *apong* as an important skill they need to possess in order to be accepted by their future in-laws. This is what the interviewee had to say: “My friends argue that as a girl if I don’t take it and don’t learn how to make it, my future in-laws will not like me etc., so if you have to be a perfect house wife you must know how to make apong.” However, this is not to say that any of them were in support of its misuse or overuse by the members.

SIGNIFICANCE AND FUNCTIONS

As recently as three decades back, the people of Arunachal Pradesh were leading a traditional life style by mostly depending on forest and forest products. For beverages and beverage preparations they used different wild plants as ingredients (Shrivastava, et al., 2006). Since time immemorial the people of Arunachal Pradesh were preparing and consuming various kinds of alcoholic drinks. Traditional beverages occupy a special status and importance in the social and cultural life of the people. On social functions such as marriage and on other occasions like funeral, harvesting, making of houses, birth of new child etc., consumption of these drinks was a “must and customary” practice. Festivals were opportunities for all the members of the community to gather and drink the beverages together that was served to all the participants at the function, including children (Shrivastava, et al., 2012). This fermented beverage was an important part of the daily life of the Galos. Apong was served during the social and cultural ceremonies and functions. It was served to people of all age groups, including children below five years, with no restriction of gender or social status (Shrivastava, et al., 2012; Paul., Sylvia., Carlos., Josiah., & Manuel, 2002). Because it was used at family meals, it is defined as a food rather than a stimulant (Mandelbaum, 1965). Fermented food beverages have a strong ritual importance and are deep rooted in the cultural heritage of the community. Being rich in caloric value, it serves as a part of their diet, though drinking in excess quantity creates some problems like unconsciousness and unusual behaviour etc (Paul, et al., 2002).

Apong is ‘socially and morally neutral’ as it is a symbolic tool for identifying, describing, constructing and manipulating values, interpersonal relationships, behavioural norms and expectations (SIRC, 1998). New members of the community rarely make a choice of taste. They accept and adapt the prescribed drink for themselves.

Drinking apong, among the Galos, is essentially a social act, subject to number of rules and norms regarding who may drink what, when, where, with whom and so on. It is used more by men than by women and is more a social affair than a solitary act. In most cases, it takes place in social groups usually composed of age mates and social peers. Drinking takes place mostly in open and easily visible places uninhibitedly. It is an accepted and unremarkable element of everyday life. Hence, some consider apong drinking as a social leveller, and as a means of communication between those of different ranks and status in society and, hence, a socially integrating activity (Paul, et al., 2002).

Apong is not a situation definer unlike champagne which is synonymous with ‘celebration’, or status indicator, like in Poland, where wine is regarded as a high-status drink of the middle-class, and native beers and vodkas are for ‘ordinary’ or working-class (Nichter, 2003). Among the Galos, white and black apong is served to all on different occasions. However, white wine is usually served for more important occasions and to more respected persons. Participating in and sharing of apong is a statement of affiliation, a declaration of membership in a particular group, generation, class, tribe, sub-culture and their associated values, attitudes and beliefs. Among tribal communities, as observed by Mohan and Sharma (1995), no one, friend or foe, would decline an offer of rice beer. Among the Galos too, rejecting the offer of ‘apong’ injudiciously can hurt the feeling of the host in certain situations. However, if politely declined as a teetotalter, this refusal is taken in its right spirit and is accepted respectfully. Non-consumers in the community are looked upon with appreciation and esteem.

According to the Adi- Galo tribal conception, apong serves as an antidote against sorcery, witchcraft and black magic. It was a traditional substitute for a legal document, as a word given over a drink had the sanctity of a legal document, meaning that men kept the promise made on a drink. Apong plays an

integrative role from the cradle to the grave, i.e., in all stages of life for all, men and women. Its presence is noticed and is essential in all major life-cycle events such as birth, coming-of-age, marriage and death. Apong consumption is indispensable during important milestones in life such as graduation or retirement and even far less momentous shifts such as the daily transition from work to play. Apong is used at different stages of marriage from negotiation to solemnization as well as at divorce, widow re-marriage, elopement and death. The presence of apong in all the life cycle events, according to Gusfield (1987), lies in the natural affinity between alcohol and ritual: alcohol is an integral element of the rites of passage because drinking ‘performs’ the symbolic, psychological and social functions of these rituals.

Apong serves to strengthen social bonds and to ease tension at *Kebangs*¹. A conflict resolved through the mediation of *Kebang* is cemented by drinking together at the expense of the guilty party. Most people, in one way or the other, are fond of apong consumption and treat it as something very normal. The rural population consumes apong daily as nourishment after their hard labour as a stress relieving agent whereas the people of urban areas mostly consume fermented beverages on special occasions.

CHANGING SIGNIFICANCE

As viewed in its significance above, apong is integral to the social life of the people. However, the study noticed certain distinctions, in certain cases clear, while in some other cases subtle, between the traditional use and present-day use, and traditional interpretations and present day understanding. Present day understanding are highlighted below.

1. Traditional use has been in the context of agrarian life and lifestyle. There are some who would go to the extent of saying that ‘development of agriculture was for cultivation of grain for beer as much as for bread’, in order to show how much an agrarian society was intertwined with home made brews. The society had been by and large agrarian until 18th century. The industrialisation and urbanisation of 19th and 20th century changed the characteristics. Today there is more sharp distinction between agrarian and industrial society and their lifestyle. In the case of Galo society, it is largely agrarian, though other ways of meeting both ends is sought by a large section. The educated youth belong to the latter category. Hence there are intelligent changes in the views of the educated youth regarding the topic discussed here. Besides having progressive change in their own views, they urge others to move away from the use of apong as they associate this lifestyle as a preliminary step towards the more dangerous alcohol use and abuse. They do not approve it anymore as significant and integral to their culture and social life.

2. The research directly came across people who disagreed with the justification that use of home made brews is integral to the culture. With regard to the influence of culture on the use of *apong*, one respondent, a prominent Galo writer and publisher and a proponent of Galo culture and literature, as well as a compiler of Galo folklore, argued, “Originally *apong* was only medicinal and was used at home. But today it is used for merry making” and hence, in that sense, it cannot be held as a cultural drink. Another response came close to this notion when she proposed that *apong* traditionally was “served to guests like tea or ‘*tamul*’ (local terminology for areca nut)” and not used as an intoxicant drink while another held the view “it is more a social practice than a cultural drink”. These are perspectives that communicate the message that more individuals are disagreeing to the traditional view that it is culturally inseparable to them. Similarly, when apong is used for ‘merry making,’ it is no more a cultural drink.

¹ Village council or self-governing institution of the Galos in the village.

3. As regards the religious significance, the views differed. The same interviewee who attributed a religious significance to apong use by people asserted in the same breath that “In the past *apong* had something to do with the religion and a sense of faith or god in the practice of use of it. These days, religious practice is only an excuse for the people to use it. Today it has nothing to do with religion or culture.” Thus the religious angle to the home made brew has lost its relevance.

4. One of the explanations for the use of *apong* as a medicinal drink was that in the absence of alternative feeding system to the infants, the nursing mothers who could not produce breast milk on time or in adequate quantity, used to give fresh and healthy rice beer to children because in those days, alternative milk was not available as milking of cows was not practiced by them. However the times have changed and as a result, there is bottled and packeted milk available in most areas. In highly remote places people have learned to rear cows and get cow milk and hence the relevance of *apong* for infants do not have ground or relevance any longer.

5. Another changing view that has emerged is that “*apong* use is becoming as a daily practice that should be avoided.” So there was a universal view that use of *apong*, for no reasons is approved as a daily practice.

6. Another important trend that has come to the knowledge of all is that the present generation youth is giving way to Indian Made Foreign Liquor (IMFL), that has large number of outlets in every nook and corner of the studied society. This is more worry some than the use of home made brews. Though the study did not focus on the daily or monthly revenue of these outlets to raise the alarm bell, common sense is enough to clinch that these outlets have high market and huge revenue. If not for this there would not have been so many in the market.

Thus a silent but significant transition is evolving in the present society towards the understanding of traditional home brews. There is silverline in this evolutionary perceptions with the warning that efforts are to be made that youth do not fall into alcohol consumption from *apong* utilisation.

CONCLUSION

Most Galo people consider *apong* use as a traditional practice and hence treat it as a cultural practice which is essential for their socio-political and religious life. Its presence and use in all common functions is the proof of its acceptance. It is consumed during all rites of passage like birth, marriage, death and also during festivals because there exists a natural affinity between drinking and rituals and because drinking ‘performs’ the symbolic, psychological and social function (Gusfield, 1987).

Drinking, as a learned behaviour, is acquired initially by imitation of a model, who demonstrates and induces new behaviour. Therefore, exposure to drinking situations, awareness, knowledge, opinions, beliefs, attitudes towards drinking and institutions like family, peer group, educational institutions and work place are integral to developing and learning drinking habits. Parents, older siblings, relatives, peers, co-workers and others become trainers to adolescents in alcohol use. Most drinking occurs at traditional dances and parties in social peer groups. Contact with peers is usually maintained at recreational places, at a mutual friend’s house, at festival celebrations – like Mopin and Solung- and at other life events. (Stigler, et al., 2006; Desai, 2005; Poulsen, et al., 2002; Mohan & Sharma, 1995). Many of these characteristics are undergoing a gradual transition due to the arrival of modern educational system and a change in lifestyle practices.

Studies reviewed reveal that use of alcohol, home made brews are highly prevalent among the youth of the north eastern region of India (Rukmini 2014; Director 2013; Neufeld, Peters., Rani., Bonu., & Brooner, 2005; Chadurvedi & Mahanta 2004; Sinha., Gupta., & Pednekar, 2003; Deswal., Jindal., & Gupta, 2003; Benegal., Gururaj., & Murthy, 2003). In the context of tribal communities of central India, Mohan and Sharma (1995) observed that contact with the outside world introduced them to consuming adulterated liquor. This is true also of the Galos resulting in the use of various IMFL products in place of the traditional *apong*. As a result, many of the traditional meaning and purpose associated with *apong* consumption is being diluted. Mohan and Sundram (1987) in a study found that students of twenty years of age consume more alcohol than those younger, and those students of boarding school/college use alcohol more than day scholars, students from English medium schools and educated students drink less than the vernacular language students and that rural students drink more than urban students. Most youth drink in the context of schools and colleges today.

Drinking of *apong* is in the process of losing its traditional connotation among the people for different reasons. There is a real possibility and danger that ‘*apong*’ can well be replaced by any other object like IMFL. So the society need to be on its watch that the change should not be limited to the object of drinking, but be extended to the dangers and purposelessness of drinking itself.

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