

# **'DO YOU RESPECT ME?' DRINKING AS A SOCIAL CATALYST IN THE REINDEER HERDING COMMUNITIES OF EUROPEAN RUSSIA AND WESTERN SIBERIA**

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**Abstract:** This paper<sup>1</sup> analyses alcohol consumption amongst the indigenous communities of reindeer herders in the Russian North. It introduces the metaphor of the social catalyst to interpret a broad range of effects and motivations linked with drinking practices and discourses associated with alcohol. An anthropological fieldwork methodology allows entry into the sphere of cultural intimacy in order to understand morally suspicious practices usually hidden from the outside world. A non-normative approach is suggested to escape the moral trap of the 'social problem' discourse. Two main patterns of drinking practices, the 'losing face together' and the 'competitive drinking' spree are identified. Whereas the first can be associated with local traditions, the second is linked with male interaction with and within the settler communities. Transgressive practices causing loss of control are examined for their social function and the different notions of 'strength' associated with drinking practices. All of them serve either to confirm, to transcend or to abandon social boundaries, status roles and relationships, which allows us to speak about alcohol as a social catalyst.

**Keywords:** alcohol, competitive drinking, drinking patterns, indigenous people, losing face together, reindeer herders, social catalyst, transgression

## **ALCOHOL AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLE OF THE RUSSIAN ARCTIC**

Indigenous people in the Russian North and Siberia have to face negative and very persistent stereotypes when it comes to alcohol consumption. They see their image of drunkards and alcoholics as one of the heaviest obstacles towards being respected as equal members of the surrounding society (Leete 2005). These stereotypes present them as weak, helpless, genetically predestined to addiction, incapable of self-control, irresponsible about their own future, or of securing their existence. Ethnographic literature about Siberian peoples recurrently refers to alcohol, describing its negative effects, even up to the

present day (Castrén & Schiefner 1856; Dunin-Gorkavich 1904; Pika 1993; Sidorov & Shubin 1994; Pika & Bogoyavlensky 1995; Tuisku 2001; Dregalo & Ulyanovsky 1998; Koester 2003; Kozlov et al. 2003; Vershubsky & Kozlov 2006; Kozlov 2007; Ziker 2009; Istomin 2011, 2012). The majority of literature deals with alcohol as an unquestionable problem, and its destructive effects on indigenous communities. The question of why indigenous people drink is either avoided, in a few cases associated with a genetic deficiency or social weakness, or attributed to external factors (cf. Khairullina 1994: 152; Levin 1997). The focus on the negative effects of alcohol associates drinking mostly with alcoholism and ignores the fact that often even the most excessive drinking practices, involving physical violence, are not the outcome of pathological dependency, but are socially embedded practices (as described in Koester 2003).

Alcohol is not a new theme in the social sciences, and there is a long tradition of anthropological literature dealing with the drinking practices of indigenous peoples and especially arctic and subarctic groups. Dwight B. Heath has provided several overviews of the anthropological discourse on drinking practices (Heath 1975, 1987a, 1987b, 2000) and Mary Douglas published already in 1987 a seminal reader about the social context of drinking (Douglas 1987). However, Russia and especially the Russian indigenous North remained a terra incognita for the anthropology of drinking. For Russia's urban centres and ethnic Russians this changed in the years after perestroika (Braun 2003; Chepurnaya & Shpakovskaya 2005; Goryacheva 2003; Shchepanskaya 1999, 2007; Timofejew et al. 2006; Herlihy 1991; Sokolov 2005; Mäkinen & Reitan 2006; Sempura & Levin 1997; Zdravomyslova & Chikadze 2000; Nemtsov 2005) but the everyday drinking practices and their social context among indigenous groups remain understudied (with almost only one exception: Koester 2003). A workshop in Tartu in 2013 (Dudeck 2013b) was organised to initiate a change in the situation and encouraged the author of this article to try to draw some conclusions from the by-products of anthropological research focused on other themes.

## **A NON-NORMATIVE APPROACH**

Anthropological literature about drinking (Singer 1986, 2012; Room et al. 1984; Room 1992, 2013; Room & Mäkelä 2000; Douglas 1987; Hunt & Barker 2001; Dietler 2006; Heath 1975, 1987b, 2010; Everett et al. 2011 [1976]; Spicer 1997; Mandelbaum 1965; Marshall et al. 2001; Marshall 1983; Sulkunen 2002) seems to oscillate between two poles and the dilemma of anthropological alcohol studies lies in the predicament of this polarity. Some of the authors claim

that anthropologists systematically underestimate the bad effects of alcohol on community life (Room et al. 1984), while others claim that the discussion on alcohol ignores the important functions of drinking within society (Heath 2007, 2010). Arguments from both sides seem to be valid, but consider a functionalist perspective that examines human behaviour under the aspect of either a positive or negative outcome for social life. Most of them forget the, not so recent, insight that individuals and communities are often very much aware of the negative effects of some practices that play an important role in everyday life and that they are willing to pay the price, a fact described already by Brody (1971) in his seminal study of the drinking practices of urban Native Americans. Too often, social scientists stick to the dominant normative oppositions in the public discourse, which are publicly expressed by indigenous communities as well. An anthropological understanding of drinking requires a look behind the façade of the public discourse to grasp the deeply ambivalent effects of drinking practices in the realm of what Michal Herzfeld (1997) calls cultural intimacy (cf. also Shryock 2004). The fact that most of the social research is dominated by verbal expressions and data gathered through questionnaires, interviews, and written sources fosters the prevalence of the ‘either – or’ perspectives of the western normative discourse. Most social researches of alcohol in indigenous communities focus on this normative approach which derives from specific western arrangements of dichotomies introduced to them in the course of the colonisation process: pathological – healthy, controlled – uncontrolled, constructive – destructive, functional – dysfunctional, normal – deviant. In this paper I shall put aside this normative discourse for the purpose of accessing internal (emic) motivations for drinking that are often not directly expressed verbally.

Anthropological fieldwork in northern indigenous communities that access the realm of cultural intimacy reveals that the distinction between dysfunctional and controlled moderate drinking does not help us to understand why people drink and why they drink the way they do. This becomes especially clear when we look at the normative discourse around drinking – what I would call here ‘alcohol talk’. To the outside public indigenous representatives generally condemn indigenous alcohol consumption as uncontrolled and destructive while in intimate spaces drinking is associated with positive values like fun and relaxation. To outsiders indigenous drinking seems to reveal the social weakness of indigenous communities and their vulnerability if not marginalisation. From the inside, the emphasis is often on strength and masculinity and the closeness of social ties (as emphasised in anthropological research on subarctic indigenous people already in the 1970s: Van-Stone 1980; Honigmann 1980; Hamer & Steinbring 1980a, 1980b; Matthiasson 1975).

The above-mentioned dichotomic approach contains in itself already elements of this ‘alcohol talk’ that make the contradicting and nested normative discourses inside indigenous communities invisible (Gal 2002; Liarskaia & Dudeck 2012). An interpretative approach towards drinking practices, an approach that tries to understand the drinking of Northerners from their point of view has, first of all, to shed all normative pre-assumptions. It does not mean becoming blind to the negative or positive consequences of drinking practices, but it does not start with definitions of what is socially destructive and what is functional. It is an integrative approach that tries to look at patterns of drinking and the normative discourses inside the community that frame and influence drinking behaviour.

## **CONSUMING ALCOHOL**

No other practices of food and psychotropic substance consumption possess such variable and ambivalent potentials charged with cultural meaning and social function as do practices of alcohol consumption. There are certainly communities that use, instead of alcohol, other substances that are highly charged with meaning, like kava or khat (Marshall 1976, 1983; Marshall et al. 2001; Bott 1987; Hunt & Barker 2001). Anthropology has considered drinking to be a cultural performance that serves the institution and confirmation of bonds and borders, social proximity and distance inside society. It is full of a variety of signifiers (symbols) that transport meaning, but as a performance it affects and changes the signified (the drinking humans and their social relations) as well (cf. Room 2013). To understand this forest of symbols one has to pay attention to the context of the occasion of drinking – the time and place, the activity that drinking is part of, and the composition of the company of participants. But more narrowly the details of the act of drinking itself have to be considered as well – the kind of drinks, the ways of drinking, drinking speed and amount, drinking vessels and paraphernalia. All the rules that have to be observed to drink appropriately, and all the rules that have to be violated to provoke criticism in order to confirm the borders of appropriate behaviour or to remove them, form the drinking culture of a social group. One should also not forget the effects of drinking – on consciousness, on emotions, on the body, on mental and physical abilities, on the development of addiction, as well as short- and long-term health effects. Comparative anthropological research has shown that this is not only determined by the biochemical effects that ethanol or other by-products have on the human body and mind but also by expectations and learned behaviour in connection with drunken comportment (Douglas 1987; Lemert 1980; Van-Stone 1980; Hamer & Steinbring 1980b; Marshall et al.

2001). Drunkenness causes, first of all, a change in the ability to act, changes in self-discipline, loss of self-control, changes in the quality (and quantity) of agency, which all are obviously central for practices of drinking alcohol and the narratives linked to it. In Russia the motivation for drinking is often described with the term '*rasslabit'sia*', meaning relaxing with a strong connotation of letting loose and getting weak.

## **ALCOHOL AS A SOCIAL CATALYST**

To conceptualise the role alcohol plays in social relationships, their establishment and negation, I suggest the term 'social catalyst' – a metaphor borrowed from chemistry. A catalyst induces some reaction but is NOT part of the causes and consequences of the reaction itself. The effect of alcohol consumption – light or heavy forms of intoxication – enables certain things to happen that would not happen or would not happen so quickly and easily without it. In this way the notion of a catalyst could be used for the constructive as well as destructive, for the functional as well as dysfunctional qualities of drinking. The metaphor could be seen as a synonym for the widespread notion of alcohol as a social lubricant, but as a catalyst alcohol does much more than only to ease and to enhance. The reactions can be quite different and often contradicting: dividing and uniting, coming close and making enemies.

The term 'social catalyst' serves, first of all, for the comparison of the social effects of drinking and the different drinking conventions that frame them. It has of course its limits. Social processes are by no means chemical reactions and cannot be described as such. The chemical catalyst is not consumed during the reaction and stays unchanged – that is of course not the case with alcohol. The catalyst metaphor is therefore not applicable for the role alcohol plays as a commodity and the whole economy surrounding alcohol based on the consumption of the substance.

## **RESEARCH**

The observations analysed in this paper originate from over 20 years of anthropological fieldwork among indigenous reindeer herders in the Russian Arctic – to be precise, Khanty and Nenets communities. It is important to mention that it would exceed the volume of this paper if I aimed at a holistic description of drinking practices that can be observed among Nenets and Khanty reindeer herders today. I will confine myself to an impressionistic description of drinking

practices that can serve the purpose to underline some aspects that I believe are important and are widely ignored in the literature on indigenous drinking in Russia and Siberia. Stories about indigenous drinking culture in Russia are now usually reserved to the corridor talks of anthropologists when they exchange experiences that are too 'problematic' or ambivalent to present them in papers that are valued for clear evidence and plausible conclusions. Anthropologists' stories about encounters with indigenous drinking in Russia are so similar and comprehensible to each other that they can serve as an identity marker, or the proof of a 'real' initiation into the field of anthropology in Russia or Siberia. A comparison of colleagues' experiences reveals that even the difference between indigenous and non-indigenous drinking habits seems to be similar for most of the Khanty and Nenets communities over a territory that spans more than 2000 km. The only exceptions are recent converts to Protestantism that are famous for their complete abstinence from alcohol (Wiget & Balalaeva 2007; Vallikivi 2009).

## UNCONTROLLABILITY AS THE AIM OF INTOXICATION

"There is no sense in drinking alcohol when you don't get drunk," was the statement of male reindeer herders, when speaking about drinking or specifically about possible controlled drinking. Alcohol consumption without or only with light signs of intoxication does not fit into their concept of drinking at all. This is strikingly similar to other circumpolar indigenous drinking cultures (described in the contributions to Hamer & Steinbring 1980a). While some of the reindeer herders are aware that there are other alcohol cultures, they even experienced alcohol consumption in countries like Germany during their army service, but the tone was incomprehension towards forms of drinking that do not succeed in getting people wasted. The quality of drinks like vodka (the typical Russian spirit) or *braga* (homebrew) was discussed by men mainly due to their ability to make people drunk in an effective way, expressed with the Russian term *vyrubat'sia* (to pass out). When discussing the quality of *braga*, male reindeer herders mentioned different additives that make *braga* stronger, among them the excrements of hare that were believed to make the drink more effective. The benchmark for the quality of the alcohol was considered to be the time span it took to reach a condition when drinkers could not walk anymore and passed out. But it would be a mistake to think that reindeer herders are constantly searching for uncontrolled ways to get wasted as quickly as possible. The restriction of drunken comportment to well-defined heterotopias (a concept derived from Foucault 1986) and the observation and comparison of people's

abilities to get drunk in the 'right' way were also stressed in the conversations. I frequently experienced being carefully observed on occasions of collective drinking. The comments of these observations mentioned my ability to keep up with the pace of drinking of my companions and also the time span until I became drunk. I usually avoided getting hopelessly wasted, going to sleep before getting completely drunk, and in most cases that was accepted due to my status as a foreigner. The tolerance towards quitting drinking earlier than others is generally higher among indigenous reindeer herders than I normally experienced with Russian men in similar situations. Colleagues working among reindeer herders in the same region confirmed my observations. Individual differences in reaching the state of drunkenness are respected, as well as the individual decision to quit the table.

### **RANGE OF PRACTICES: ALCOHOL TALK, HIDDEN PRACTICES**

The small village N. is one of the remotest and most isolated communities in the whole region. One can reach it only by helicopter or by snowmobile in the winter. My first visit to the village took place in the nineties while I met state officials and local reindeer herders, with a subsequent public feast, where I could observe how a whole village got completely drunk. I visited the village again for the yearly official celebration of the Day of the Reindeer Herder almost 15 years later and experienced almost the same thing again. Already before my journey to the village some Khanty friends warned me to be careful with potentially violent villagers, but fortunately I did not experience any personal involvement in dangerous situations. Because of its remoteness the village is dominated by indigenous values and lifestyle.

Drinking started with several boxes of spirit (around 90% alcohol per volume) brought by helicopter pilots and sold to villagers and the local shopkeeper, who diluted it to the degree of vodka (less than 40%). It was a sunny spring day and I spent most of the time outdoors where the activities of the festival like sports competitions and games took place. Meat, broth, bread, and tea were served in a nomads' tent erected especially for the purpose, as well as in the private houses I was invited into constantly during the day. Eating and drinking were always accompanied by invitations to have a drink together, and I observed the increasing drunkenness of almost everybody. At some point I realised that people started to disappear from the scene because they reached a state of drunkenness in which they fell asleep and to my surprise this happened according to chronological age. There was obviously a different speed of getting drunk between the generations. Young people disappeared first, then the middle generation, and finally the elderly.

When I was almost alone in the street with the children, who did not drink alcohol, there was only one last old lady, who had removed even her headscarf, a gesture almost unimaginable under normal circumstances. She was dancing and loudly singing a song. When she recognised me, she welcomed me with a kiss and invited me into her house. She could not get her husband to wake up, and I decided to leave and let her sleep off her drinking spree. Behind the delay in getting drunk was the gradation in self-control that rises with the age of a person as I found out later. Older people are expected to control their drinking more than the young.

The drinking had not ended before the whole supply of alcohol had been consumed in the village. Now encounters involving an open expression of discontent and aggression became frequent. Some villagers were especially angry about the representatives of the state who they saw as the guilty ones for their marginal social position and economic difficulties. The policeman, who visited the village only for the purpose of the meeting, barricaded himself up in the wooden cabin where he was staying overnight, to avoid becoming the scapegoat for the villagers' discontent.

I again experienced the increasing danger of violent outbursts in the village during my second visit to the village at the end of the 2000s. Some internal conflicts had broken out, one of them culminating in a father smashing a bottle on his son's head; also resentment towards the representatives of the state and the oil companies, which had started to work in the surrounding area, became so threatening that the guests had to flee the village in the evening. They spent the night at one reindeer herder's campsite some kilometres away. During the first visit I was shocked by the excess of drunkenness, but later I understood that these are not regular events because the majority of the inhabitants live on their campsites scattered over the tundra where alcohol is not available. The few people in the village only have access to alcohol often less than once a week, when the helicopter or other visitors are providing it for private sale. From the perspective of the reindeer herders the village is considered to be a place outside of normal life and already by its origin associated with the breaking of religious taboos. The village was established by the Soviet authorities at a sacred place in order to cause its profanation. It has become the place where reindeer herders stay from time to time if needed and spend their leisure time drinking alcohol, a pattern observed in a number of colonial settlements (cf. Hamer & Steinbring 1980a).

## **THE TWO MAIN PATTERNS OF DRINKING**

Getting drunk until the stage of losing control over body and mind is almost always the ultimate aim of indigenous drinking in the observed communities, even if there are signs of change in recent years. The nutritional or medical value of alcoholic beverages was never mentioned. Often people were copresent who did not participate in the drinking or who just nipped symbolically at the drinking vessel but stayed completely sober. Some of them explained their temperance with a treatment called coding (*'kodirovanie'*), the only therapy available for the local people who want to stop their excessive and addictive drinking. Elders and women often took a very negative attitude towards drinking and forbade drinking in their presence.

Most of the drinking sprees of the Khanty and Nenets reindeer herders began in a fairly relaxed manner, but sometimes ended in an outburst of conflict and violence, quite similar to the pattern described in northern American native people (Lemert 1980; Hamer 1965; Van-Stone 1980; Hamer & Steinbring 1980b; Robbins 1973). Periodically I was invited to the drinking sprees of young men, often involving non-indigenous youth that showed a different pattern that was from the beginning associated with competition and slight aggression. In the next section, I will describe both patterns in more detail.

## **LOSING FACE TOGETHER**

The first drinking practice the anthropologist encounters, in the field in Siberia, is what I would call the 'integration ritual'. Although it can take on different forms in different communities, the main pattern is the same: the most secure way to include a stranger in a social grouping is to engage him in practices where the involved lose face together in a drinking party. Getting completely wasted together makes sure that from now on the novice is part of a 'community of complicity' (Steinmüller 2010). The result is a state in which the social façade, the social face becomes destroyed temporarily; I call this type of drinking 'losing face together'.

Drinking is in most cases a social practice that unites and integrates the people that gather to drink. During the Khanty and Nenets' conjoint drinking everybody takes the responsibility to secure the amount of alcohol he or she needs individually. The typical drinking method is from one cup that circulates clockwise and is refilled by one responsible person, usually the host of the drinking spree. Everybody drinks as much as she or he wants because there is no reason to refrain from getting drunk.

While staying at a Khanty campsite in spring, I was invited by some young men in their late teens/early twenties to film them, while they were jumping from floe to floe on the melting ice of the nearby river. This kind of fooling around was a way to pass free time and the action, which undoubtedly had to culminate in one of them plunging into the cold water, fitted perfectly with the popular genre of jokes called *'prikoly'* in Russian.

Young people gathered, watched, and constantly exchanged on their mobile phones a huge amount of short video clips showing similar instances of *'bezpredel'* (excess) and *'prikoly'* (gags), and they were eager to produce their own. This popular humour encompassed activities and instances showing people in embarrassing situations, and during the transgression of sexual and other behavioural norms. It often involved violence and other instances where people were depicted losing face and reputation in one form or another.

Out of the blue, one of the guys asked me not to film the 2-litre plastic beer bottle with the camera. Only then did I realise that there was a bottle cruising among the youngsters. They did not show any sign of intoxication yet, but were very eager to prevent being filmed while drinking. I asked for the reason and got the answer that the mass media shows the Khanty always as drunkards, but it was clear that my film material was not meant for broadcasting in public and that they were not drunk. It remained a riddle for some time until I showed, by accident, some other footage I had filmed among the Khanty youth to one Khanty elder. He reacted very strongly when he saw a courting couple kissing each other during a party, where obviously alcohol consumption (even if quite moderate) was involved as well. It was not the kissing and drinking itself that he disapproved, but the filming that transferred the information to potentially any outsider and especially to the elders. The Khanty society and, in a similar yet not identical way the Nenets society, is very much concerned about the informational borders inside their community between genders, age groups, and kinship groups as well as outsiders (Liarskaia & Dudeck 2012). It is often not the content of the activity itself, but the visibility of certain categories of people that makes behaviour appropriate or inappropriate.

Cultural intimacy, a concept borrowed from Michael Herzfeld (1997), can describe the way drinking practices have to remain inside a certain context and the practice itself constructs this intimate context. It was Susan Gal (2002, 2005) who made the point that spheres of privacies are nesting into each other, and I consider drinking practices as one of the major markers that determine the privacies of different groups in the communities I visited. Being invited to a drinking party, or any other activity involving alcohol consumption, including religious rituals, meant to be included in a specific intimate relationship of the participants. I had to learn that people, especially in Khanty communities, are

concerned with the principle that information about these intimate activities should stay inside the group of participants (Liarskaia & Dudeck 2012). Drinking is therefore not considered to be an amoral activity itself. Rather, it is the dissemination of such information that is linked with shame and embarrassment. Alcohol consumption is in this way one of the most important practices that establish and maintain the boundaries of intimacy.

But there are more aspects of the participation in common alcohol consumption that make it a sign of inclusion. The effect of drunkenness is seen as a proof of authenticity and trustfulness of the drinkers; this is a motivation for drinking with the aim of losing face together. By jointly reaching a state of drunkenness, which allows for very little controlled behaviour, one's social reputation is ritually destroyed. Russian sociologist Mikhail Sokolov (2005) called this drinking habit, which he observed with Russian students, an experience of non-identity, a temporary loss of social status and identity. Common drinking can become an important rite of passage for a newcomer, a test to see if he could become '*svoi chelovek*' (our kind of guy). Even the common rhetorical question to force somebody to take a drink: '*Ty menja uvazhaesh?*' (Do you respect me?), aims to prevent one's refusal to take part in the shared experience of getting drunk, losing face together, producing a certain kind of intimate relationship. It is clear that only practices that are linked to shame, to the destruction of reputation and status, are able to serve the aim, and alcohol is a perfect means to induce them.

### **COMPETITIVE DRINKING: PROVING STRENGTH**

I also observed another way of drinking, first among Russian males. Drinking companions monitor their partners scrupulously, to see if they drink as much as they themselves, to secure that everybody drinks exactly the same amount of alcohol, and ensure that nobody escapes the common goal of getting drunk. The typical reaction to any attempts of the guest to refrain from further drinking is: '*Ty menia uvazhaesh?*' It forces the guest to join the next round until they are completely drunk.

The question of respect combined with the jealously observed equal amounts of drinks is based on the association of male strength and alcohol consumption. The hegemonic concept of Russian masculinity comprises the idea that the ability to withstand copious amounts of alcohol without showing signs of intoxication is proof of male strength. Plenty of male drinking is therefore competitive, establishing hierarchies of masculinity inside male groups. However, the fateful effect of alcohol intoxication leads to an acceleration of the feeling of status insecurity, especially in young men. Therefore, these men often try

to force their drinking buddies to show respect by getting drunk in their presence to convince themselves of their own relative strength or at least their companions' equal weakness.

The associations between strength and alcohol consumption are formed in very different and sometimes even contradicting ways. The concept of male strength is associated with the ability to drink and maintain control longer than others. This idea of strength links political and domestic power with masculinity in a specific way (Shchepanskaya 1999, 2007; Zdravomyslova & Chikadze 2000; Chepurnaya & Shpakovskaya 2005). The socio-political 'weakness' of indigenous groups is thus naturalised through their 'genetic' inability to demonstrate strength by drinking hard and, implicitly, the masculinity of indigenous men is questioned in this way. But there are other perspectives on strength. On one occasion, during an internal discussion with a Khanty elder about the drinking habits of the Khanty, the elder mentioned that Khanty women have the right to get drunk like hard-working men when they visit the village. They work hard in their forest households, so they will not stay abstinent like the Russian women, who do only soft jobs.

On the other hand, strength can be associated with staying abstinent. The best public example for the symbolic association of political power with sobriety is probably Vladimir Putin, the Russian president. An almost supernatural strength is associated with protestant groups evangelising among the Khanty and the Nenets because of their ability to keep their proselytes teetotal. In the indigenous communities the elders often stress these concepts of showing strength through staying abstinent and criticise young people, especially young males, for their weakness, i.e. their inability to refrain from alcohol. Part of the story on strength is frequently the narrative of being a former hard drinker that understood at one point that he had to take life in his own hands.

In opposition to the strength of staying abstinent, competitive drinking aims at the proof of strength of the drinker. Strength in drinking is associated with the ability to retain agency longer than others, either by controlling oneself or by just the physical ability to withstand large amounts of alcohol without showing signs of heavy intoxication. This form of drinking appears usually only between men. If women are present, they are automatically excluded from the competition. Indigenous men, who fear falling prey to the above-mentioned stereotypes of weakness, experience, especially in the company of non-indigenous people, the need to compete in this type of show of strength and the masculinity associated with it. A refusal to take part in such competitions is often prevented with the expression of moral pressure: *'Ty menia uvazhaesh?'* Status insecurity is the main reason why drinking among indigenous males turns towards the competition form especially non-indigenous men are present. The refusal or hesitation

to take part in the competition can easily grow into aggression, especially if the feeling of emerging intoxication accelerates the feeling of insecurity. It can easily develop into a vicious circle that can be stopped only with physical proof of strength through a fight.

The status insecurity that causes aggression in connection with alcohol can be observed among the Khanty and the Nenets also without competitive drinking. It often appears among close relatives, when the feeling of insecurity about respect paid to each other coincides with feelings of insecurity caused by the inability to control oneself due to drunkenness. In these cases gestures of love like kissing can easily be followed by physical violence in a fight between relatives. I have a strong impression that this tendency of conflicts among close relatives distinguishes Khanty drunkenness from comparable Russian forms. The typical village disco fight involving young Russian men rises from doubts on whether they gain respect from some strangers and outsiders at whom the following aggression is directed. The peer group unites and enhances its identity in the fight with outsiders. In the episodes where I experienced fights among the Khanty after heavy drinking, they appeared mostly between close friends and relatives and it felt almost taboo to involve me as a stranger. On several occasions girls asked me to intervene in the fights of their friends. In one case the young Khanty man that seemed completely uncontrollable in his rage directed his fist to a nearby mirror so as not to hit my face.

## **TRANSGRESSIVE PRACTICES: DRINKING AND CONFLICT**

Literature on the effect of alcohol consumption often mentions aggression as an outcome of drunkenness. Anthropologists have shown that inebriated behaviour is as much shaped by the biochemical effects of alcohol as by socialisation and the expectations of the community the drinker is part of (Sulkunen 2002; Marshall 1983). Physical violence and aggression often involving young men under the influence of alcohol is a common feature of everyday life in Russia and most anthropological fieldworkers encounter situations in which they have to cope with the danger of being involved.

During one of my fieldwork seasons I lived with some families of reindeer herders during the weeks before the main festival of the year, the Day of the Reindeer. It is the only occasion when the majority of reindeer herders of the community gather in the tundra to organise a big celebration around a sports competition and a meeting with the head of the reindeer herding enterprise they work for. The weeks and days before were filled with stories about former events and things that I should be prepared to encounter. A prominent place in

these stories was occupied by two themes: alcohol and violence. The feast was not only a place for exchanging news, sports competitions, and courting. My impression was that the unique occasion of the feast, in combination with the effect of alcohol, allows conflicts to surface, which are suppressed and rarely verbalised in the rest of the year. I was told that the occasion also served to punish certain men who had committed an offence, by beating them up collectively. The feast is the culminating point in the life of the reindeer herders' community in the summertime. The density of events, the lack of sleep during the polar day, and the constant consumption of alcohol create an almost surreal atmosphere during those days. One can feel the heterogeneity of time and place, the heterotopia (Foucault 1986), which puts everybody in a strange mood.

One of the most impressive encounters, involving an outburst of violence, I experienced during one of my first visits to a reindeer herders' camp in the mid-nineties. I was the guest of a family and sitting in a conical tent, drinking tea together with some elders, when some young women ran into the tent and asked me in a panic if I could help them to prevent their brothers from killing each other with an axe. My arrival as a guest was probably the cause for the drinking party and I felt obliged to help even if I did not know how to cope with a man armed with an axe. The sisters insisted and when we left the tent the young men lay already on the ground and one of the women had taken the axe out of his hands. Fortunately he was so drunk that he could not coordinate his resistance and was bound by a rope, providing a pitiful image. More than by the axe fight I was struck by the picture of the bound guy that started to cry. I never found out the reason for the conflict but I learned that this event was full of things transgressing the norms of everyday behaviour. Violence against one's own kin is impermissible, tears are usually not shown and women do not use physical power against men, and being displayed in this helpless condition in front of a stranger is a very shameful situation. Everything is forgotten the next day as if it happened in another world because of the exceptional state produced by alcohol.

Aggression directed against the self can also break out. A friend of mine miraculously survived a suicide attempt after a common drinking party motivated by the sudden death of her husband in an accident. When I spoke with her about the event she said she had tested the will of god and that she should not die whatever she will do. Some of the life-risking behaviour under the influence of alcohol that usually young men are involved in looks suspiciously similar to this kind of 'testing one's fate'.

As in 'losing face together', here it is the ability of alcohol to disinhibit, to suspend self-control, which produces the desirable effects. The annual festivals are the only occasion where almost the whole community meets during the

year. They therefore play an important role in community life. I could observe that they are almost the only place to openly act out conflict and change the social fabric by destroying old ties and establishing new ones. Life in small family groups of nomads or in isolated settlements of the semi-nomadic reindeer herders does not allow for conflict to appear during the rest of the year and discussing controversies publicly is taboo. The lack of self-control produced by alcohol consumption allows for violating of taboos and becoming emotional; it also allows for flirting and the display of erotic attraction, and engaging in violent behaviour.

### **ALCOHOL TALK: THE CRITIQUE OF ALCOHOL**

Through the lens of drinking as a social problem, the gaze is narrowed on practices that are considered to be destructive to individual health and to the social fabric. Alcohol problems are in the focus of popular media, and of indigenous activists and scientists dealing with alcohol in Russia (as discussed in Chepur-naya & Shpakovskaya 2005). In expressions of general critique it is the main sign of ill-being, hardship, and the consequences of victimisation of indigenous communities and families. Indigenous mothers, elders, and representatives of the indigenous intelligentsia, which are concerned about the danger of moral degradation, frequently raise the topic of the destructive effects of alcohol. These perspectives are so dominant that I want to contextualise them within the broad range of aspects of the practices in which alcohol plays a role of what I call a social catalyst, even though I can only deal with part of the field in this paper.

One could say that the above-mentioned critique plays a more important role for the social impact of alcohol in the communities than the drinking itself. It may serve the marginalisation of indigenous people as part of racist stereotypes, but it may equally serve the resistance against marginalisation as part of the argumentation of colonial exploitation and discrimination, which caused the social problems. It is an argument for the domination of Russian culture, the inability of indigenous groups to exert self-government and sovereignty in any of their own affairs, and the refusal of rights over resources. It is as well an argument against all the effects of domination when it describes the alcohol problem as a result of deprivation of resources, assimilation pressure, powerlessness, and lack of prospects for economic development.

The critique of alcohol-related problems is not only a matter in relations between colonising powers and the indigenous groups. This is also an important issue inside the community. It is the role of the wives, mothers and elderly men to level criticism at the men who transgress moral boundaries when getting

drunk. It is the role of wives and mothers to take care of the day-to-day economy of their families and to prevent their men from neglecting the prosperity of the family by engaging in generosity and a waste of money. It is the role of the elders to prevent the younger ones from neglecting religious taboos by engaging in sexual laxity, indecent behaviour, and disrespect of traditional social roles. The constant verbal critique is only rarely followed by harsh actions. In practice the women show an incredible patience towards their husbands and sons, and the elders seem to be masters in turning a blind eye to the drunken excesses of the youth. I am nevertheless convinced that it would be a big mistake to draw the conclusion that women and elders have lost their power as bearers of values and tradition. On the contrary, their indulgence supports traditional values by keeping the balance between the different morals of excess and control, which made indigenous cultures so persistent under the conditions of political, economic, and ecological change.

A Khanty elder explained to me: “Do you know why we won the war? Because our soldiers drunk hard. Soldiers were stronger because they could drink harder. Then they were able to fight harder.” *What is good for a Russian means death for a German*, is a common proverb in Russia. Strength, a certain type of strength, is part of the Russian identity. The paradox was that the same Khanty elder, who underlined the importance of alcohol for the victory in the World War, was one of the harshest critics of alcohol consumption in his own community.

He once explained to me that the Khanty expression for the Khanty living in the village means literally translated ‘living by the shop’ (in Khanty, ‘lapka’ means village, as well as shop), with the connotation of the village shop as the main source of vodka. In this way the village as a living place is associated with alcohol addiction and, subsequently, with weakness and moral degradation. The Khanty living in the village are in this perspective not able to secure their livelihood in the forest; they have become dependent on alcohol and the external colonial forces that sustain the northern settlements. Compared to the image of the central village established during the Soviet time as the political, cultural, and economic centre of development and of the civilising process, the perspective of reindeer herders is more ambivalent. They perceive the village as the centre of political power, but, on the other side, also as the place of the socially weak, the dependent. For them it is a morally deeply ambivalent place where opportunities for recreation and joy mix with moral transgression and violence around the official celebrations, meetings, markets and discotheques that are regularly organised and attended by the reindeer herders. For them the village is a place of yearning as well as of moral degradation. It is the antipode to the reindeer herders’ camp: the tundra and taiga are perceived as morally

and spiritually pure, as the centre of indigenous values, as a place for work and family life, and as the basis for economic survival.

The critique of alcohol of that Khanty elder went even further. He explained that in opposition to a majority of today's Khanty he believes that also religious rituals should be performed and offerings made without the consumption of alcohol, and that he did not want me to drink at all with the Khanty youth. Moreover, that he would consider expelling me from his house if he discovered me hanging around with people drinking (he was similarly strict in forbidding me to have contact with the teetotal Khanty converted to protestant denominations). By associating alcohol with the village and moral degradation it was logical to dismiss alcohol from the opposite pole in the sacred landscape of the Khanty. The Khanty associate the downriver Russian-dominated settlements with the underworld and the upstream holy places of the Khanty deities with the power of the heavenly gods and moral purity, while the forest settlements of the Khanty reindeer herders are located in the middle.

As most of the indigenous reindeer herders, he lives in a double-reference frame – the indigenous one and the Russian one, and in practice he did tolerate certain amounts of alcohol to be present in religious rituals. He expressed a quite ambivalent concept of strength and weakness, in connection to alcohol consumption: on the one hand the strength that is expressed by the ability to bear heavy drinking and on the other hand the strength of self-control and abstinence.

In some indigenous communities (e.g. reindeer herders on the Kanin Peninsula) I experienced a clearly expressed gender divide with regard to alcohol consumption. In contrast to the neighbouring indigenous groups, their women were almost abstinent and only the men engaged, from time to time, in heavy drinking. Women had the task to store alcohol and to control the sometimes excessive drinking of their husbands and sons. Most of the decisions in day-to-day life and work were taken by the men, but during drinking parties the usual rules of decision-making became inverted and women took over complete control. The members of one community even expressed the differences to the neighbouring group of reindeer herders by the fact that they differ in respect of what they thought was a sign of a higher moral and cultural level: "Did you see that even their women get drunk at the celebration in the village?" A man from another Khanty group that was tolerant towards women taking part in heavy drinking expressed the group identity in contrast to Russians that consider it inappropriate for women to drink as men do: "Our women work hard, so they can also drink hard."

## **THE SOCIAL MECHANISM: INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION**

I consider competitive drinking and drinking to communally lose face the most important binge-drinking patterns in these northern communities. While the loss of face drinking aims at producing egalitarian relationships, the competitive drinking produces hierarchies.

The form of drinking I call 'losing face together' is the most widespread among the Khanty and Nenets. It serves to break down social boundaries, makes tabooed behaviour possible, and facilitates the integration of strangers and newcomers. It enables the transmission of information in a cultural context in which silence, distance, and the observance of informational borders are the main ways to express respect and morality. The establishment of extraordinary and exceptional situations similar to what Foucault (1986) called heterotopia or Douglas (1987) 'ideal worlds' is enabled and marked with alcohol consumption. It is the intoxicating effect of alcohol towards losing self-control and giving up agency that makes transgression possible and excusable. These are the incidents when, sometimes, strongly tabooed behaviour like promiscuity, incest, homosexuality, physical violence against others and oneself, life- and healthrisking behaviour, lavish wasting of economic resources and other ways of endangering one's own existence take place (Chepurnaya & Shpakovskaya 2005). If the reputation and social face is completely smashed, nobody has to fear status insecurity (Sokolov 2005; cf. for 'face work' also Goffman 1959). If there is no status to be upheld any more in the face of the others, the stress linked to possible disrespect and devaluation is relieved. In this way the 'joint loss of face drinking' counteracts the increased feeling of insecurity during the proceeding intoxication. The greater the suspicion and insecurity about the readiness to reach the complete 'loss of face', the more carefully the speed of drinking is observed. When genders and age groups are mixed and the participants drink out of the same vessel, which is provided by the responsible host, this kind of pressure is absent. Everybody is left to decide on their own, yet according to their social status, how quickly to reach the stage of drunkenness. In this case the young speed up and the elders drink in a more controlled way, and it is left to the responsibility of the individual to show signs of drunkenness as proof of intimacy and trust in the community. In some communities women are excluded from the status-damaging practice and left to observe and control men's transgressive behaviour and to prevent them from damaging their physical health.

Losing self-control allows for a social integration of outsiders into a group and for enhancing group identity. It also enables conflict evolvment and resolution, the splitting or reforming of alliances, scapegoating and score settling.

The mechanism of inclusion and exclusion works miraculously not only with the loss of control but also with the control of drinking. Women, for instance, can integrate the families with the control of uncontrollability of men and develop concepts of female solidarity and strength. The abstinent elders show strength and status in controlling themselves and enhance internal status differences in the indigenous community. In a similar way Christian converts mark group identity by the rigorous moral of teetotalism. The breaking down of borders inside a group has its counterpart in the way alcohol consumption expresses differences to outsiders and confirms social boundaries.

### **SUBSTITUTES FOR DRINKING: IS ALCOHOL THE ONLY SOCIAL CATALYST?**

According to the Khanty reindeer herders themselves, alcohol became a massive problem among the Khanty communities in the Surgut region during the time of the arrival of the oil industry in the seventies and especially the eighties. However, the predictions of complete degradation of the indigenous population and destruction of their communities proved wrong. They managed to preserve their lifestyle of reindeer herders, diversify their economy in connection with the emergence of oil-workers' settlements and towns, and to develop a more controlled drinking culture, as some Khanty elders called it (Dudeck 2012, 2013a; Wiget & Balalaeva 2007; Balzer 1999).

My ethnographic fieldwork was not especially focussed on the history of alcohol consumption, and I can only provide some hypotheses that would have to be proved by further research focussed on the theme. My first suggestion is that the environmentally destructive effects of oil development, resettlement, and the heavy acculturation pressure did not directly provoke drinking in the way of a stress reaction, but affected the possibilities of the communities to apply cultural techniques (among them drinking) to cope with rapid and heavy change. It was more the destruction and devaluation of other cultural techniques, such as religious rituals, sacred places, and oral traditions, and the easy availability of vodka and high prestige of drinking among the oil workers that led to an inflation of practices involving heavy drinking. The tragedy was that exactly at the time when the amount of conflict grew, the traditional possibilities to cope with it, like traditional forms of war and ritual, were less available or not available at all (cf. similar findings in Hamer & Steinbring 1980a).

Recently, a certain change in religious practices has occurred. Some reindeer herders converted to Protestantism and another part revived traditional religious practices with limited and controlled consumption of alcoholic beverages

during the rituals. Both religious movements could be considered to be cultural techniques to cope with change and conflict. On the other hand, a changed attitude of the oil companies and townspeople towards excessive drinking could be observed. Today hard drinking typical of the first generation of explorers and oil workers can only be noted in some badly paid branches of the business and people fear the loss of well paid jobs due to alcohol problems. Young indigenous men copied habits of controlled and limited alcohol consumption, including the switch from vodka to beer, from their Russian peers in the oil towns.

One could say that all cultural techniques that serve the practices of transgression, help to establish heterotopia (Foucault 1986) and *communitas*, to reach the state of liminality (Turner 1969) or collective effervescence (Durkheim 1915), can be considered similar social catalysts to alcohol. The traditional fields to search for such catalysts would be war, religious ritual, and forms of carnival; the modern ones would be sport- and often also music-oriented subcultures. Alcohol could be replaced by other psychotropic drugs but also by dance, violence, erotic and other body techniques. An open question remains what kind of effect the modern media has with its ability to render virtual transgression permanent in popular TV-channels, like a constant rain of sex, drugs, violence, and other forms of moral transgression dripping without a break into the homes and brains of villagers. This constant simulation of transgression could be considered to devaluate and weaken the efficacy of what I here call social catalysts, but it seems that even some traditional rituals retain their power in modern conditions.

## **CONCLUSION**

I would distinguish between two main motivations, or aims, for drinking, which are mutually exclusive, but nevertheless sometimes appear quite close to each other when I drink with my indigenous friends: one of them I would call broadly 'competitive drinking' and the other one – 'losing face together'. I associate the first one with the colonial influence and the second one with traditional indigenous ways of drinking, but this remains a hypothesis that is still lacking enough evidence. Already Mary Douglas (1987) emphasised the dialectical linkage, the interplay of drinking oriented towards the production of community (social cohesion) and drinking linked with competitiveness (individualisation), summing up the uniting and dividing effects of drinking.

If the negative and positive effects of drinking are balanced from the perspective of the community, people see no need to change their drinking practices even if critique is expressed verbally and alcohol consumption is proclaimed to

be a vice (cf. Brody 1971). Only in situations when external factors make alcohol almost the only social catalyst available and increase the overall number of incidents in which people have to apply a social catalyst, its negative effects start to become too destructive for the families and the community.

In the case of Khanty and Nenets communities, one can observe how the growing alcohol problem was followed by processes of religious change and revitalisation, the increased application of the anti-alcoholic therapy of *kodirovanie*, and a change in the patterns of alcohol consumption. External measures to fight the alcohol problem failed to acknowledge the social function of alcohol and proved, therefore, to be ineffective.

It remains an unanswered question why health issues or risk factors other than alcohol are treated so differently. Contaminated drinking water through industrial pollution by mainly oil and gas extraction, parasites in fish (opisthorchiasis), environmental toxins, the risk of using new means of transportation like cars and snowmobiles, are no less life-threatening than alcohol consumption. The main difference is that the risks of alcohol consumption are seen in the public discourse as depending on the individual decision of the self and on inherent personal factors like genes or traditions, but not on external factors like the environment or technology.

Alcohol as a social catalyst is applied in Russia's reindeer herding cultures in a wide range of social encounters with a wide range of effects on society. Drinking as a cultural practice is one of the most important lifestyle features to mark social differences due to the variety of possible forms it can take. It is a practice of distinction par excellence in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu (1984). However, in opposite to most other practices of distinction, it has a unique ability to counteract distinction and to break down social differences. Unlike death and violence, which have a similar power, its effect can be relieved or inverted and the status quo ante reconstructed. It can be only a part-time breakdown, a partial destruction, but, nevertheless, with seriously destructive side-effects for one's health. The comparison with death, violence, war, wasteful feasting, erotic and other forms of transgression and excess leads us to the work of George Bataille (1988), who stressed the importance of practices usually considered to be destructive, amoral, and negative for the human existence.

## NOTE

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