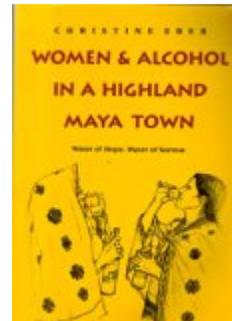


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Christine Engla Eber. *Women & Alcohol in a Highland Maya Town: Water of Hope, Water of Sorrow*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-292-72089-3; \$18.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-292-72090-9.

Reviewed by Kate Davis (University of California Berkeley)
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Women and Alcohol in a Highland Maya Town: Water of Hope, Water of Sorrow is a well-written feminist analysis of culture, tradition, gender, and alcohol use within a Highland Chiapas community. Eber states that her research was guided by two primary questions: "How is women's relationship to alcohol changing in Chenalho, and how are Pedranas handling their own and others' drinking problems?" (p.3) While her focus is on women in particular, her efforts to contextualize the study within the historical, cultural, and spiritual framework of an indigenous community broadens her work by providing a basic understanding of community life as a whole.

Eber's method of feminist analysis which includes symbolic systems, historical materialism, and social construction of gender provides a solid, but not rigid, research framework which she uses quite masterfully. One of the most intriguing and ultimately effective aspects of this book is the choice of storytelling as the vehicle for presenting her research and analysis. This platform allows her to give voice to the women she worked with in Chenalho. While that voice is filtered through Eber's own personal and professional assumptions and experience, it is nevertheless a sincere and quite effective attempt. Eber does not pretend to be an "objective" participant-observer. Rather, she includes her own thoughts, feelings, and actions which gives the reader a three-dimensional perspective of the relationships Eber had with the women she studied. Eber's methodology and literary style added depth to the analysis of a very complicated cultural, social, and economic system.

One of the main themes evident throughout the book is, of course, alcohol. Eber's analysis of the dialectical role of rum is excellent. Rum is a powerful substance

within the context of traditional spirituality while it destroys people's ability to follow a path that demonstrates understanding of their god's desires for individual and community behavior. Rum is empowering and debilitating. Rum is cause and cure. Alcohol eases the pain of the economic exploitation in which alcohol was an effective tool of the Ladinos. Alcohol created/increased the pain of women and children through escalating domestic violence. The sale of alcohol (usually by women) often provided the only source of income for a family. Economic exploitation of Ladinos contributes to poverty, violence, alcohol consumption and frustration to a level that challenges the ability of Pedrano communities to maintain their culture and reject mestizoization. However, Eber does make the reader aware that for some in the community, especially the young, mestizoization is an attractive alternative to poverty and oppression.

Alcohol is only one of many contributing factors in cultural, gender, and structural changes occurring in Highland communities. Ladino domination of indigenous peoples sets up an increasingly intolerable imbalance of power. Power struggles between Pedranos, Ladinos, and mestizoized indigenous people occur with increasing frequency. There are also internal power struggles within the community in which land and women are symbols of the struggle over autonomy and freedom from Ladino exploitation. As Pedranos become more powerless and aware of that condition, they turn with greater frequency to domestic violence which jeopardizes family and community structure as well as the health and lives of women and children (200). Economic instability in Mexico contributes to the significant re-definition and re-situating of traditional gender roles when women are forced to become breadwinners in whole or in part (69).

In the chapter on “Traditions, Religion, and Drinking” Eber’s analysis of the spiritual, religious, economic, political, and cultural aspects of Catholic Action, Protestantism, and Traditionalism is especially powerful. Protestant churches offered Pedrano communities entry into a capitalist economic system (217), improved living conditions, and required abstinence from alcohol. With the help of priests and nuns, Catholic Action lay leaders “organize their communities into small groups which identify and study the sources of their economic exploitation and political oppression, and develop strategies to confront these (223). Nuns (madres) work with women to place their “agenda within an overall economic and political liberation context” (226) without stressing the radicalism within feminist theology.

I found the comparison/contrast between the alcoholics in the indigenous community and Alcoholics Anonymous in the U.S. a bit disconcerting. While I find cross-cultural comparisons important and useful, a comparison between the wealthiest country and one of the poorest communities in the world was, for me, ineffective. Near the end of the book Eber states that AA does exist in San Cristobal. It would be more useful to know whether AA in Mexico was successful in helping indige-

nous people stop drinking. Was the group in San Cristobal strictly Ladino? Did AA groups reach out to indigenous communities? If there were no meetings, groups, or outreach services to the Highland Chiapas communities then why was AA used as a point of comparison/contrast?

This book is an important contribution to studies of indigenous communities and especially gender issues within those communities. It is clearly analyzed, artfully written, and perceptive. Perhaps one of the central contributions of this work is the lesson Eber credits Pedranas with teaching her. “[T]ake women’s concerns out of a western framework of individual rights and put them into their framework of community and cultural survival.” (242) This same advice is especially useful when studying and analyzing different cultures, ethnicities, and races. It is also one of the most difficult tasks of a researcher, but one that is crucial to an attempt to give voice to the people we study and work with.

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