H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Emmanuel Akyeampong. *Drink, Power and Cultural Change: A Social History of Alcohol in Ghana, c. 1800 to Recent Times.* Portsmouth, N.H.: James Currey, 1996. xxiii + 189 pp. $23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-435-08996-2; $60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-435-08994-8.

Reviewed by Martin A. Klein (University of Toronto)
Published on H-Africa (January, 1999)

This book is an important contribution to the increasing body of literature on the history of alcoholic drink and popular culture in Africa. In the first two chapters, Akyeampong sets his study in an analysis of the role of water, blood and alcohol in the traditional cultures of southern Ghana, arguing that the symbolism of the three fluids is crucial to power and spirituality. This provides a theoretical framework for the book, but once done, he focuses not on the ritual uses of alcohol, but on its social role. Palm wine was originally the drink of choice in southern Ghana, but during the slave trade period, it was replaced by rum and schnapps.

This means that like the nations of northern Europe, Ghana was an area where men drank hard liquor, seen as "hot" or "strong" and clearly preferred it to palm wine or beer. It also means that as in northern Europe, alcoholism has long been a serious problem. Liquor was a prestige good in pre-colonial Ghana, and as such, was controlled by the elders and the politically powerful. Women did not drink and young men rarely so, and then only as a result of the beneficence of the rich and powerful. Palm wine and liquor were central to the exercise of power. There was, however, one day during the annual Asante odwira festival when basins of rum were laid out for the ordinary classes. This was a signal for a day in which people were free to act drunk and under cover of inebriation to do and say what they wished, a ritual note of rebellion against state and a rigid social order.

Akyeampong begins and ends with the ritual importance of blood, water and alcohol, but the heart of the book is the social history of drinking. Once young men moved to the mines or the cities, they were free to drink and had the money to pay for it. Drinking, as in many other male cultures, became the basis of peer group socializing. Young men gathered after work to drink together, and for some to escape the tensions of an oppressive work situation. Chapter Three deals with these young men's drinking groups. Chapter Four deals with the inevitable response, a temperance movement, which was an alliance between the churches and elders who feared that uncontrolled drinking would lead to disorder and disrespect for authority.

The temperance efforts failed because liquor duties provided a large part of the colonial state's revenues, up to 40% in the pre-World War I years. Chapter Five deals with two developments. First, drinking underwrote the development of music, dance and theatre. Second, increasingly, locally brewed gin called akpeteshie replaced imported liquors, much to the distress of colonial rulers unable to tax it. Chapter Six deals with many of the political issues emerging from this drinking culture and the way they were used by Nkrumah's Convention People's Party, which mobilized support in the akpeteshie bars. Finally, in Chapter Seven he deals with alcoholism and despair in post-Nkrumah Ghana.

Throughout this, Akyeampong links the form and significance of drinking to power and status. There are crucial differences in what people drink, where they drink, and how they drink. Drink involves markers of social status. In spite of the CPP's patronage of the akpeteshie culture, the social divide grew after independence. The new elite drank at home and in comfortable hotel lounges. "For the winners," he writes, "alcohol has been a prized commeodity; ironically, it has also been a consolation prize for the losers" (p. 157). The poor continued to drown their sorrows in palm wine and at akpeteshie bars. Akyeampong also deals well with gender questions. Though women produced and sold alcoholic beverages, they rarely drank until recently. The drinking culture has been a male culture, for which women have paid a high price.

All this is done with great skill. He uses high life lyrics, proverbs and interview data very well. Akyeampong makes the culture and politics of drink central to an understanding of modern Ghana. He is terse, perhaps too terse in places, and the argument is well made. If I

have any criticisms, it is that much of the discussion of the ritual importance of the three fluids is irrelevant to his central subject. He would have been better off finding his theoretical framework in the comparative history of alcoholic drink. On the other hand, there are questions he could have expanded. I would have liked more on the relationship between popular culture and the drinking culture that under-wrote much of it. I would have liked more on the importance of hard liquor. He mentions beer in many places, but it is rarely discussed, though in much of Africa and elsewhere, beer is the ordinary man's drink. A man drinks akpeteshie, gin or vodka to get smashed. A man can get drunk on beer, but it takes a lot of work. Beer is a social drink.

Perhaps it is better to be terse and to leave us eager for more. Emmanuel Akyeampong is a fine historian. We can expect more fine history from him.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Martin A. Klein. Review of Akyeampong, Emmanuel, *Drink, Power and Cultural Change: A Social History of Alcohol in Ghana, c. 1800 to Recent Times.* H-Africa, H-Net Reviews. January, 1999.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2672

Copyright © 1999 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.