

DRINK, DRANK, DRUNK: A SOCIAL-POLITICAL GRAMMAR OF RUSSIAN DRINKING PRACTICES IN A COLONIAL CONTEXT

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The study of everyday life, like everything else in anthropology, is complicated by the consideration of a variety of cultural perspectives. In history, the concept of the everyday was introduced in distinction from the study of important political events and the activities of elites. In ethnological research, on the other hand, it was originally taken to mean the unmarked, unritualized activities—that is, not holidays or specially marked events—that make up the daily life of a society. Drinking practices in Russia disturb the coherence of this ethnological notion of the everyday precisely because the power of drinking plays upon the boundaries between the special occasion and everyday life. Drink marks special occasions. Drinking is a part of daily life. Daily life is thus filled with special occasions and it is the power of special occasions to draw together people across social boundaries such as ethnicity and political hierarchy that plays into the colonial effects of drinking that I will describe.

Social Effect in Drinking

A complex of social, symbolic and psychophysiological mechanisms make drink, drinking and drunkenness powerful and nearly unavoidable aspects of social life in much of Russian society. The aim of this paper is to understand the amplifications of alcohol ritual practices that have taken place in indigenous communities of Kamchatka by examining the ritual, symbolic, and social mechanisms that contribute to the social valuation of drinking and the self-reproduction of drinking as a practice.

In brief, drinking is a socially powerful and powerfully social practice that facilitates the expression of honor, respect, friendship, obligation and group membership as well as insult and exclusion. It does this in a number of ritualized and ceremonialized forms that create and reinforce the meaning and power of drink and drunkenness. It has thus not only a

physiological component but a large sociological component that is reinforced by all of the social occasions—birthdays, deaths, holidays, visits, etc.—that call into play the power of respect, honor, friendship and enmity. Although I am speaking primarily of drinking as I have seen and experienced it in rural Russia, many aspects of the analysis may apply to ritualized alcohol use in other places in the world, particularly in the North.

Much of the power of drinking comes from multiple and seemingly contradictory moral valuations that are attached to it. On the one hand, drunkenness, particularly in the eyes of the sober, is considered a failing and a weakness, a social and personal ill. On the other hand, inebriation, especially for certain occasions, is highly approved. It is considered a true form of celebration, an indexical sign of social equality and an expression of mutual sociability. Many Russians hold these opposite moral views of drinking and drunkenness simultaneously. In fact, the contradiction is a powerful component of the social force that urges people to drink. Like the potential energy of a physics experiment, the two sides of the moral divide between drunkenness and sobriety are the social potential energy for a system that generates status and forms social bonds. I take in this analysis the perspective, common in anthropology along lines deriving from Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown, to van Gennep, Victor Turner, Ortner and Ardener and in social philosophy from J. L. Austin to Pierre Bourdieu and Judith Butler (Austin 1962; Bourdieu and Thompson 1991; Butler 1997; Durkheim 1965; Turner 1977; van Gennep 1960) that ritual and performative speech are social actions that can clarify or elaborate the meaning of social relations, redefining past ones, establishing immediate ones and creating entirely new and variably durable ones.

Status in the Drinking Ritual – An Ethnographic Example

My aim in this paper is to examine the place of status in Russian drinking practices and ideology and then the implications when those status relations are brought into an interethnic relation with the power asymmetry of colonial rule. The rituals associated with drinking in Russia invoke honor, trust, friendship, hospitality and group solidarity and differentiation. The ethos of drinking tradition was brought along as Russians encountered various peoples across the continent. On the way, it was picked up and given particular cultural inflection in each situation of encounter. New meanings were added with the advent of the Soviet government, as productivity became a key gauge of personal and group status. For the purposes of this essay, I will be describing not the specificities of historical encounters, but the impact of ideal typical values in relation to Russia's colonial history in Kamchatka. Analysis of actual attitudes at various times would require an extended historical treatment; my aim here is only to deal with the principles and discuss their implications in the specific ethnographic context of Kamchatka that I know well.

I thus want to begin my description of social values in the practice of drinking with an example that will illustrate many of the principles of the drinking ritual. In 1993 I was invited to a birthday party at the home of an Itelmen friend, "Shura," who lived alone with her daughter but who had a regular Russian boyfriend, who I will call here, Misha. Misha did not live with Shura, because he had a wife, who also lived in the village. At the time he was teaching athletics at the village school, and was involved in various kinds of semi-illicit trade, including alcohol. When I arrived at the party it was well under way. Misha hailed me and immediately began talking about my *shtrafnaia*, the extra drink that I was to drink for coming late, after the drinking had already begun. This component of the practice illustrates one of the ways in which some of the practices are targeted toward a goal of inebriation; I was to catch up. It also recognized the implicit social order of the drinking group. The performance of a mock "fine," mimicking larger society and its social rules, contributes to the metaphorical ritual creation of the drinking group's social order. I took a seat within the oval shaped group; as a rule, drinking of this kind takes place with participants facing each other, an added

mechanism of focused attention and social cohesion. Drinking of alcohol takes place in the context of the broader social practice of "sitting" that Dale Pesmen has thoroughly described; sitting is also practiced around the drinking of tea (Pesmen 2000). There were about 12 people, more and less at various moments, and conversation broke into neighboring subgroups. The group maintained its focal orientation for toasts. Misha, as male host, took the role of filling everyone's glasses. It is at the moment of pouring that anyone with any reluctance to drink feels the force of what Mauss called "the obligation to receive." Mauss, in his *Essay on the Gift*, distinguished clearly between three types of obligation that can be invoked when exchange takes place: the obligation to receive, the obligation to give and, what has become the famous part of his analysis, the obligation to repay (Mauss 1967:10-12). Much of the ensociating power of drinking ritual is associated with the obligation to receive. When drinking as a guest, one can honor one's host, or the person being honored by accepting drink. I showed a little reluctance and Misha reacted immediately, saying that I needed to honor Shura on her birthday. Here the obligation to receive is doubly overdetermined. On the one hand, the group has accepted the occasion of the birthday as suitable for drinking and by seeking to enter the party, my acceptance would be implicit. To refuse to drink would be to insult the group. At the same time, the occasion was centered around a particular individual, as occasions often are, and refusing to drink could also be construed as an insult to the honored individual. I was still relatively early in my fieldwork and did not realize yet the impossibility of drinking along at every occasion to which I, as an interesting foreigner, would be invited. So I acquiesced, at least at first, to all the pouring. Toasts were made honoring the birthday celebrant, her mother and then a variety of group-oriented values, such as friendship.

After the party I visited a friend who was a cousin of Shura and likewise of Itelmen heritage. She did not, however, attend the party. She explained that she and Shura along with others, were once close friends and a drinking circle. They drank together and shared conversation and personal information in confidence. Such "secrets"—statements that are intended to circulate only within a defined group of people—give drinking circles the character of secret societies (Simmel 1964:345-376).

Drinking is thought to and indeed does encourage free speaking within the drinking group (Pesmen 2000). There is a trust that things said within the drinking circle will not be shared with outside others if to do so would have negative (embarrassing) consequences for the members of the circle. This “reciprocal confidence,” as Simmel called it (1964:345), works to give the group its identity and maintain it. To leave the group would be to threaten that those confidences shared could leak out. This in fact was why my friend Lydia no longer attended Shura’s parties. The drinking of Shura and others in the group had become too frequent and heavy for Lydia and she pulled out. They saw her then as threatening and told things about her personal life to others, including about her heavy drinking with them. Lydia felt betrayed, Shura mistrusted Lydia and they were no longer on speaking terms. Lydia said that she hated to go to those parties where there was so much drinking but it was clear also that there was now a deep mistrust on both sides and the consequence was total isolation from the drinking group.

Many of the features of drinking as a social phenomenon are illustrated in this example.

- Drinking practices foster the formation and maintenance of a drinking group. They create what Sartre called “bonds of interiority” (Sartre 1976:52) – shared sentiments within the group.
- Drinking also produces bonds of exteriority (Sartre 1976:65). That is, groups are defined not only by the internal connections among members, but also by the groups and individuals who are excluded or outside. The group maintains a structure of inclusion and exclusion.
- Drinking practices invoke and produce honor or more generally lower and higher status.
- In the ritual itself, status is acknowledged and honor is established and maintained in the obligation to receive,

- and in the ritualized, yet sincere, praise and honor associated with toasting.

The Obligation to Give and the Making of an Occasion

The obligation to give, that is, to offer drink or initiate drinking, is, unlike the obligation to receive, contingent. Drinking, in order not to be mere alcoholism, must be motivated, it demands that there be an occasion. Public holidays, celebrations, birthdays, funerals, weddings, graduations, and so on are all suitable occasions for drinking. Visiting too can be made into an occasion. The act of bringing out the bottle itself already carries the message from the host: “I consider you a guest,” or “this meeting is a special occasion.” When an individual or group attempts to assemble others for drinking they invariably designate an occasion, no matter how slight: “we have not seen each other for such a long time,” “it’s a holiday...tomorrow,” “the dinner I cooked tonight came out so well that I think we should drink,” “Ivan here is depressed because he got a low grade,” “Igor is celebrating because he got a high grade,” and so on. Sometimes the creation of the occasion is done with humor or irony as in one case when I was invited to join some people who were drinking on the occasion of the birthday of one of the participant’s distant cousins. The cousin lived in far off central Siberia and had not been seen by the participant in over 25 years, and she wasn’t certain that she had the day right.

Drinking, Drunkenness and Group Formation

The paradox of drinking is that although its rituals can bestow honor on both guest and host, there is nevertheless dishonor in drunkenness, the carefully recognized measure of which contributes to the formation of bonds of friendship in the drinking circle. Creation of an occasion is related to this idea because getting drunk without purpose is not considered “respectable.” People with whom I have spoken all over Kamchatka regularly use the epithet, “they are drunks” or “he/she is a drunk” as a statement that marks or performs lower status, lack of respect (*uvazhenie*). It can refer to the imputation that accused drunks drink without sufficient occasion and therefore drink too frequently. They drink to a point of drunkenness and are therefore both of weak character and are unreliable. Such statements are an important

part of boundary creation in the formation of a drinking circle.

One gets drunk with individuals one trusts, with people one is sure will not criticize one for having been drunk. The circle of drinking is tight because when everyone participates equally, becoming fully drunk in a cycle of drinking, no one can fairly accuse others in the group of being a drunk without equally reflecting on him or her self. Much of the social pressure for drinking in any particular drinking session comes from this sense that one must show that one shares in the status leveling of the drinking circle and will not betray the drunken trust.

A Simple People

The calibrated lowering of status that is a consequence of the negative image of drunkenness is also associated with a broader dimension. The practice of drinking to become inebriated is a mark of being "simple," *prostoi*. Pesmen has described this idea as associated with peasant life. It means not cultured (*kul'turny*) in the sense of *haute culture* but rather living a simple lifestyle and using simple technology, being hospitable, generous, peaceable and unpretentious (Pesmen 2000:91).

The term was used on a couple of occasions to explain Russian drinking practices to me. Volodya, for example, a Russian man who had lived in Kamchatka for over thirty years, explained Russian drinking in relation to Russians' simplicity. The explanation was prompted by my hesitancy to accept another drink. He said, "Excuse us, you don't look down on us because we drink? Don't look down on us because we drink. We are a simple people (*prostoi narod*). Are your people simple like us?" Volodya was speaking nationally of the vast peasant culture of traditional Russia and of Russians in contrast to urban Europeans. To refuse to drink in this context would be to admit to having pretensions of being better. In saying this he looked over toward his Itelmen wife, including her in his "we." For him, there is no significant difference between Itelmens and simple Russians in the fundamentals of ways of life. Both people live simply, and part of living simply is sharing and enjoying drink with friends. Here again, an inside group is being referenced in contrast to an outside other, the

cosmopolitan or complex others, who would look down on peasant drinking.

Of course, *prostoi* also refers to the relative lack of immediate consequences that come from drinking to drunkenness in village society. If one is not on a rigid business schedule, if one does not keep to institutionalized time discipline, as some people in small villages need not, then periods of incapacity in productive activities are not consistently negatively marked. They are noted in the contrast between *prostoi* and urbane, are accepted as a part of the positive value of simplicity.

Drinking is thus recognized as both bad and good – status lowering but good if you prefer the connotations of that lower status. It is therefore part of the complex that binds the group together under the regard of wider society (or particular individuals). The positive symbols of rural life and independence from authority tie simple people together in opposition to urban complexity.

Drinking at the Frontier: Interethnic Dimensions of Drinking

It is at this point that we can begin to analyze the interethnic dimensions of drinking practices. Russians in both Petropavlovsk and small villages of Kamchatka often say that native peoples of the North are drunkards (*pianitsi*). The idea of simplicity, like the myth of the laziness of the colonized, as Memmi describes it, comes to be taken up by all: "Willfully created and spread by the colonizer, this mythical and degrading portrait ends up by being accepted and lived with to a certain extent by the colonized" (1965:87). An ideology that was accepted by the Russian peasantry as well as Russia's elites, the idea of simplicity would have required a double leap of status pretensions for indigenous peoples to refuse when offered drink. Simplicity thus has an important meaning in interethnic drinking contexts. When a Russian desires to drink in a non-Russian community s/he needs others to legitimate the drinking. Since drinking as a general phenomenon can lower one's status, the Russian visitor wants not to be in a position of being looked down upon in the community. If, as in the colonial situation, the Russian is in a higher political position, the locals would not want to risk insulting him by not drinking with him, thereby suggesting that they were in some

sense superior. In both popular and Russian scientific theory it was thought that the peoples of the north were at a lower level of culture than Russians (Grant 1995; Slezkine 1994). This scale of ethnic status could be construed (in arguments for drinking) as the same scale that ranks people as simple. All native peoples, then, were to be at least as simple as Russians and therefore in a position to accept drink. To refuse would be to refuse to recognize their station, their cultural status. In my next example, the acquiescence to drink on the part of father and son came at least in part from a sense of their position in the strata of Russian society.

I knew one young man, Lyonya, who sold alcohol in an Itelmen village, Kovran. He was married to an Itelmen woman and traveled from their home in the city Petropavlovsk to Kovran with luggage full of *samogon* and vodka to sell. He would stay with his father-in-law, Kolya, who lived with one son, Nestor, in his forties. Whenever Lyonya came to town it was known that Kolya and his son would be drunk for days. Lyonya, would sometimes invite me to visit and would inevitably invite me to drink with them. He maintained control by drinking somewhat less than his in-laws and but encouraging them to drink up. His father-in-law was respected for his absolute policy of not drinking grain alcohol (*spirt*), he would only drink vodka. Nestor, once told me that he did not respect his brother-in-law. Lyonya, he said, always brought drink and would encourage them to drink when he came. The form of encouragement was not merely a gift of bottles, but pouring drinks in celebration of his arrival. As hosts, the in-laws were expected to drink, and the truth is that at some level they did enjoy the drink at first. The interethnic dimension of this drinking group was evident in Lyonya's attitude toward them. He spoke demeaningly of them because they drank heavily, even though at every drinking binge, he too would end up drunk. Though as a son-in-law he would have had as great as possible an opportunity to get past ethnic stereotypes of his in-laws, he nevertheless blamed their drinking on their ethnicity and drew conclusions about other Itelmens from them. Kolya and his son understood Lyonya's attitude but both were entirely unpretentious and would not have presumed to reject their kinship ties, nor their obligations to be hospitable and receive in order to refuse to drink. They spoke begrudgingly of the drinking as an inevitable consequence of Lyonya's visit. At the same

time, Nestor told me once, as if defending himself from the charge, that he was not an alcoholic, he just loved to drink. Lyonya was over a foot taller than his in-laws. He had to drink substantially more than they to have an equivalent blood alcohol content, yet he always ended up thoroughly plastered and it was clear that drinking with his in-laws was founded at least in part on his need to drink.

Drinking Up, Drinking Down

Lyonya was engaged in a form of drinking-to-drunkenness that I think of as drinking down. In order not to see oneself as an alcoholic, one needs to drink with a group. He felt confident that he could coerce his in-laws to drink because, in his mind, he knew their people, and what he knew was that they could not control their drinking. He could thus count on them to fulfill his need for drinking partners. The obligation to receive felt by Kolya and Nestor was complex. On the one hand, Lyonya was an in-law and he was, in their house, a legitimate guest. And moreover, as Nestor told me, they enjoyed drinking (or at least used to). On the other hand, there is a larger social issue that I saw at play in numerous social circumstances, including that of Misha, mentioned earlier, where shy Itelmens did not feel comfortable refusing Russians who might take offense. This uncertainty founded on the power differential in society has a long history that is most often alluded to with reference to the Stalinist repressions. When these patterns of drinking are placed in the context of interethnic contact, as it happened throughout the expansion of the Russian empire, their power to reproduce themselves leads to what has been perceived by many as the intentional causing of native peoples to drink. While there were undeniably cases in the history of Russian imperialism in which native peoples were encouraged or even forced to drink, there need not have been a systematic attempt to turn the native population to alcohol in order for that to come about. Instead, I would argue that Russians brought drinking to their boundaries as one of their boundary mechanisms. By its power to make social groups, it was recognized as a social tool. It was on the frontier that Russians encountered unknown others with whom they could speak in the common language of "drinking together." Because of the colonial power differential, native peoples were particularly ill positioned to refuse.

The other half of colonized consciousness is reflected in modes of resistance, some of which can equally serve to reproduce the system. It has been widely noted in the ethnographic literature on Russia that drinking was an important means for getting things done. One could share a drink with someone who offered a service or controlled a resource one needed and coerce that key individual into fulfilling the need. This was true at the specific level of particular needs, but I also saw that some Itelmens I knew engaged in what could be seen as *drinking up*. Max Weber argued that one of the reasons that bureaucracies, despite their impersonal nature, could be durably popular forms of social administration and hierarchy was that people at the bottom could, if unhappy, skip levels to make their appeals known (Weber 1978). A professional dancer I knew from the village of Kovran, Kornil, had become a drinking partner of the head of the District Administration (*raion*) in Tigil, nearly 100 km away. Kornil saw his relationship as useful, as an insider, friendship connection. The problem with *drinking up* in the case of cultural or ethnic revitalization movements is that to drink to the point of total inebriation is often to circumvent the forms of thinking that make sentiments into political action. The regional administrator was as likely to be able to talk activists like Kornil out of their positions in a situation of drinking as the other way around.

To conclude this brief survey, it is my contention that the status and power in Russian drinking patterns has social, political implications in the asymmetric power situations of interethnic encounters in minority indigenous communities. The obligation to receive in the form of accepting a drink was heightened by the legacy of threat and violence against those who resist or stand out and by the assumption of colonized status. The idea that indigenous peoples were by nature simple people had positive, noble savage connotations, but also meant that the presumption was that they would accept drinking as part of their lower status on the cultural scale. The contingency in the obligation to give, the need to create an occasion for drinking, no matter how serious or playful, reached into a world that was not defined in Itelmen social life. The occasions of encompassing Russian-then-Soviet-then-Russian society penetrated Itelmen social life in a way that their occasions could not in reverse.

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