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Justin Willis. *Potent Brews: A Social History of Alcohol in East Africa, 1850-1999.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002. xii + 304 pp. $22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1476-7; $44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1475-0.

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Potent Brews: History of East African Alcohol Straight Up

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Justin Willis has produced a work of impressive scholarship, in which he has marshaled diverse archival documents, supported by current surveys and interviews in three areas of East Africa, to chronicle the dynamic role of alcohol in shaping power structures over 150 years. He traces how alcohol has been used, argued about, and remembered in the struggle to control the well-being of society. These tensions largely fall along familiar age and gender lines; throughout the period women have been the main producers and men, especially elder men (at least until the last thirty years), have been the main consumers of alcohol–these are practically the only constants in an increasingly complex equation of contested rights over production, profits from sales, and the consumption of different types of drinks. In the nineteenth century there was a triadic contest for authority between elder men, younger men, and women, with the elder men maintaining ritual and moral authority symbolized through their exclusive access to alcohol. The caravan trade introduced opportunities for young men (the "warrior class") to gain power, and therefore access to women and alcohol, outside the control of elder men. With the advent of the colonial era the state became a fourth agent in the contest for authority, and a source of rhetoric about proper types of alcohol for different types of citizens. The post-colonial state and its decline saw both a fracturing of control over society's well-being as well as control over access to alcohol. As Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania enter the twenty-first century, alcohol production, sales, and consumption are essentially market-regulated, so that the freedom to produce and consume a wide variety of alcoholic drinks coexists with attempts to reclaim "traditional" mores of drinking controlled by elder men. *Potent Brews* is a well-written, captivating history of the shifting rhetoric and behavior around alcohol, and can serve as a valuable classroom resource despite limitations in its last chapters.

The strengths of the book are in its organization, style of prose, and thorough archival research. Willis has divided the book into four chronological sections; within each are thematic chapters with some overlap in time, which provide for examination of detail within larger social and economic contexts. Willis writes clearly; he explains the premise of each section and chapter, amasses evidence in logical order, then summarizes and links it to the next argument. This smooth progression is a boon for the reader, but at the same time seems to put his repeated reminders of ambiguity, contradiction, and alternatives in question. The introduction, "Ambiguous Power: Drink, Drunkenness and Society," lays out the central premise of the book: "There is ... ample reason to argue that people have been, and are, faced with profound and urgent challenges to their well-being which come from other directions [than heavy drinking]; that such challenges became more acute in the late twentieth century; and that arguments over the very nature of drinking have been and are involved in central debates over power and authority which occur in the context of these challenges" (p. 5). This section also includes the essential description of how and where various types of alcohol have been produced in the region over the period of study. Photographs and tables add to this comprehensive but not unnecessarily detailed technical section.

Having made a convincing argument for the "central role which alcohol has played in the making of power" (p. 11) in East Africa, Willis begins the delineation of that role in elder male power in part 1, "Drink, Sex and Violence." "[I]deas about power over individual and societal well-being were generally the basis of the authority of senior men in the face of the potent forces of sex [women's basis of power] and violence [young mens' basis of power]; and ... the ways in which people used alcohol and talked of its use were central to the reproduction of those ideas" (p. 60). The examination of these

ideas and practices, and their dynamics during the caravan trade period, build a kind of suspense for the reader, who anticipates that the European colonials will complicate the contest over power and authority. The reader is not disappointed: the strongest, most convincing chapters of the book are in part 2, "Native Liquor, Money and the Colonial State c. 1900-60," those that utilize the documentation of the first Europeans to the area, and the colonial era records. In this section, Willis explores the debates around where, when, and who should produce and consume which types of alcohol (traditional fermented drinks such as banana, palm, and millet brews; imported bottled beer, whiskey, and wine; locally bottled beer; and locally produced distillates). The shifts in the states' determination of which types of alcohol consumption and production contribute to the "health" and "development" of East African societies are fascinating and lend insight to understandings of the colonial state beyond simply (or complexly) the study of alcohol.[1]

As an anthropologist, I was impressed with the number (274) of qualitative interviews Willis had undertaken, and the 217 survey responses on the drinking and making of alcohol. These were collected in three very different areas: Hoima District in western Uganda, Jajiado District of southern Kenya (on the Tanzanian border), and Rungwe/Kyela District of southern Tanzania. Yet with the volume of data that must have been produced, there is little idea of the perspectives of women and young men interviewed. Although the patriarchal voice of elder males, and their analysis of what has gone wrong with drinking practice (and social order) is clear, if not uniform, the reader gets no sense of the alternative, oppositional, or contradictory voices of those not in power. Is this because the respondents all gave the researcher what they thought he wanted to hear? It is impossible for the reader to make a guess, since Willis himself offers no information about how the interviews were conducted or his own role in their collection. This weakness is apparent in part 3, "Drink and Development," but the reader is held by the very informative discussions of the rise of bottled beer and illicit distillation in the post-colonial period. Especially interesting is Willis's description of the contradictory views surrounding the economic health of the state, types of drinks produced, and their producers and consumers.

Part 4, "Drinking in the 1990s," was disappointing on several counts. The most striking gap is the total absence of any mention of HIV/AIDS. This is a mystifying omission, since HIV/AIDS is inextricably linked to the gender and civilian-state relations in the production of social authority Willis describes. Women who produce illegal drinks or are not licensed pay bribes and fees to stay in an economically precarious business. It is not inconceivable that sex, and thus sexually transmitted diseases, is a part of this economic survival strategy. He quotes one woman from the Rungwe/Kyela District: "The drink in the past did not cause any harm because knowledge was very little.... Now they mix many drugs into the drinks. That is why people are getting drunk so much, unlike the past. They are putting many intoxicating things in the beer. That is why many people are getting infected with very many diseases, *many infectious diseases which were not there in the past* ... That is why deaths are so many now" (p. 262, emphasis added). Another respondent said, "Now I'm blaming drinking. At the same time it has caused the breakage of many people's marriages, more than long ago ... now there are so many things which are mixed up, and again diseases have increased more than long ago" (p. 264). Given the high prevalence rates of HIV/AIDS across East Africa during the period of research, and given that the epidemic was certainly in the public eye by the 1990s, it seems apparent to me that people were talking about the intersection of alcohol, sex, and HIV/AIDS.[2] What could be more of a threat to individual and social well-being than HIV/AIDS in these countries? While I can understand that Willis may not have wanted to ask people directly about this crucial intersection, his total failure to address it in his analysis is a major shortcoming of an otherwise comprehensive study.

I would recommend this work for anyone interested in the history of East Africa or the social history of alcohol. Because of the excellent organization and accessible writing style, this book would be useful as an African history text for advanced undergraduate or graduate courses in African history. Instructors, however, should be prepared to use additional resources to discuss the interaction of alcohol and HIV/AIDS and the resulting effects on power structures and struggles for authority in the region.

Notes

[1]. For example, traditional fermented drinks have variously been officially deemed nutritious and important to the local diet, unhygienic and dangerously impure, a detriment to nation-building and progress, and important to local economy in a global market. Willis is careful to point out that popular discourse and official (or advertising) rhetoric have often been at odds.

[2]. In a quote used to illustrate the popular discourse on "drinking crises," one respondent reports "[T]his beer is drunk on the road-side, they just have little *vikao*

[drinking-groups], there is not a [separate] place for the children, the woman, the school student–they are all together. As you can see, there are many prostitutes" (p. 264). I believe that Willis missed the opportunity to draw HIV/AIDS into the discussion of the "sense that the ability to manage health and wealth have been compromised by a modernity which has offered little in return" (pp. 265-266).

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