

Namibia and the Heritage of Colonial Alcohol Policy

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"The Shebeen Culture: 900 drinking places around capital alone", declared Namibia's leading newspaper *The Namibian* in its special issue dealing with alcohol abuse at the end of 1992 (*The Namibian* 18 December 1992). Sale and serving of alcohol beverages is not restricted to towns and their surroundings but is available even in the most outlying villages. Strange logos - such as Seven Seas Bottle Store or Love Station Bottle Store - and colourful advertisements clearly distinguish bottle stores and restaurants from other buildings.

A characteristic feature of alcohol policy in Namibia during the last two decades has been the rapid increase in the consumption of alcohol beverages and their fair price in comparison e.g. with foodstuffs. Alcohol abuse has become a serious social problem, particularly among the African population, in towns as well as in countryside. The aim of this paper is to make a long-term approach to alcohol abuse in the Namibian territory by concentrating on analysing attitudes of the German and South African colonial administrations towards alcohol.

1. THE WILD DECADES OF ALCOHOL TRADE

Mr. Sakarias Hamutenja, living in north Namibia near the Angolan border at the beginning of the 1930s, described to the Finnish missionary Emil Liljeblad changes in drinking habits during his lifetime: "Earlier: beer and **omagongo**. At present (in addition to traditional alcohol beverages) **olambika** fermented from all kind of fruits or grain, fermented sweet sap of palm trees = **omalunga** and spirits purchased from Europeans" (ELC: 977, HUL).

The march forward for imported alcohol started, in the present Namibian territory, during the mid-nineteenth century, when the first contacts between African communities and European traders and hunters were established. In a very short time spirits rose to be among the most important trading items, together with ammunition and firearms, in German South West Africa (present Namibia) and in many other African colonies (see, e.g. Siiskonen 1990; Partanen 1991).

However, the interests of European traders and colonial officials were on a collision course following the establishment of colonial power. Increases in the supply of arms and alcohol was not only philanthropically precarious but made subjugation and governing of African communities more difficult. At the Brussels Conference in 1890 European colonial powers deliberated the sale of alcohol to

Africans. In reality the European colonial powers had only very limited resources to suppress the growing alcohol trade. For example the smuggling of spirits from Portuguese Angola to the northern part of South West Africa continued throughout the German colonial period (1884-1915). In Portuguese Angola the distilling and sale of alcohol from sugar cane was "winked at" by the colonial administration (Siiskonen 1990: 143-190).

2. MANDATE AGREEMENT AND ALCOHOL POLICY

German colonial rule in South West Africa ended in July 1915 when the German troops surrendered to the South African army. Until the end of 1920 the territory was governed under military rule and then the League of Nations proclaimed it a mandated territory with the Union of South Africa as the mandatory. The mandate agreement required the Union of South Africa to promote material and moral well-being and the social development of the people living in the South West African territory (Dore 1985: 177-179). The Union of South Africa perceived the mandate more as a victor's prize from the First World War than as a position of trust.

The mandate agreement, signed in Geneva on 17 December 1920, included an interesting article relating to alcohol policy. The third article in the agreement prohibited the supply of intoxicating spirits and beverages to the "natives" (Dore 1985: 177-179). All products containing more than three percent of alcohol by their weight were classified intoxicating beverages (NAO 102, 50/1, 25 February 1947, NAW).

Obeying the mandate article relating to alcohol was also in the interest of the South African colonial administration until the end of the 1950s. As a result of tight trading and travelling restrictions colonial officials succeeded in restricting the smuggling of alcohol and its illicit trading to a moderate level in the central and southern parts of the Namibian territory. However in the northern part of the territory colonial officials were not able to stop the smuggling of spirits from Portuguese Angola. In order to reduce smuggling the South African administration demanded that their Angolan counterparts tighten up the control of the southern Angolan border by appealing to Portugal's membership in the League of Nations and to the commonly accepted resolutions of the international community. In spite of Portugal's agreement to tighten the control of trade with spirits they made only minor attempts to suppress the smuggling of spirits from Angola to the Namibian territory (NAO 26, 20/2, 12 April 1929, NAW; NAO 70, 30/2, 5 January 1949, NAW).

A clear loophole in the alcohol policy article of the Mandate Agreement was that it did not prohibit Africans making traditional alcohol beverages - like beer and wine - for their own consumption. On the other hand South Africans did not want to restrict this. However the commercial production of mild alcohol beverages was interpreted as illicit (NAO 71, 32/3, 28 December 1948, NAW).

The making of spirits, which had been adopted from Europeans in the nineteenth century, was outlawed. The first proper action to control the expanding home distilling in north Namibia was postponed until May 1947, when the Native Commissioner of Ovamboland gave an order to locate and destroy stills. The widespread practice of home distilling was obviated in the report of the Assistant Native Commissioner of Ovamboland - based in Oshikango near the Angolan border - in which he announced that he had destroyed 352 stills before the end of August 1947 (NAO 71, 32/3, 29 August 1947, NAW).

3. APARTHEID AND ALCOHOL

Racial segregation was familiar in the South African and Namibian territories following the arrival of the first Europeans, but a legal framework to apartheid was not established until 1949, when the Population Registration Act was passed. According to this Act everyone living in South Africa had to be classified as belonging to one of the four racial categories: Whites, Asians, Coloureds or Blacks. Through a long series of complex laws apartheid was extended in the 1950s to all levels of the South African society (Siiskonen 1992).

The tightening of racial segregation increased the demands and movements for political rights and for social and economic justice. The first wave of resistance against apartheid laws culminated in the Sharpeville massacre of March 1960, where 67 Africans were killed. The Sharpeville shootings forced the government to make cosmetic revisions to the politics of racial segregation in order to pacify the internal situation and to reduce the critique of the international community against the South African apartheid system.

South Africa's response to the growing demands of political and social change was the introduction of the Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Bill, which meant transfer from classical apartheid to separate development. The central feature of the new approach to apartheid was the idea that homelands or bantustans must be encouraged to move towards ultimate political independence. In theory homelands had, according to the new legislation, equal development possibilities with white South Africa. The government pointed out that the Bantu Self-Government Bill meant an end to the notorious apartheid and the beginning of a period of separate development for the different ethnic groups.

According to the doctrine of separate development African people were no longer citizens of South Africa but were citizens of their own homelands or bantustans. At the same time they lost the right to settle permanently any area of white South Africa. They had only a temporary right to work in the area reserved for whites.

Changes in the course of politics in South Africa were reflected after a short delay in the Namibian territory. In 1962 the South African government appointed the so called Odendaal Commission to prepare a social and economic development strategy for South West Africa, as it was called at that time, on the

basis of separate development. The Odendaal Commission, in its report of 1964, recommended division of the Namibian territory into ten self-governing homelands or bantustans according to the South African example. As in South Africa most of the surface area of the country was reserved for the use of the white minority (Report of the commission ... 1964: part D).

Even though South Africa had systematically denied the status of the United Nations as the supervisor of the South West African administration after the Second World War, the South African government thought it best to postpone enforcement of the Odendaal Commission recommendations. The Development of Self-Government for Native Nations Act was not passed by the South African Parliament until 1968 (Du Pisani 1985: 184-189).

The Odendaal Commission also took an interesting initiative related to alcohol policy. In order to reduce large scale illicit alcohol trading among the African population the Commission recommended allowing controlled sale of alcohol to Africans. The Commission justified repeal of the selling prohibition on alcohol to the African population following positive experiences in South Africa, where new legislation had repealed the alcohol sale prohibition laws relating to non-whites. Furthermore, the Commission argued "that when the restriction on the supply of liquor to non-Whites was incorporated in the old Mandate forty years ago, these population groups were still very underdeveloped, whereas today they have progressed so far on the road of development that the Commission has recommended that they be granted an advanced form of self-government" (Report of the commission ... 1964: 487).

In revising the guidelines for alcohol policy in South West Africa the Commission recommended application of the provisions of the Liquor Act of the Republic of South Africa. Alcohol trade should be controlled as far as possible by granting concessions to supply alcohol to the African population only to local authorities in the white area and only to homeland authorities in the homelands. The repeal of the prohibition of alcohol trade was connected closely with cancellation of the SWANLA (South West Africa Native Labour Association, owned by the mining companies) trade monopoly in north Namibia. The Commission recommended that trade in the homelands should to "an increasing extent be conducted by competent indigenous entrepreneurs".

A legal framework for the new alcohol policy was laid by the Ordinance No. 2 of 1969, which is still in force today. It legalised firstly the controlled selling of alcohol to the African population and secondly the granting of alcohol trading licences to African entrepreneurs. In principle legislation still ensured authorities enforcable means to control the selling and serving of alcohol.

However, the new alcohol legislation started to be interpreted very loosely by the South West African administration. Both the wholesale trade of alcohol by Europeans to African dealers and the rapid increase of home distilling in the homelands were "winked at" by the authorities. In reality only a few African shopkeepers would have fulfilled the requirements of a licenced alcohol dealer.

Releasing the alcohol trade restrictions led e.g. in north Namibia to the establishment of thousands of "cuca-shops" specialised in selling and serving alcohol beverages. The name "cuca" is derived from a Portuguese beer which was sold in small shops located on the Angolan side of the border. This beer was very popular among north Namibians and people crossed the border to buy it (Eirola et al. 1990: 66). In central Namibia these illicit combined restaurants and bottle stores are called "shebeens".

In spite of the rapid growth of alcohol consumption and the increase of alcohol abuse among the African population little attention was paid to these problems in literature dealing with Namibia before the mid-1980s. The most influential Namibian scholars and authors, of whom many had lived years in exile where they lacked up to date information of the social situation in the country, concentrated their works on criticizing the apartheid system, and the political and economic injustices caused by it, on a general level. The problems encountered by western Namibia researchers included difficulties to get into country due to the tight immigration policy adopted by the South African government, and difficulties to get access to records in Namibia due to the strict secrecy rules.

But for those who managed to visit black townships and homelands the fair price and considerable consumption of alcohol could not go unnoticed. Katutura Revisited 1986 (1986), a small booklet edited by Dr. Christine von Garnier, was one of the first publications where social and economic problems caused by alcohol abuse were highlighted. Garnier's report was based on interview material collected from Katutura, the black township of the capital Windhoek. "Life in Katutura is one dragging hell. Children die of malnutrition, adults die of alcoholism", observed Mrs. Nashilongo Elago, the Secretary General of Namibian Women's Voice describing living conditions in Katutura (Garnier 1986: 48).

In north Namibia the question of alcohol abuse was exacerbated during the 1970s, when the South African army stationed troops there. Arrival of the military increased the amount of cash circulating in the region, of which a big share was spent on alcohol. And because the South African administration did not take care of who was selling alcohol or of the licences, the consequence was an explosive growth in the number of "cuca-shops". Even farmers, teachers and civil servants established "cuca-shops" in order to earn additional income.

Demand for alcohol grew rapidly in north Namibia just prior to independence, when in addition to South African troops there were also United Nations' UNTAG forces, which were sent to supervise the realization of the United Nations independence plan for Namibia. According to data collected from the Oshakati - Ondangwa region in February 1990, on the eve of Namibia's independence, altogether 240 licenced traders were identified, of whom about 20 percent had concentrated on selling alcohol. In addition there were more than 800 "cuca shops" specialising in alcohol trade in the same region (Pendleton et al. 1992: 7).

Withdrawal of the South African and UNTAG forces from north Namibia led to a big cut in income for "cuca-shop" owners. However, these illicit traders adapted much better to the drop in demand than the licenced traders, because only

a few of them did business on a fulltime basis and additionally they paid neither income tax nor sales tax on their sales.

4. ALCOHOL AS A SOCIAL PROBLEM

"It is lucky that the **omogongo** lasts only a quite short time, perhaps about one and a half month in a year. Neither do they know any method to store **omogongo**, but it will be drunk soon after fermenting. Due to **omogongo** tree (marula tree) Ovamboland has a small but, however, problematic question of alcohol abuse, which is not easy to solve satisfactorily" (Koivu 1925: 37).

Missionary Kalle Koivu's opinion, dating from the beginning of the 1920s, indicates well that consumption of alcohol in north Namibia was restricted mainly to home made beer and wines. Taking into account Koivu's very negative attitude to alcohol, it seems that consumption of alcohol had to have been on a moderate level. Alcohol abuse touched at that time only the elite of the Owambo society, but has spread during the last decades to all levels of the society.

However, the question of alcohol abuse in Namibia was not highlighted until after independence. The Namibian Institute for Social and Economic Research (NISER) opened the discussion with a short paper on alcohol abuse in southern Namibia. Pomuti and Eiseb (1990: 1-10) concentrate first on considering the supply of alcohol and the patterns of drinking, and second, on the social effects of alcohol abuse. They were concerned especially with the effects of alcohol abuse on children. Mortality and malnutrition of children was more frequent among alcoholic families as also was their risk of being victims of violence. Incest and rape were also higher. Teenage pregnancies and high dropout rates from school were connected closely with everyday life in alcohol abuse families and villages. "Mothers are sometimes so young that they don't even know how to breast-feed their babies" commented one of the interviewed nursing sisters on the social situation in a south Namibian village in 1990.

At present alcohol is also closely connected with crime. According to statistics collected by police in south Namibia alcohol was connected with 80 percent of all crimes committed in that part of the country. The crime rate escalated toward the middle and the end of the month, when people had more money. Typical crimes, as the result of drunkenness, were rape and assault, burglaries linked with damage to property, and traffic accidents (Pomuti and Eiseb 1990: 12).

It is very likely that the results of Pomuti and Eiseb work can be generalized to represent the whole of Namibia. As the preceding sentence reveals, alcohol policy research is still in its infancy in Namibia. The greatest obstacle for research at the moment is the availability of source material.

Inconvenience caused by the growth of alcohol consumption is not restricted to mental or economic factors alone, but the rapid growth of the sale of industrially produced alcoholic beverages and soft drinks since the 1970s has

created a visible environmental problem in Namibia. There is no organized refuse collection or returnable bottle system for country areas, and this has led to the littering of the environment. Worst is the situation along the roadsides. Empty bottles and cans cause economic losses to households by damaging vehicle tyres, and livestock die from eating packing plastic. However little attention has been paid to packing wastes as an environmental problem, even though the amount of packing wastes will grow rapidly in the future.

5. NAMIBIAN GOVERNMENT AND ALCOHOL

An interesting feature related to the alcohol policy discussion in Namibia has been the evasive attitude of the government towards the acknowledged problem. Already the Namibians interviewed by Pomuti and Eiseb (1990: 17-18) wished that the authorities would start fighting against alcohol abuse and the social problems caused by it. They demanded tighter controls for alcohol trading, and the closing of illicit shebeens and cuca-shops, the tightening of alcohol legislation, and the creation of recreational facilities, such as swimming pools, organized sports facilities, libraries, and so on.

Unfortunately demands presented by people suffering from alcohol abuse have not yet been realized. Alcohol policy in Namibia is still based on legislation prescribed during the South African colonial period. On the grounds of the public debate at the moment it seems that the media is most concerned with alcohol abuse and of the social problems caused by it.

Detachment from the heritage of the colonial alcohol policy will not be easy in a country troubled by mass unemployment and poverty among the African population. At the moment any restrictions in the supply of alcohol and raising its price would only worsen the situation of the poorest people. "In the past, people had money for alcohol, food and clothing; now they just have money for alcohol", commented the researcher Axel Thoma on the social situation of a San community living in north Namibia near the Botswana border (The Namibian 4.9.1992).

Map 1. Distribution of Population

[Note: Map 1 not available in the web version.]

Source: Erkkilä and Siiskonen 1992: 30.

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