

## INTRODUCTION: DRINKING AND FUN IN THE ARCTIC

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We initiated the Arctic workshops at the University of Tartu, Estonia, in 2010. The first three meetings concentrated on discussing the problems of movement in the North.<sup>1</sup> The fourth workshop, *Drinking and Driving Is So Much Fun*, was held from May 31 to June 1, 2013.<sup>2</sup> The progression from one theme to another does not make much sense at first glance. In general, the Arctic region remained in the focus of our forum and the title of the workshop suggests movement, but actually, what is the connection? The title served as an academic provocation and also indicated how the participants perceived it (see, for example, Dudeck 2013: 93). We adopted the idea for our workshop title from the song *Drinking and Driving*, which was recorded by a British punk band, The Business, in the late 1970s, and became an instant hit among beer-loving punks. The song associated drinking with fun and collective action (to put it mildly), demonstrating that beer-drinking can be evaluated as a process involving positive social meaning.

At the same time, the organisers also attempted to initiate discussion about the integration of ambivalent alcohol experiences and narratives into anthropological research (ibid.).

Therefore, we can say that punks are not the only group of people who believe that drinking is related to the pleasant side of life and is unavoidable in certain situations. The use of alcohol and its social meaning as a topic of research has an impressive history. In Arctic studies, however, alcohol is primarily contextualised from the negative side: everybody seems to know that in the Arctic alcohol is related to violence, suicide, decline of indigenous traditions, culture shock, and other misfortunes that result from excessive drinking. The scholar's task here is to warn of the damage that alcohol causes, and demand restrictive methods to limit access to alcohol. Notwithstanding the scholarly approach to alcohol use, people still continue to drink, an activity primarily associated with leisure time, joyfulness, and celebration. Every scholar who has



*Vodka. Saily settlement, Yakutia, Russian Far East.  
Photograph by Aimar Ventsel 2015.*

conducted fieldwork in the region knows that alcohol is deeply embedded within many rituals, such as the greeting of an honoured guest, the demonstration of masculinity, or as part of religious ceremonies.

This workshop at the University of Tartu was arranged to explore the topic and seek answers as to why people drink in the Arctic, and whether there is anything specific in the use of alcohol that distinguishes this region from others. During the workshop, we examined a wide range of papers that discussed the social, political, cultural and medical meanings of indigenous and non-indigenous alcohol use in the Arctic. Our aim was to discuss how alcohol's agency is conceptualised in the region, and how these concepts vary in different ethnic, religious, gender and age groups. Also, we were interested in the role of alcohol in field research situations and in how questions of fieldwork ethics are related to this.

During the workshop, several papers were dedicated to the analysis of general problems of alcohol addiction as such, as well as to the history of alcohol

discourses in the Arctic. Particular case studies touched upon the Khanty, Sakha, Nenets, Veps, Finns and Russians' alcohol-related social issues as well as the ritual context of drinking. Not all of these presentations made their way into this collection; yet, we hope that the specific flavour of the workshop's intellectual atmosphere is reflected in our special volume.

Interestingly, last but not least, this particular workshop gained an unexpected amount of public interest in Estonia. The organisers of the workshop were interviewed by radio stations and newspapers, coverage of the workshop (<http://blog.ut.ee/to-drink-or-not-to-drink/>) was fourth among the ten most read texts in the blog of the University of Tartu in 2013 (see <http://blog.ut.ee/the-top-10-stories-of-2013/>). Despite the long history of academic research on Siberia and the Far East in Estonia, the media and the general public have shown only a limited interest in it. Alcohol, apparently, was the turning point. This gives evidence of how science could, by choosing attractive topics for scientific events, gain more public exposure, as well as further evidence that alcohol matters.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> About earlier workshops, see Leete & Ventsel 2011, 2012, 2014. About the 4th Arctic Workshop, see also Dudeck 2013.
- <sup>2</sup> The workshop and this paper were supported by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund (Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory, CECT) and Estonian Research Council grants IUT34-32 and PUT590.

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