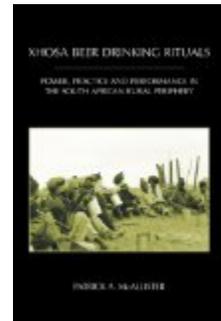


Patrick McAllister. *Xhosa Beer Drinking Rituals: Power, Practice and Performance in the South African Rural Periphery*. Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2006. xxii + 355 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-89089-021-9.

Reviewed by Sean Redding (Department of History, Amherst College)
Published on H-SAfrica (July, 2007)



A World in One Beer Beaker

In this study of beer-brewing and beer-drinking rituals of a rural South African group, anthropologist Patrick McAllister shows, with a great deal of finesse, how to take a small-scale study and use it to cast light on a much broader set of topics. He uses his descriptions of the social world constructed both around and through beer as a way of discussing cultural and social change in an African society that identifies itself as culturally conservative. He also shows how this self-conscious reconstruction of a rural world became both a refuge and a way of resisting broader changes in South Africa.

McAllister's fieldwork took place over twenty-two years and multiple beer-drinks in a small sub-district of the Eastern Cape. He notes his own initial reluctance to see beer-drinks as anything beyond recreational and occasionally rowdy social gatherings; his views were based on his knowledge of the anthropological literature that suggested that beer-drinks had little ritual content in themselves. But gradually, as McAllister tells it, after attending several beer drinks and discussing them with participants, he learned that a beer-drink was almost always hosted for a recently returned labor migrant, and that these gatherings had many ritual elements. He became interested in the historical dynamics of alcohol consumption and beer drinking in South Africa, and the way that changes in practice connected to the political economy of migrant labor and to the increasing impoverishment of the countryside.

McAllister sets out a brief history of African beer-

drinking in South Africa. (He also gives a complete "how-to" description of Xhosa beer-brewing in appendix 1.) The beer, currently omnipresent at social gatherings and rituals, was not always as important to rural life. Usually made from a fermented porridge of maize and sorghum, beer-brewing required that people raise a surplus of these grains. Maize was an introduction from the American world, but rapidly became a staple crop; the plow accompanied missionaries in the 1800s in most parts of the Eastern Cape and the new technology enabled African farmers to raise a consistently larger crop. The simultaneous decline of cattle-herds—the other agricultural staple in the region—as a result of livestock diseases newly introduced by colonial settlers decreased the availability of milk and, McAllister speculates, elevated the importance of beer. This happened more or less at the same time as the region was being taken over by the expanding Cape Colony, so that beer became the drink of a politically colonized but culturally resilient people.

Although the author provides a brief history, his real concern is with how beer-drinks developed the ritual associations and content that they currently have. Changes in beer-drinks accompanied changes in the rural relations of production. Building on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus, McAllister traces the impact of male labor migration on rural kinship networks and on the economic integrity of the homestead. The widespread migration of young men to the mines and industries of South Africa provided both an opportunity to acquire money that could be re-invested into the rural family

as well as a danger associated with the erosion of family ties and the loss of deference owed to elders. Rural, culturally conservative families, often called “Red” (for the red ocher they used as a cosmetic) re-invented beer-drinks as a way of managing the danger posed by labor migration: “Red Xhosa converted the bulk of their earnings into forms of capital in rural areas that were multi-dimensional; at once economic, social, cultural and religious—cattle, ploughs and other forms of rural assets—in accordance with a habitus arising out of their position in the field of capitalist production. Such conversion was an act of resistance and subversion which signaled the perceived illegitimacy of the existing structure of power in the field (as well as in other fields). But it was also a positive act, aimed at the needs of the homestead and expressing Red people’s legitimate position within the rural social field, and which provided them with bargaining power in their relations with other homesteads” (pp. 63-64).

Beer-drinks enabled rural people to turn assets (including cattle, grain, and money) into symbolic capital via ritual and communal activities. In the rural context, the social legitimacy of migrants’ wages was dependent on the earnings being transformed into symbolic capital of some kind. Gradually, beer-drinks began to perform this function. McAllister develops his description of *um-sindleko*, beer-drinks held upon the return of a labor migrant, through this theoretical framework.

Despite the name, beer-drinks are not just about drinking beer, but also involve oratory. The oratory at beer drinks is principally a form of public performance. At the drinks for returning migrants, the most important theme in the oratory is building the rural homestead. Speakers praise good behavior and castigate bad behavior (anything that keeps money from the homestead or that is seen as anti-social). A migrant who has successfully returned with saved earnings to support his rural family is celebrated; one who has been less successful is encouraged both by the support of the community attending the beer-drink as well as by the support of the ancestor spirits invoked during the ritual.

Beer-drinks had always been a form of hospitality, but in the altered rural context the brewing and con-

sumption of beer became a sign of a moral household that is part of a larger community. With labor migration becoming more common during the twentieth century, many households found themselves without sufficient family labor to perform routine agricultural tasks; these households became more dependent on the labor of neighbors, and beer brewed for work parties recognized and celebrated the growing significance of reciprocal transactions between homesteads. Beer was “the medicine of the home” that re-integrated the migrant laborer, re-affirmed ties between neighbors, and called upon the homestead’s ancestors for assistance.

Beyond this explanation of the role beer-drinks have played in the re-invention of the rural family and rural production, McAllister also describes the very positive way that beer-drinks and beer-brewing have developed cultural meanings in themselves. In drinking out of beakers of beer as well as offering beakers to neighbors and to social juniors, people debate the idea of the ritual and the morality enacted in its performance. The beer-drinks are not meaningless holdovers from a long-dead life, but an indication of a vibrant, participatory community that engages but declines to embrace the life of urban, globalized South Africa.

McAllister’s study gives the reader a sense of the meanings incorporated into the rituals of beer-drinking in rural South Africa. He does an admirable job of connecting changes in the ritual to changes in the rural political economy. Beyond the question of migrant labor, he also discusses the ritual beer-drinks for widows coming out of mourning, and the ways in which beer-drinks reaffirm or challenge social hierarchy and gender relations. For scholars outside of southern African studies, he provides some cross-cultural analysis of the social dimension of alcohol consumption. Historians may find the more theoretical chapters a bit dry, but the more descriptive chapters contain enough theory to develop the analysis and enable the reader to understand the argument. McAllister provides a deep ethnography that builds upon the work of earlier ethnographers of Xhosa-speakers, including Philip Mayer and Monica Wilson. Like that of his predecessors, his work shows a profound respect and affection for rural culture and the people who practice it.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

Citation: Sean Redding. Review of McAllister, Patrick, *Xhosa Beer Drinking Rituals: Power, Practice and Performance*

in the South African Rural Periphery. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. July, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13409>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.