Global Status Report on Alcohol 2004
Part I

Global overviews

Traditional or local alcoholic beverages 18-21
Traditional or local alcoholic beverages

In many countries there are beverages which either fall outside of the usual beer, wine and spirits categories or which are traditionally produced at the local level, for example in villages and in homes. This kind of production seems especially common in many African countries, where a wide variety of different beverages can be found. Many of these are produced by fermentation of seeds, grains, fruit, vegetables or from palm trees, which is a rather simple procedure. Through fermentation the alcohol content does not rise very high and often the beverages have a very short shelf life before they are spoiled. Distillation is a more complex procedure requiring more equipment and time, but then the result is both more potent and has a longer shelf life date.

Even with the limited data available about prices, it seems that there is ground for the expectation that at least some home or locally made beverages are cheaper than mass or factory produced “branded” beverages. In some cases the price difference is quite significant. This means that it is mostly the poorer segments of the society which consume these local beverages, except in the case of some culturally important beverages which might have ceremonial value. In Nigeria for example, the alcoholic beverage called *burukutu* is popular in rural areas and in poor urban neighbourhoods because it is more affordable than commercially produced beer (Obot, 2000). Likewise, in the United Republic of Tanzania, domestically produced “homemade” or “informal-sector” drinks continue to dominate the market and local drinking habits (Green, 1999). In the case of Seychelles, although home brew is consumed only by a minority of the population (mainly of low socioeconomic status), home brew drinkers consumed particularly high amounts of alcohol derived from these homemade beverages. The much lower cost per alcohol unit of home brews compared to beer or spirits is likely to be an important factor to maintain home brew drinking in segments of the population (Bovet, 2001). Furthermore, in some countries (e.g. Namibia), the production of home-brewed beverages is the dominant channel for alcohol availability. Control was practically non-existent and cheap home-brewed beer found an easy market among the low-income or no-income consumers. Production of home-brewed beverages is closely connected to food production in both the urban and rural areas. The producers are a heterogeneous group, but many of them are women, particularly widows or divorced older women. Especially for older women it is largely a question of improving their economic livelihoods (Mustonen, Beukes & Du Preez, 2001).

These traditional forms of alcohol are usually poorly monitored for quality and strength, and in most countries it is possible to find examples of health consequences related to harmful impurities and adulterants. Extreme cases might even result in death as was the case in Kenya in November 2000 where 140 people reportedly died, many went blind and hundreds were hospitalized after consuming an illegally brewed and poisonous liquor called *kumi kumi* in the poor neighbourhoods of Mukuru Kwa Njenga and Mukuru Kaiyaba. Made from sorghum, maize or millet, the alcoholic drink is common among Kenyans living in the country's low-income urban and rural areas who can ill-afford conventional legal beer. *Kumi kumi* contains methanol and other dangerous additives such as car battery acid and formalin (Mureithi, 2002). In Zimbabwe, it has been noted that in addition to home-brewed beer, alcohol industry representatives and government officials agree that there is a strong enough market for *kachasu*, a name given to home-distilled products with 10% to 70% alcohol content, to warrant it as a major problem. Occasional newspaper reports of alcohol poisonings from *kachasu* point not only to the high alcohol content, but also the continued use of lethal additives to speed drinkers to their desired high (Riley & Marshall, 1999). Similar cases have
also been reported in Bangladesh, India and Somalia (see country profiles for details). When viewed from a public health and welfare perspective, it is important for the state to gain effective control and oversight over informal alcohol production and distribution. Licensing and inspection of production, whether it be a matter of cottage, of small factory or of full-scale industrial production, is an important means of eliminating adulterants (Rehm et al., 2003b).

Although more expensive, there is indication that industrially produced beverages, particularly lager-style beer, are gaining popularity in many developing countries, due perhaps to issues of prestige attached to international brands and increasing marketing efforts by multinational alcohol beverage companies (Babor et al., 2003).

It would seem that there may be health benefits from replacing cottage-produced with industrially-produced alcohol in terms of the purity of the product. However, these benefits should also be empirically verified, since they can easily be overstated (Room et al., 2002). On the other hand, it could be speculated that traditionally produced alcoholic beverages may potentially carry the benefits of having a lower alcohol content, providing local employment opportunities and preserving values of the local culture (which may or may not promote lower levels of alcohol consumption).

The following case examples present some information regarding local and traditional alcoholic beverages in selected countries. As mentioned earlier, there exists a wide range of beverages - what is interesting to note here is the social context in which these beverages are produced and consumed in different parts of the world.

**Case example 1: India**

Country liquor is a distilled alcoholic beverage made from locally available cheap raw material such as sugar-cane, rice, palm, coconut and cheap grains, with an alcohol content between 25% and 45%. Common varieties of country liquor are arrack (from paddy or wheat), desi sharab and tari. Illicit liquor is mostly produced clandestinely in small production units with raw materials similar to that used for country liquor. With no legal quality control checks on them, alcohol concentration of illicit liquor varies (up to 56%). Adulteration is quite frequent, industrial methylated spirit being a common adulterant, which occasionally causes incidents like mass poisoning with consumers losing their lives or suffering irreversible damage to the eyes. Cheaper than licensed country liquor, illicit liquor is popular among the poorer sections of the population. In many parts of India, illicit production of liquor and its marketing is a cottage industry with each village having one or two units operating illegally.

*Source:* Mohan et al. (2001)

**Case example 2: Venezuela**

Corn liquor is consumed by an indigenous tribe in Venezuela. Several times each year, especially during the corn harvest season, the trunk of a large tree would be hollowed out and filled with corn mash by an individual specially chosen by the community. The corn mash would be allowed to ferment to create an alcoholic beverage with a high enough alcohol content to cause intoxication after consumption of only two glasses or gourdfuls. When the corn liquor is ready, a village festival would be held in which all adults would drink to the point of falling down. Men would typically bring their bows and arrows and fight to settle grudges. Festivals would end after two or three days, when the corn liquor ran out. There were rarely individuals who consumed alcoholic beverages at times other than festival celebrations.

*Source:* Seale et al. (2002)
### Case example 3: Malaysia

In the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo, indigenous people traditionally drink a homemade rice wine called *tuak* or *tapai* in conjunction with harvest celebrations and social or communal gatherings. This rice wine is reportedly very potent. At such important functions, especially the harvest festival, which is of much significance for these agrarian folk, almost all are required to drink. Refusal by guests to partake of these drinks is a breach of etiquette. Such drinking is an integral part of the culture of these tribes.


### Case example 4: Uganda

*Tonto* is a traditional brew produced from juice obtained from special varieties of bananas. The common local banana varieties used in making *tonto* are *kisubi*, *ndizi*, *musa*, *kivuru*, *kabula* and *mbidde*. Another common name used for the brew in central Uganda is *mwenge bigere*. It is mostly consumed in central and western Uganda, where banana growing is a major agricultural activity, and in urban areas all around the country at social gatherings and in bars. In various parts of the country, it is a source of income for many families. The production of *tonto* is as follows: Green bananas are ripened for 3–5 days in a covered, previously warmed, pit lined with banana leaves to ensure uniform temperature. The juice is extracted from the ripe banana by squeezing, by a group of men using their feet after mixing with spear grass. The juice is then filtered through grass held in a calabash funnel and diluted with water in known ratios. Roasted and ground sorghum is added to the diluted banana juice in a canoe-shaped wood container. The fermentation broth is then covered with banana leaves and split banana stems in a warmed pit and incubated for 2–4 days. The alcohol content in *tonto* ranges between 6 and 11% v/v and is consumed from small gourds using straws.


### Case example 5: Botswana

*Bojalwa* (sorghum beer) and *khadi* are both home-brewed beer-like drinks that vary greatly in terms of taste, consistency and alcohol content depending on availability of ingredients and methods of fermentation. Indeed *khadi* could almost be described as a ‘designer alcohol’ often brewed to the consumer’s needs and tastes. It is made from a base or ‘mash’ that can consist of a combination of any of the following ingredients: wild berries, wild pumpkins, wild roots, oranges, sorghum and maize. Yeast, black tobacco or other unspecified substances are sometimes added to this base to give it ‘strength’, and there have been rumours around Ghanzi of car battery acid also being added.


### Case example 6: Ethiopia

*Talla* is an Ethiopian home-brewed beer which differs from the others in some respects. First it is brewed with barley or wheat, hops, or spices. Secondly, it has a smoky flavour due to the addition of bread darkened by baking and use of a fermentation vessel which has been smoked by inversion over smoldering wood. *Talla* is not processed under government regulations hence the alcohol content varies but is usually around 2% to 4%. Filtered *tella* has a higher alcohol content ranging from 5% to 6%.

Case example 7: Egypt

_Bouza_ (traditional beer) is a fermented alcoholic beverage produced from wheat in Egypt, and has been known by the Egyptians since the days of the Pharaohs. It is a thick, pasty yellow beverage and produces a sensation of heat when consumed. Like other opaque beers, _bouza_ has a very short shelf life and is expected to be consumed within a day. It has an alcoholic content of between 3.8% and 4.2%.

(Source: Haard (1999))

Case example 8: Ghana

_Pito_ (local brew made from millet) is widely consumed in Ghana. The brewing of _pito_ is traditionally associated with the people in the northern part of the country, but migration has led to its production throughout the country. The industry is mostly controlled by women between the ages of 18 and 67 years old. _Pito_ is golden yellow to dark brown in colour with taste varying from slightly sweet to very sour. It contains lactic acid, sugars, amino acids, 2% to 3% alcohol and some vitamins and proteins. There are four types of _pito_ in Ghana – _nandom, kokomba, togo_ and _dagarti_. The peculiar characteristics of each lies in the differences in their wort extraction and fermentation methods.

(Source: Akyeampong (1995); Sefa-Dedeh (1999))

Case example 9: Kenya

_Muratina_ is an alcoholic drink made from sugar-cane and muratina fruit in Kenya. The fruit is cut in half, sun-dried and boiled in water. The water is removed and the fruit sun-dried again. The fruit is added to a small amount of sugar-cane juice and incubated in a warm place. The fruit is removed from the juice after 24 hours and sun-dried. The fruit is now added to a barrel of sugar-cane juice which is allowed to ferment for between one and four days. The final product has a sour alcoholic taste.

(Source: The Schumacher Centre for Technology & Development (2004))

Case example 10: United Republic of Tanzania

A study that collected and analysed 15 homemade but commercially available alcoholic beverages in Dar es Salaam found that ethanol concentrations of the brewed samples ranged from 2.2 to 8.5% w/v whilst the two distilled samples contained 24.2% and 29.3% ethanol w/v. Aflatoxin B1 was found in nine brewed beverages, suggesting the use of contaminated grains or fruit for their production. The amount of zinc in four samples was double the World Health Organization recommended maximum for drinking water (5 mg/litre). One brewed beverage contained toxic amounts of manganese (12.8 mg/litre). Both distilled spirits were rich in fusel alcohols and one was fortified by caffeine. The results suggested that impurities and contaminants possibly associated with severe health risks, including carcinogens, are often found in traditional alcoholic beverages. Continuous daily drinking of these beverages is certain to increase health risks.

(Source: Nikander et al. (1991))