

**“TO DRINK OR NOT TO DRINK?”: MORAL AMBIGUITY
OF ALCOHOL IN THE PENTECOSTALIST IMAGINATION**

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ABSTRACT

Alcohol is a commodity of immense cultural significance and its consumption is circumscribed by moral conventions. This study explores moral construal of alcohol using qualitative data obtained from 86 Pentecostal Christians in Uyo, Nigeria, which generates contrasting narratives of alcohol. A more dogmatic position denounces alcohol because of its link to moral degeneracy and social problems. A subaltern view contests and seeks to transform this position through the language of moderate consumption. Alcohol occupies an ambiguous position in the moral imagination. It is at once a resource for constructing identity and marking moral boundaries, and a discourse for contesting and transforming moral traditions. Ambiguity in moral construal of alcohol may predispose to hazardous consumption and certainly impedes efforts to address alcohol problems. The need for a coherent dogmatic position on alcohol that restrains harmful consumption and further research to broaden understanding of the moral economy of alcohol are highlighted.

Key Words: Ambiguity, Alcohol, Moral Imagination, Pentecostal, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Alcohol is a commodity of immense socio-cultural significance. Its production and consumption has a long history in Nigeria (Olorunfemi, 1984; Ambler, 1987; Heap, 2005; Korieh, 2003). The consumption of alcoholic beverages is a culturally acceptable practice rooted in the social

and moral fabrics of local Nigerian societies (Korieh, 2003). Softer alcoholic drinks such as palm wine, beer made from malted grains, and local gin, distilled from palm wine sap, have existed in Nigeria for centuries. Among the Kofyar of north-central Nigeria, Netting (1979) observed that the consumption of beer constituted the ‘focus of cultural concern and activ-

ity'. The Kofyar people 'make, drink, talk and think about beer' (p. 325). The consumption of alcoholic beverages reflected individual, communal and ritual concerns, including child naming, weddings, chieftaincy coronation, funeral obsequies, and libation rituals (Heap, 2005). The emergence of rum and whisky as part of the Atlantic slave economy produced changes in tastes and made imported liquor a fashionable commodity. However, imported liquor did not supplant traditional drinks; they coexisted in complementarity and competition (p. 30).

Alcohol is enmeshed in diverse ways in cultural symbolism (Jarvinen & Room, 2005), and its consumption is circumscribed by moral conventions, which serve to control abusive and pathological drinking that leads to social and health problems. Alcohol plays a significant role in leisure activities and in certain cultural and religious traditions (Parry, 2000). The 'roles of alcohol in daily life and ritual occasions vary considerably across societies and cultures and depend in part on the religious practices of the group' (Joffe, 1998). Religious beliefs and practices influence patterns of alcohol consumption. Alcoholic beverages and intoxicated states fulfil essential functions in religious rituals (Armstrong, 1993; Trenk, 2001). Alcohol is used for libation to mollify dead ancestors (Offiong, 1982), and in shamanistic divinations (Mathee, 2014). On the other hand, religious beliefs exert prohibitive influence on the consumption of alcohol. This is the case where alcohol use is banned on religious grounds as in the Muslim societies of northern Nigeria.

The relationship between religious beliefs and alcohol consumption is not monolithic since different religious traditions hold different views of alcohol.

Within Christianity, Pentecostalism espouses a prohibitionist view of alcohol, as part of a rigid insistence on a strict moral ideology (Wilson & Clow, 1981; Navarro & Leatham, 2004). Studies also show that Pentecostal faithful have lower levels of alcohol consumption compared to other denominations (Coldiron, 2008; Ford & Kadushin, 2002; Ford, 2006 *inter alia*). The bane of these studies, however, is their preoccupation with statistical associations between religious affiliation and alcohol consumption rates. A counter-point to quantification is qualitative studies investigating moral evaluations of alcohol among Pentecostals. For example, van Dijk's (2002) study of Malawian Pentecostals has shown that alcohol is rejected because of its link with the traditional past. He sees this as part of a total moral programme of resistance to the encroachment of modern forms of consumption, which threatens the moral fabrics of society. He pursues this thesis further in his study of Ghanaian Pentecostals (van Dijk, 2004), which indicates that alcohol is rejected not only because of drunkenness and indecent behaviour, but also because of 'the entire world of ancestral veneration that is related to the use of alcohol in ritual practice' (p.449).

The present study attempts to present a nuanced understanding of alcohol from the perspective of Pentecostals. By exploring polyvalent narratives of alcohol characterized by both permissive and prohibitionist themes, the study seeks to tease out shades of cultural meanings attached to alcohol in the moral imagination. The narrative nature of the study focuses attention on that genre of discourse that is the site of counter-hegemonic resistance, and socially-mediated representations of the self and constructions of personhood

(Abu-Lughod, 1986; Lutz, 1988; Stromberg, 1993), which also embeds a variety of cultural constructs that evoke cultural sentiments, propositions and evaluations (Chafe, 1980; Price, 1987; Strauss, 1990). By privileging cultural understanding of alcohol, the study challenges orthodoxy in alcohol studies (Dietler, 2006).

Pentecostal Christianity: An Overview

The Pentecostal¹ movement has a long and complex history. Its root goes back to the holiness movement of the nineteenth century, which sought to articulate a stable form of experientially robust Christianity built around the notion of the second blessing of the Spirit called 'sanctification' (Robbins, 2004). The early twentieth century revival at Azusa provided ferment for the founding of the movement in its various branches, including Elim (1915), Apostolic (1918), and Assemblies of God (1924) (Hollenweger, 1972). The second stream is the charismatic movement of the 1940s, which was characterized by the rediscovery of spiritual gifts like speaking in tongues, prophecy, healing, new forms of worship, including greater spontaneity in dance and songs with emphasis on praise, and a new spirituality that is 'life-affirming rather than world-denying' (Tidball, 1994).

Although it had an obscure beginning among poor socio-economic groups in America, the movement has experienced significant demographic growth, and has evolved a distinctive culture of its own. Pentecostal Christianity has spread throughout the world, becoming the fastest growing movement in Christianity

(Anderson, 2004; Hollenweger, 1997). It boasts of global membership strength in excess of a billion. Furthermore, within 100 years of its existence, the movement has had over half a billion conversions worldwide (Barrett, 2001), which is almost 28% of the global Christian population (Barret & Johnson, 2002). This phenomenon has been described as 'the largest global shift in the religious marketplace' (Martin, 2002).

The majority of Pentecostal converts are found in third world countries, especially Latin America, Asia and Africa. Africa has an estimated 120 million Pentecostal converts, which constitutes roughly 11% of the total population of the continent. Barrett & Johnson (2002) estimates that some 109 million of these converts have joined the movement since 1980. The growth of Pentecostalism in Africa, as part of the appropriation of Christianity in the continent (Gifford, 1995), is linked to the economic crises of the 1980s, which led to widespread impoverishment and decline in material conditions of life (Marshall, 1991). Pentecostal churches offer a form of Christianity that fits into local cosmological categories such as witchcraft, spirit and ancestors. It also offers prayers, spiritual warfare and deliverance as cures for these ills, thereby presenting as 'an alternative centre of power for solving human needs' (Ojo, 2005).

Scholars have sub-divided Pentecostal and Charismatic churches into three broad categories. These are classical Pentecostal, Charismatic and Neo-Charismatic churches (Anderson, 2004; Hollenweger, 1997). The classical variety are those churches with links to the early American and European Pentecostal churches which stressed the importance of speaking in tongues as evidence of the baptism

¹ The term 'Pentecostal' is used throughout this study to refer to both Pentecostal and Charismatic churches.

of the Spirit. They include Assemblies of God, Church of God in Christ, and the Pentecostal Church of God. The Charismatic variety consists of those who emerged from mainline denominations such as Lutheran, Catholics, and Presbyterians in the 1960s, having experienced the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Coleman, 2000). The Neo-Charismatics consists of different non-denominational and post-denominational churches, fellowships and Para-churches which have sprung up since the 1980s. They are characterized by innovations in the adaptation of Pentecostal doctrine and styles of worship to different settings. In Nigeria, Neo-Charismatic churches include Winners Chapel, Church of God Mission and Deeper Life Bible Church.

The Pentecostal movement is known for passionate forms of evangelism and proselytism, including open-air crusades and aggressive church planting campaigns. Although there is no uniformity of doctrine, the essential beliefs of the movement, known as the 'full gospel', are fourfold: personal conversion (described as 'being born again'); baptism in the Holy Spirit with the initial evidence of speaking in tongues; healing and miracles by the power of the Spirit, and; the imminent return of Jesus. Its aversion to sin is as stringent as its desire to depart from every residue of the traditional and ancestral heritage (Meyer, 1994; van Dijk, 2004). There is a strong emphasis on adherence to strict moral codes in daily life. Prayer is exuberant and ecstatic. Worship services are characterized by speaking in tongues, powerful preaching, spontaneous expression of praise and worship in singing, dancing, kneeling, prostration and lifting up of hands.

Worship is meant to bring about 'personal transformation', involving 'dramatic

changes in subjectivity', and 'a revision of consciousness' (Maxwell, 1998), a 're-making of the individual' (Martin, 1990), and a 'reorientation of persons' (Barbalet, 2008). Transformation is often of a moral kind, and is associated with strong emphasis on strict moralism in conduct, which includes abstention from alcohol consumption (Wilson & Clow, 1981; Navarro & Leatham, 2004; van Dijk, 2004). Alcohol consumption is part of a broad spectrum of practices which are abhorrent to Pentecostals, including immodest dressing and sexual immorality.

A coherent Pentecostal theology of alcohol is almost non-existent. The subject is rarely taken up in regular bible studies or developed as catechism. It may be mentioned occasionally in sermons, but mostly in passing. Most African Pentecostals hold a prohibitionist view of alcohol. They assume that the Bible condemns the use of alcohol in any manner. In making a case for total abstinence from alcohol, most Pentecostal Christians focus on passages of the Bible that condemn or show the results of alcohol misuse, but neglect those passages that show that they can be a proper, moderate use. On the other hand, those who espouse moderate use of alcohol often lack a robust theological grounding for their views. There is a tendency to assume that 'the Bible teaches that', but little attempt is made to interpret these passages theologically.

METHOD AND MATERIALS

Study Setting

The study was conducted among Pentecostal churches in Uyo, the administrative capital of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, since the state was created in 1997. A for-

mer colonial province, Uyo became a local government council in 1987 after a prolonged period of struggle for local political autonomy. The city has grown tremendously within the past few years, attracting people from different ethnic, religious and cultural groups in the country. According to figures from the 2006 national census, Uyo has a population of 309, 573 people. The traditional occupations of Uyo people are farming and commerce. Urbanization has, however, brought about the growth of various occupational activities, such as banking, cottage industry and white collar jobs, which refers to a variety of low-level office, administrative, or salaried positions mostly in the civil service. Poverty level in Uyo is high. A survey conducted in 2004 (FERT, 2004) indicates that over a third of the population live below the national poverty line. Access to basic social amenities such as healthcare, electricity, housing and water were very limited for a long time but there have been some improvements in recent years. The people were traditional worshippers in the past but the coming of western missionaries during the pre-colonial and colonial period witnessed gradual conversion to Christianity. A significant proportion of Christians in Uyo are Pentecostals, a version of the Christian faith that arrived in the area in the 1960s. The first set of Pentecostal churches in Uyo was the Apostolic Church and Assemblies of God, which came in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The late 1980s witnessed the beginning of the proliferation of Pentecostal churches in Uyo. The city has experienced rapidly growing rates of alcohol consumption in recent times, along with a surge in the intensity of night clubbing, partying, and visits to drinking places where hazardous consumption of alcohol is common place. The effects of this disturbing pattern

of alcohol consumption are increasingly being felt in the incidences of road traffic accidents, violence and criminal activities throughout the city.

Study Participants

Participants in the study were recruited through multi-stage sampling method (Barker, 2005). This involved dividing the city into six large enumeration zones (EZs). Thereafter, cluster sampling was applied whereby Pentecostal churches in each of these enumeration zones were grouped together to form clusters. This was done based on a comprehensive list of the churches developed by the umbrella body of Pentecostal churches in Nigeria, the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria (PFN). A systematic sampling involving the selection of every fifth Pentecostal church within a cluster was used to select 32 churches. In the final stage of sampling, the Pastor-in-charge, a lay leader and three congregants from each of the selected churches were contacted for interviews. Where the pastor was unavailable, an Assistant Pastor or Elder was interviewed in his or her place. The selection of Pastors, Lay Leaders and members was to ensure the systematic inclusion of the views of all segments of the church. Interviews were arranged in advance, in line with the schedule of individual participants. Some pastors were interviewed at their residence while others were interviewed in their office, often by appointment made with the secretary or office assistant. Lay leaders and congregants were contacted for interviews after church service, with their consent and the permission of the Pastor-in-charge. Altogether 157 persons were interviewed for the study out of the initial 160 enlisted, which puts the rate of participation at

98%. All participants gave informed consent to be interviewed. They were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality in the use of the information they provided.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted in English language by 4 well-trained fieldworkers, and lasted for 5 months (June and October, 2012). The research instrument was a semi-structured, individual interview schedule which had been assessed independently by 2 methodological experts from the local university². Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were also conducted to allow for deeper and extensive exploration of the themes raised in the individual interviews. Two FGD sessions held, and each session had six participants in attendance. FGD sessions were conducted in English language and tape-recorded with an electronic recording device, while one of the field assistants took notes. The recorded discussions were transcribed and edited by an English major from the university. Both personal interviews and FGDs generated a stout body of narratives containing multiple representations of the moral economy of alcohol. Since culture concepts are relative, the study focuses on context-specific conclusions, rather than phony generalisations which have little validity across cultural contexts (Nyamnjoh, 2005). Analysis picked out segments of the narratives in which participants expressed both supportive and proscriptive views regarding alcohol. This was done in order to juxtapose these mutually contradictory narrative sets to reveal the ambiguous position of alcohol in the moral imagination. Repeated reading of the transcripts

enhanced immersion in the data (Burnard, 1991). A thematic analysis was performed in line with the data reduction, display and verification procedure (Miles & Huberman, 1994), involving thorough examination of the narratives fitted into analysis matrixes. Themes and patterns emerging from content analysis were marked. The themes were further refined through the development of sub-themes and their properties. This process continued until the point of analytic saturation was reached. Key comments are quoted verbatim.

RESULTS

Socio-demographic characteristics of participants

The basic socio-demographic characteristics of the participants are presented on the table located below. The bulk of participants were male (73.5%). Women constituted a small proportion of the sample (26.4%). Similarly, majority of the participants were above the age of 40. Only 12.8% were below the age of 20. The participants' age structure corresponds fairly to the age distribution of Pentecostal congregations (see Gifford, 2004). The educational attainment of the participants was significantly high as the majority had tertiary level education (51%). Again, this resonates with the literacy level of the members of these congregations (Ojo, 2005). Majority of the participants (67.5%) were married. Only a small proportion (5.9%) were either divorced or separated. Ojo (2005) aptly captured the demographic profile of Pentecostal Christians when he described them as 'young, mobile, well educated people seeking a modernising milieu for self-expression'.

² University of Uyo, located in the city where the study was conducted.

Table 1. Basic Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Participants

	#	%
Sex		
Men	86	73.5
Women	31	26.4
Age		
Below 20	15	12.8
21 – 30	22	18.8
31 – 40	31	26.4
41 and above	49	41.8
Literacy Level		
Uneducated	9	7.6
Primary	13	11.1
Secondary	34	29
Tertiary	61	51.1
Marital Status		
Single	31	26.4
Married	7	5.9
Divorce or separated	79	67.5

Source: Fieldwork in Uyo, 2012

Drinking practices of the participants

Regarding the drinking practices of the participants, data indicates a sharp cleavage between those who condemn the consumption of alcoholic beverages and those who supported modest consumption. All those who condemn the use of alcohol (69%) said they do not consume any kind of alcoholic beverages. This is consistent with observational evidence regarding the denunciation of alcohol by most Pentecostal faithful. The intensity of abstinence may be glimpsed in the comment of a participant who stated, 'I don't take anything that contains alcohol, not even fruit wine. Nothing with alcohol enters my mouth'. Another simply said, 'I don't take alcohol; not beer, stout or fruit wine with alcohol content'. On the other hand, majority of those who supported

the use of alcohol were themselves consumers of alcoholic beverages. However, the kinds of beverages they consume differed. The majority use softer beverages such as fruit wine containing 4 to 6% of alcohol, as well as imported beer and stout. They variously explained that the reason they favour these kinds of beverages is that they do not intoxicate unless one consumes a very large quantity. A participant in this group told us, 'I take beer because I can control how much I drink. I don't ever get drunk on it'. A few of the participants who supported alcohol also consume beverages with high alcoholic content (termed 'strong drinks'). This includes whisky, brandy and other kinds of imported spirits. They explained that they do not consume a significant quantity of these beverages, but just take enough to make them feel good. In the words of one of such participants, 'I take some whisky to feel good and relax, but I don't drink much'. But this indicates that while modesty in consumption is widely mouthed by these participants, this limit may be hard to preserve in practice.

Mainstream view of alcohol use

Majority of the participants (69%) were of the opinion that Christians should not consume alcoholic beverages. This position constitutes what may be called the 'mainstream' or 'orthodox' view of alcohol among Pentecostals. It is so called because this view is held by a great majority of these Christians, and reflects the dogmatic position of the majority of these churches. Participants who hold this view casted aspersions on those who consume alcoholic beverages. A participant stated, 'How can someone call himself a Christian and still take alcohol? I doubt if such a person is born again'. Alcohol use was regard-

ed by these participants as an aspect of the past sinful lifestyle which a truly born again Christian is expected to abandon. Therefore, those who consume alcoholic beverages are either not born again or are 'carnal Christians'³. This view of alcohol was premised on Biblical injunctions concerning the use of alcohol, particularly the Pauline epistle to the Ephesians⁴ and the Old Testament book of Proverbs⁵. Arguing from the former passage, a participant told us:

A Christian should not drink alcoholic beverages. It is against the Bible. Paul forbade drinking alcohol because it makes people misbehave and commit all kinds of sins. As a matter of fact, watch the lifestyle of people who drink. Most of them womanize or commit crimes. No Christian who is genuinely born again should drink alcohol.

Regarding the passage in Proverbs, another participant noted:

In the Bible, King Solomon says that wine (i.e alcohol) is not for kings, but for people who are about to perish. A Christian is a king because Jesus has made us kings before God. As Christians, we should abstain from wine so that we do not go astray and do things that dishonour God. People who drink alcohol are likely to commit sin and offend God. A Christian should not do that.

³ This phrase is used to characterize Christians whose do not conform to the ideals of Pentecostal morality.

⁴ Ephesians chapter 5 verse 18.

⁵ Proverbs chapter 20 verse 1; 31 verses 6 and 7 inter alia.

The participants made strong moral arguments regarding the impropriety of alcohol use based on these Biblical passages. It was contended that intoxication leads to moral degeneracy, which is manifested in profanity of speech, sexual promiscuity, and lack of self-control, impulsive spending, aggression and violence. They maintained that such conducts do not only dishonour God, but also drags the Christian into disrepute before non-Christians. A participant noted that alcohol intoxication is the very opposite of a spirit-filled Christian life. He added that a Christian should be filled with the Holy Spirit, and not with 'the spirit of alcohol'. Alcohol perceived as a substance that exerts negative control over the human personality and makes people engage in immoral behaviour. On the other hand, the presence of the Holy Spirit was said to promote ethical life-style. A participant told us:

The Bible compares alcohol to the Holy Spirit. The same way the Holy Spirit controls a man and leads him to do things that pleases God, alcohol will control him and lead him to do sinful things. What controls a person determines how he behaves. When you indulge in drinking, you yield control of your life to alcohol. A Christian should be controlled by the Holy Spirit, not by alcohol.

The use of alcohol was also condemned because of the negative consequences associated with it. Participants pointed out that alcohol use is linked to various health problems such as depression, mental health problems, liver cirrhosis, physical injuries, road crashes and (untimely) death. They also drew attention to many

social problems associated with drinking, including unemployment, poverty and disintegration of the family. A participant stated, 'I know a man who drinks. He is a debtor all over the neighbourhood. He uses his entire earnings to repay the debts he incurs on account of drinking. How will he be able to take care of his family?'. Others noted that people who drink are usually violent at home. Domestic violence, they said, leads to injuries for family members, causes divorce and affects the care of children.

Subaltern voice on alcohol use

A small proportion (27%) of the participants did not share a prohibitionist view of alcohol. They held that alcohol could be used with moderation. Their account provides an alternative, though marginal, view of alcohol among Pentecostals. These participants may be considered liberals with respect to their perception of alcohol. Some of them perceived abstinence from alcohol as an imposition a foreign culture on them. They maintained that Christianity is not against drinking beverages which contain alcohol. I refer to this position as 'subaltern' or 'marginal' because it exists on the dogmatic fringe, and is espoused by a small proportion of Pentecostal faithful.

Those who held this view also resorted to the Bible to support their position. This involved a revision of the interpretations supporting prohibition. For example, some participants argued that admonition of the Apostle Paul is not supposed to be interpreted as an outright proscription of alcohol consumption, but as an exhortation to exercise moderation when drinking. This position was expressed in the phrase, 'Paul said we should drink but not get drunk', which was a common refrain in the ac-

counts of these participants. A participant pointed out, 'The Bible did not say that a Christian should not drink wine. It said that he should drink but not get drunk with it'. Another participant corroborated, 'there is nothing wrong in drinking a little alcohol. The problem is when you get drunk and misbehave'. The point made here is that it is intoxication, not mere ingestion, which leads to intemperance. This point is summed up in the following comment:

The Bible is not against drinking. It says, 'do not get drunk with wine'. That is not the same as saying don't drink wine. A Christian is allowed to drink wine, but he or she should not get drunk. This means that a Christian should drink moderately. He should not take too much so that he does not become intoxicated.

The participants buttressed their views by referring to other passages of the Bible where drinking of wine is encouraged, particularly the wisdom books⁶. Whereas those who condemned alcohol interpreted these passages as encouraging the use of non-alcoholic beverages, participants who held the view that moderate use was proper said they refer to all kinds of beverages, including those containing alcohol. They contended that the Bible encourages feasting and merry-making, including consumption of all types of wine. Some of them referred to Jesus' participation at the wedding in Cana of Galilee⁷, where he miraculously transformed water to wine, to support their position. This is how a participant captured these sentiments:

⁶ This includes Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Songs of Song.

⁷ John chapter 2 verses 1 to 10.

There is no place in the Bible where you are told not to drink. But there are many passages you can cite in support of drinking. For example, Jesus turned water into wine for the people to drink. Is that not a way of saying serve in ceremonies? The Bible even said wine makes people happy. If something will make you happy, is it wrong to have it?

Others referred to Paul's admonition that Timothy, his protégé, should drink a little quantity of wine because of his protracted abdominal condition⁸. They argued based on this passage that alcohol contains therapeutic properties, and that because of this it should not be completely proscribed. While acknowledging that some Christians have used this passage to justify indulgence in hazardous drinking, they maintained that this does not warrant the conclusion that alcohol is completely bad. They stated that the solution lies in the exercise of self-control by individual Christians, and not in outright condemnation of drinking.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The study is a narrative exploration of moral construal of alcohol among Pentecostals in a Nigerian city. Findings indicate that two contradictory attitudes towards alcohol exist in this religious community. On the one hand, alcohol is denounced because it violates moral integrity and occasions social problems. On the other hand, it is regarded as 'a necessary evil' to be used cautiously. It is important to observe that those who consume alcohol

recommended its use, while those who condemned it were themselves abstainers. Among other things, this implies that their views on alcohol were influenced by their practice. But the two view-points agree on the impropriety of heavy drinking and its link with moral degeneracy and social problems. They, however, disagree on the Christian's relationship to the dangerous commodity called alcohol in that while one prohibits it, the other contends for restrictive usage. References to the Bible in this struggle reflect its centrality in the construction of the Pentecostal moral order. Pentecostals 'make much about being Biblical' (Gifford, 2004). For them the Bible functions primarily as a repository of narratives used to sanction regimes of moral ideology. The apparent ambiguity of the Bible on alcohol seems to set the stage for an ideological struggle.

Alcohol, a commodity of historical significance, emerges as a site of moral contestations. It is perceived both as 'a modern demon luring people into disorderly conduct and threatening the moral order of society' (van Dijk, 2004), and a health-promoting, if dangerous, commodity, the negative effects of which may be checked through restrictive consumption. Moral contestations over alcohol support the argument that alcohol is enveloped by emotionally charged moral conventions (Dietler, 2006). It is associated with the construction of personhood, and symbolization of identity and difference (Douglas, 1987; Heath, 1987; 2000; Wilson, 2005). Drinking and/or abstention are practices through which personal and group identity are constructed, embodied, performed and transformed. Alcohol is an important symbol for defining identity, marking boundaries and shaping beliefs and practices. It is a discursive

⁸ First Timothy chapter 5 verse 23.

and potentially volatile field, 'subject to an almost unlimited possibilities of variation in... modes of consumption, patterns of association and exclusion and moral evaluations' (Dietler, 2006, p. 232).

This study is not concerned with assessing the moral presuppositions surrounding alcohol, but with the consequences of such ambiguous representations. One of these consequences is that it breeds an ambivalent drinking culture wherein 'no prescribed pattern of behaviour exists to regulate drinking behaviour' (Bengal, 2005). This predisposes to 'deviant, unacceptable and asocial behaviour, as well as chronic, disabling alcoholism' (p. 1052). Moderate drinking may be the ethical ideal, but heavy drinking remains the signature pattern. The language of moderation may even mask patterns of chronic problem drinking, making it elusive to interventions. It may also be interpreted by the abstinent population as an invitation to drink. Recognition of the harms of heavy drinking, however, provides a point of focus for intervention aiming to address drinking problems. There is need for a coherent dogmatic position on alcohol consumption that is responsive to the social, economic, health and moral consequences of drinking and that provides restraint on problem drinking. There is also need for further studies on moral construal of alcohol in order to broaden understanding and provide relevant information for policy and action on alcohol problems.

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