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Research in Social Change

BREWING INDIGENISATION, FILTERING WESTERNISATION: A SOCIO-HISTORICAL STUDY OF LOCALLY BREWED ALCOHOLIC DRINKS IN BHUTAN

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Abstract

Amongst the various indigenous societies across the planet, alcohol has always played a pivotal role in shaping and preserving different forms of social, cultural, communal, personal, and familial values in an inter-generational and transcultural manner. With the advent of European colonisation, over different segments of time and space across the globe, this community practice was disrupted and dismantled as unmodern, unhygienic, non-civilising, and dehumanising. However, such community practices in Bhutan remained unaffected till the beginning of the 21st century. In 2007, with the establishment of a democratic governing system, as Bhutan started welcoming foreign investors, the West (Europe and USA) invaded the local markets of Bhutan. Gradually, the individuals were attracted towards the western-branded alcoholic drinks and the consumption of the locally brewed alcoholic drinks started declining. Keeping these arguments at the forefront, this article makes an effort to socio-historically analyse the various ways through which the culture of brewing, consuming, and sharing the locally brewed alcoholic drinks functions as a tool to resist the westernisation of the culture of drinking in contemporary Bhutan.

Keywords

alcohol • indigenous communities • European colonisers • capitalistic narratives • westernisation

1. Introduction: A Journey Towards Collaborations and Co-creation

Let me initiate the discussions in this article by performing *serkem* for the wellbeing of our forefathers, foremothers, elders, and younger ones from all the knowledge constellations and all the generations across the planet Earth. I have initiated this article by performing this spiritual practice because, according to the traditional Tantric Buddhist culture of Bhutan, every form of discourse should be initiated with a spiritual offering in order to ensure the wellbeing of knowledge production. *Serkem* is a traditional Buddhist spiritual practice of Bhutan in which alcohol is offered to a deity. After the deity is offered alcohol, it is shared amongst the individuals. As the men and women sit in a circle and get ready to consume their respective bowls of alcohol,¹ someone from the group starts entertaining the crowd with folk tales and folk songs that were once narrated to them by their foremothers and forefathers. Usually, the alcohol is expected to be locally brewed. Before performing *serkem* in a community, equal

amounts of alcohol are collected from every household. So, after offering *serkem*, I would like to narrate a couple of folk tales, which uphold the spiritual values of brewing, consuming, and sharing alcohol in Bhutan. The tales are centred on Ap Khyung bdud (also known as Ap Chhundu) – a mountain deity of Bhutan. The residents of Bhutan revere and worship Khyung bdud as a protective figure and an alcohol lover. According to Francoise Pommaret:

One story goes that the *Zhabs drung*² Ngag dbang mam rnyal sent both Ap Khyung bdud and Ap dge bsnyen, the protective deities of bde chen phug, to the world of demons to bring back a particular fire. Ap Khyung bdud managed to obtain the fire but on his way back he was overcome by the desire to accept the alcohol offerings of some yak herders. While he was drunk, AP dge bsnyen,

¹ Traditionally, instead in a glass and/or cup, alcohol (especially locally brewed ones) is consumed in a stone/wooden/brass bowl.

² It is an honorary title, which is used to refer to the great *lamas* (Buddhist monks) of Tibet, especially those who held a hereditary lineage.

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took the fire and brought it to the *Zhabs drung*, telling him that Ap Khyung bdud has failed because he preferred to get drunk instead. The *Zhabs drung* was so upset that he took the *gt or ma*³ representing Khyung bdud and threw it away. When Ap Khyung bdud returned later and explained what had really happened, the *Zhabs drung* pardoned him and ordered that the people of Haa⁴ offer a special prayer to him, the *Lha grol lu bsten srol*.⁵ (1994, 49)

The second story is also about Ap Khyung bdud. He had a lake over the valley of Haa from which he wanted to irrigate the paddy fields of Haa. But, Jo bo Brag skyes, who is regarded as the mountain deity and the protector of Paro, tricked Khyung bdud by offering him alcohol. Taking advantage of Khyung bdud's drunken stupor Brag skyes diverted the water from the valley of Haa towards the fields of Paro. When Khyung bdud came back to his senses, he got extremely annoyed that the direction of water had been diverted to Paro. He also threatened Brag skyes that he will overturn the lake and change the direction of the water. This made Jo bo Brag skyes afraid and he pleaded Khyung bdud to forgive him, and in return, he assured that every year the people of Paro will travel to Haa to offer him prayers for the water. Since then, it has become an annual Buddhist ritual, which is conducted on the 15th day of the 11th Bhutanese month every year.

These two stories unpack the various social, cultural, and religious dimensions of consuming locally brewed alcohol in the traditional society of Bhutan. On the one side, it creates misunderstandings, conflicts, and ego clashes, and on the other side, it generates spiritual ethics and values amongst the individuals. In 2016, it was *ara*, a locally brewed alcohol of Bhutan, that enabled a 48-year old woman from the village of Lhuentse to overcome the curse of being a poison giver. Chencho Dema in her article 'Tales of How the King of Bhutan Drank Ara from the Hands of Poison Givers to Dispel Superstitions' (2018) states: 'To dispel any superstition surrounding Tsheringmo, the king drank ara (local brew) from her hands and declared that she was not a poison giver'. In the article 'Amazing Stories from the Eastern Part of Bhutan' (2020) Tshering Denkar mentions: 'The people of the East are known as "Sharchopas". Sharchopas drink locally brewed alcohol called "Bangchang" instead of morning tea. During special occasions and festivals, most people drink alcohol instead of traditionally served rice porridge. Decades ago, there were stories that parents would feed their baby a sip of alcohol so that the baby would fall asleep and that the parents would have ample time to work at the field'. As

mentioned by Denkar in his article, keeping in consideration the various health problems that these practices have triggered, the different socio-historical contributions of the locally brewed alcoholic drinks to the indigenous communities cannot be denied. Before we probe further into the social, religious, and historical origin of the locally brewed liquors in Bhutan, let us briefly reflect on the socio-cultural importance of brewing, sharing, and consuming alcohol amongst the various indigenous communities across the globe. In the article 'Alcohol and Culture' (1965) David G. Mandelbaum argues that 'it [alcohol] was anciently the most widespread in use, the most widely valued as a ritual and societal artefact, the most deeply embedded in diverse cultures. Tribal peoples of all major parts of the world knew alcoholic drink; it was of considerable interest in the principal civilisations, in most of them from their early beginnings onwards' (281).

But, with the inception of European colonisation across different moments of time and space, the indigenous practices of consuming and sharing locally brewed alcoholic drinks were strictly forbidden. Their act of forbiddance was underpinned with the sole intention of disrupting this de-hierarchical, pluriversal, collective and co-creative indigenous socio-cultural practice and appropriates the white-European-colonial-Christian-centric ideologies of the Old Testament (Snipe 2001). Through seduction as well as coercion, as the Christian missionaries proselytised the various indigenous communities across the globe, they identified the consumption of locally brewed alcohol, especially on different socio-religious occasions, as unreligious, unethical, and unhealthy. As a result, they imposed a strict ban on the consumption of locally brewed alcohol. But, ironically, with the arrival of the European traders, alcohol was used as a 'chemical weapon of warfare in their genocidal and ethnic cleansing mistreatment and exploitation of indigenous peoples' (Dahlheimer 2009). In fact, in some Native American communities alcohol was exclusively introduced by the European traders. In 'What's Behind the Myth of Native American Colonialism?' (2016), Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz and Dina Gilio-Whitaker argue: 'Europeans introduced alcohol to American Indians as an instrument of trade and diplomacy. By the time the Great Plains was being settled by Europeans, virtually all treaty negotiations included complex and subtle uses of alcohol, and alcohol even became a bargaining chip'. This process of control took place by forcing the natives to stop brewing their traditional forms of alcohol on the one side and by introducing European alcoholic drinks on the other. The adverse impact of introducing European alcoholic drinks at the cost of locally brewed alcoholic drinks at the time of European colonisation is experienced even today. This act not only killed a set of indigenous social, cultural, and religious practices but also systematically, epistemically, and ontologically uprooted the rich constellation of depolarised plural knowledge systems (De Sousa Santos 2008, 249) that were once imbibed by the

3 In the Tibetan language, this term is used to refer to a holy vessel in Buddhism.

4 Haa is a valley, which is situated in the west of Bhutan bordering Sikkim.

5 A type of prayer in Tibetan language, which stands for repentance and forgiveness.

indigenous communities from their respective foremothers and forefathers. This is why, in the contemporary era, through various pseudo-logical narratives of religion, society, culture, and medical sciences, European and American brands of alcoholic drinks are promoted as superior (in terms of quality, health, and socio-economic values) than the locally brewed branded and non-branded alcoholic drinks. It is due to the same reasons that western-branded alcoholic drinks are gradually replacing the culture of brewing, consuming, and sharing the locally brewed alcoholic drinks in contemporary Bhutan. This act of replacement is negatively impacting the locals in a social, cultural, and economic manner. These aspects will be elaborately discussed in the later part of this article.

This article has been divided into four sections. The first section, titled 'Introduction: a journey towards collaborations and co-creation', sets the thematic and the theoretical tone of this article in a story-telling manner. To bring forth the various collaborative and co-creative socio-religious practices of the local Bhutanese that centre on the production and consumption of local alcohol, this section starts with a couple of folk tales. Both the tales are based on the consumption of alcohol by Ap Khyung bdud. Besides these folk tales, the section also briefly talks about some of the socio-religious rituals of consuming locally brewed alcohol amongst several indigenous communities across the globe and how these rituals were disrupted by the European colonisers.

The second section, titled "*Jinlab*: a socio-cultural history of locally brewed alcohol," begins with the social, cultural, and religious origins of the consumption of locally brewed alcoholic drinks in Bhutan. It also talks about the different ways through which locally brewed alcohol contributes towards building community relationship and performing religious rituals in the contemporary era.

The third section, titled '*Dewa*: brewing indigenisation and filtering westernisation', talks about how modernity in contemporary Bhutan, through brewing, consuming, and sharing local alcoholic drinks like *ara*, *bangchang*, *singchang*, etc., is trying to preserve the indigenous social, cultural, and religious practices on the one side and resist the invasion of Euro-North American/colonial cultural influences on the other. The section also unfurls the various social, cultural, medical, and legal challenges that the country is experiencing in the process and the various possibilities to overcome them.

The final section, titled 'Conclusion', summarises the theoretical and the thematic findings of this article.

2. Research Questions

This article is underlined by the following research questions:

(1) What are the cultural and spiritual significance of locally brewed alcoholic drinks in Bhutan?

(2) Which alcoholic drinks (locally brewed or western branded) are preferred by the consumers in Bhutan and why?

3. Research Methodology

The research methodology that has been used for this article is qualitative research methodology. As a part of the qualitative research methodology the research methods that have been used are personal conversations and critical diversity literacy. Personal conversation is a form of research method where the researchers and the participants engage in conversation with each other about diverse topics and the conversations are documented with due permission from the participants. In the context of this article, as the article was written during my tenure at the Yonphula Centenary College, the research participants of my article were the villagers in Yonphula and other parts of East Bhutan. The participants were chosen on the basis of their interest to participate and therefore no specific gender dynamics could be maintained. Altogether, 12 participants (7 male and 5 female participants between 18 years and 40 years old) participated in the conversations and they were asked the following question: according to you, which alcoholic drinks are better – western-branded alcoholic drinks or locally brewed alcoholic drinks?

The interview was conducted in person and the responses were hand-written and recorded. After the responses to the abovementioned questions were received, they were thematically sampled through using the thematic network analysis. The responses were divided into two thematic groups – participants in favour of locally brewed alcoholic drinks and participants in favour of western-branded alcoholic drinks. Out of the twelve participants, eight responded in favour of western-branded alcoholic drinks and four participants responded in favour of locally brewed alcoholic drinks. In order to maintain the anonymity of the participants, the participants have been named A, B, C, D, etc. The interviews were conducted in English and Hindi languages. The interviews in Hindi were translated into English by the author. The transcripts have been personally archived by the author and the author is happy to share it with scholars at any point of time. Selected excerpts from the interviews in a consolidated manner are documented in the following Table 1. The responses of the interviewees reveal that a majority (eight) of the respondents are in favour of consuming western-branded alcoholic drinks. Out of the eight interviewees, who have spoken in favour of western-branded alcoholic drinks, five interviewees believed that the western-branded alcoholic drinks are healthier and more hygienic than the locally brewed alcoholic drinks. The rest of the three interviewees believe that the consumption of western-branded alcoholic drinks gives them a high-status identity in the society. The four respondents, who have voiced in favour of consuming

Table 1. Questions and responses.^a

Name of participants (concealed)	Age and gender	Consolidated responses for the question: According to you, which alcoholic drinks are better – western-branded alcoholic drinks or locally brewed alcoholic drinks?
A	37 years old female	'Western based alcoholic drinks because they are smooth and made in a healthier way'.
B	25 years old male	'Western based alcoholic drinks because they do not smell as bad as locally brewed alcoholic drinks'.
C	30 years old female	'Locally brewed alcoholic drinks because they have rich spiritual values in Bhutanese life'.
D	20 years old female	'Locally brewed alcoholic drinks because they are made naturally, unlike the western based alcoholic drinks'.
E	22 years old male	'Western alcoholic drinks because they are from Europe and America, so they ought to be better than those from Bhutan'.
F	40 years old male	'Western based alcoholic drinks because I think they are made by smart people'.
G	40 years old female	'Locally brewed alcoholic drinks because they are a part of our spiritual culture. It can never be bad in any ways'.
H	32 years old female	'Locally brewed alcoholic drinks because they are made from natural grains'.
I	19 years old male	'Western based alcoholic drinks because they are drunk by rich and smart people'.
J	22 years old male	Same as above
K	35 years old female	Same as above
L	29 years old male	'Western based alcoholic drinks because they are packaged and brewed in a healthy way'.

^aParticipants A–L, in-person interview by the author, May 28, 2022.

locally brewed alcoholic drinks, shared that the consumption of locally brewed alcoholic drinks is a way of preserving ancestral cultural traditions and are healthier than western-branded alcoholic drinks because they are prepared with natural grains. Though the consumption of both western-branded alcoholic drinks and locally brewed alcoholic drinks is harmful, the preference of western-branded alcoholic drinks over locally brewed alcoholic drinks maps the historical and cultural shifts that Bhutan has undergone with time and how the cultural rituals that are centred on the locally brewed alcoholic drinks are under threat. Based on the responses, the following sections of the article socio-historically trace the spiritual and cultural significance of the locally brewed alcoholic drinks in Bhutan and how the native cultural practices around locally brewed alcoholic drinks can be maintained without violating any health protocols.

Besides personal conversation, the method of critical diversity literacy also contributed towards the development of this article. The critical diversity method notes how the world is a socially, culturally, and politically complex and entangled space where 'differences of many varieties increasingly co-exist' (Steyn 2015, 279). The critical diversity method in this article has been applied through a detailed historical analysis of the diverse spiritual and cultural circumstances in which locally brewed alcoholic drinks are consumed. The differences in preferences (locally brewed alcoholic drinks and western-branded alcoholic drinks) of alcohol unpack the simultaneous co-existence and conflict between various consumption patterns on the one side, and the decadence of native cultural

practices due to the blind adaptation of Euromodern cultural practices on the other. The application of critical diversity method can also be understood through the analysis of the consumption and other usages of locally brewed alcoholic drinks in Bhutan from the diverse disciplinary perspectives of sociology, history, anthropology and postcolonial studies.

3.1. Originality of the work

This research work is original in the sense that no research articles have been written on the locally brewed alcoholic drinks of Bhutan from such diverse disciplinary perspectives. The articles on the locally brewed alcoholic drinks of Bhutan that have been written so far mainly focus on the commercial perspectives, and a very few focus on the historical and spiritual dimensions.

3.2. *Jinlab*: a socio-cultural history of locally brewed alcoholic drinks

Etymologically, the English word alcohol is believed to have originated from the Arabic word *al-kuhul*. *Al-kuhul* is referred to as a 'fine black powder used as a dark eye-colouring cosmetic' (Troy 2016). Apart from various social, cultural, and religious purposes, *al-kuhul* is applied by men and women on their eyes for the sake of beautification. Through the application of *al-kuhul*, it is believed that individuals experience eternal sublimity. On an identical note, in Bhutan, it is believed that the consumption of locally brewed alcohol generates experiences of eternal sublimity. In other words, it creates socio-cultural excellence and unparalleled happiness, which the Bhutanese identify as

a form of *jinlab*. In the Chokey⁶ language, *jinlab* means spiritual blessings. The article 'Jinlab or Blessings' (2016) mentions that '*jin* refers to power, magnificence or splendour, and *lab* to waves and ripples. *Jinlab* is thus the waves, billows, or ripples of power and magnificence, which emit from a sacred agent such as a person, object, or event, and affect others. Put loosely, it is the scared vibes of a powerful person, object or event picked up by others who encounter them' [(my emphasis) Staff Reporter]. Consequently, the article 'Arak Culture: An Intangible Cultural Heritage of Bhutan' (2005) philosophises that *ara* (a form of locally brewed alcohol) is an intangible cultural heritage of Bhutan (Namgyel, 420–1), and its origin is usually understood from a 'religious-historical perspective' (Dorji 2011, 10).

One of the stories reveals that the religious origin of alcohol in Bhutan took place through Lha⁷ Wangpo Tsangpa Jajjin, who used alcohol to 'heal the wounded gods during a war against demi-gods' (Thinley cited in Namgyel 2005, 362). Lha Wangpo offered gods the alcohol in a vase of *duets*⁸ and the *duetsi* was found in a vast ocean. In this way, the act of offering *ara* in a vase of *duetsi* became an integral part of Buddhist rituals. Another story says that when the earth was formed the ocean rose and rolled up with black poisons. At that time, the longevity nectar (*chimed duetsi*) originated from the moon. The god and goddesses rushed for this nectar; the former acquired the substance. It is believed that the present-day yeast originated from this nectar (Gyeltshen 1999, 205). While preparing alcoholic drinks, yeast is used to ferment the rice, wheat, maize, and millets. It is believed that the usage of yeast for fermentation ensures 'longevity of life' (Dorji 2011, 10).

In ancient Bhutan,⁹ at the time of worshipping, alcohol was habitually offered to the local deities. The local Bon priests¹⁰ and the shamans¹¹ used alcoholic drinks as a potential medium to develop contacts with the 'supernatural powers and pronounce the oracles of gods' (Dorji, 11). In *The Life and Revelations of Pema Lingpa* (2003) Sarah Harding discusses the offering of alcohol 'during Guru Padmasambhava's epoch' (87). She says: 'In Samye Chimphu (Tibet), Princess Trompas Gyen and twenty-one ladies prayed to Guru to initiate them. She offered the Guru her mother's jewelled goblet (with lotus design) to be filled with grape wine' (88). In Tantric Buddhism, alcoholic drinks are offered by ladies and/or 'potential yoginis' (Dorji, 11) to the lamas as this

act is regarded as a form of 'ritualistic intercourse – a tantric union of male and female polarities. This is undertaken with a vow of purity to become useful to a *yogin*'¹² (Houston 2008, 84). In the Mahayana sect of Buddhism, *chang* (fermented liquor) is regarded as eternal nectar. Amongst the tantric Buddhists alcohol is regarded as a source of *sherab* (wisdom) and *jinlab*. Though it is usually said that the socio-religious culture of offering and drinking locally brewed alcohol is a part of eastern and central Bhutan, this cultural practice is vibrantly found in western Bhutan as well. Historical records reveal that Lama Choje Rinpoche Drukpa Kuenley was so impressed by the culture of offering *chang* to a guest that he visited western Bhutan several times (Thinley cited in Namgyel 2005, 124).

The following table (Table 2) outlines the various categories of locally brewed alcoholic drinks and their social, cultural, and religious usages.

The table reveals a variety of drinks that are consumed in different social, cultural, and religious contexts. Not all the varieties of drinks that have been mentioned in the table need to be different from each other. Most of these drinks are the same and they are just referred to with different names on different occasions. There is hardly any written document that talks about the brewing processes. A few audio-visual documents exist that talk about the brewing processes in a general manner.

The social, cultural, and religious significances of alcohol regulate human relationships and widely impact expressions of respect towards each other. It also develops emotional bonding. In the article 'Alcohol use, human capital and wages' (2005) Jeremy Bray argues that moderate use of alcohol has a 'positive effect' (279) on the society as it helps in building strong community relationships. In traditional Bhutanese societies, locally brewed alcoholic drinks are regularly shared during occasions of meetings and departures. The monograph *Alcohol Use and Abuse in Bhutan* (2011) makes a note of the various social and emotional impacts of consuming locally brewed alcoholic drinks as follows:

Alcohol serves as a consolatory treat during bereavement, as part of the relaxed ambience and pleasant sensation during festivities, a source of hospitality, and as a reconciliatory agent during disputes. Festivals and other important social events are organised with alcohol as a central enhancement substance. The tradition of offering *tshogchang* to official guests as a welcome gesture is an example of the social function of alcohol. It symbolises respect to the visitors and communal proclivity towards opulent hospitality. (Dorji, 14)

The farmers consume alcohol because they believe that after a hard day's toil it gives them mental peace and energy.

6 Like Dzongkha, Chokey is also a native language of Bhutan.

7 In the Dzongkha language, the term *Lha* refers to a mark of respect to gods and spiritually rich persons (like lamas). Here, Wangpo Tsangpa Jajjin is a lama who is renowned for healing individuals physically as well as spiritually.

8 *Duetsi* is like an elixir.

9 Here ancient Bhutan refers to the pre-modern era when monastic education was the only way of teaching and learning.

10 The Bon priests belong to the 'Bon' religion, which is regarded as a Tibetan form of Buddhism.

11 Shamans are priests who are believed to have the power to interact with the spirit through an altered state of consciousness.

12 This term is used to denote a practitioner of yoga and meditations.

Table 2. Categories of alcoholic drinks in Bhutan and their usages.

Types of alcohol	Usages
<i>Serkem chang</i>	It is offered to local deities.
<i>Tor chang</i>	It is drunk while making ritual cakes.
<i>Deutsi chang</i>	It is offered during various religious ceremonies.
<i>Sangdze chang</i>	It is used as an ingredient for offering incense to the deities.
<i>Jinsek chang</i>	It is used as an ingredient to ward off evils.
<i>Yang chang</i>	It is specifically brewed for the god of wealth.
<i>Ngo chang</i>	It is offered to the dead.
<i>Tsan chang</i>	It is offered to the local deity.
<i>Tshe chang</i>	It is offered and drunk while performing rituals for long life.
<i>Khando chang</i>	This drink is related to individual astrology.
<i>Tshog chang</i>	This drink is offered to visitors and it is very popular in the eastern parts of Bhutan.
<i>Dueng chang</i>	Amongst the pastoral communities of Bhutan, this drink is offered to welcome guests.
<i>Tengkor chang</i>	It is offered for reciprocity and fellow feeling.
<i>Tsug chang</i>	It is offered at the beginning of important work.
<i>Bar chang</i>	It is offered in the middle of any work.
<i>To chang</i>	Drinks that are served before a meal.
<i>Zhe chang</i>	Drinks that are served after a meal.
<i>Branpa chang</i>	Drinks are that are served as an acknowledgement for free labour services.
<i>Nar chang</i>	Drinks that are offered as a request for labour help.
<i>Suwa chang</i>	These drinks are offered to receive guests during marriages and other social gatherings.
<i>Dong chang</i>	It is offered as an arrival drink.
<i>Log chang</i>	Like <i>tengkor chang</i> , it is also offered to express reciprocity and fellow feeling.
<i>Zim chang</i>	It is usually consumed during the night-time.
<i>Lam chang</i>	It is consumed while travelling.

Alcohol is also used as a spiritual object to drive out evils, as a medicinal cure for several illnesses, and as a weapon to keep the snakes away. In the article 'The Myth behind Alcohol Happiness' (2007) Chencho Dorji reveals that 'a Bhutanese is introduced to alcohol soon after his or her birth. Starting with the celebration of a newborn a special homemade rice-based fermented drink called *chhangkhoy* is served to entertain well-wishers and to nourish and sedate the mother' (66). As the process of childbirth is physically and emotionally stressful, many mothers are given a little amount of alcohol for relaxation.

In many Bhutanese villages, children start drinking at an early age, and in traditional Bhutanese society, it is not regarded as taboo. Usually, the alcohol-based drink that they consume is the 'fermented rice-based *chhangkhoy* or diluted wheat or maize wine as a beverage with meals' (Dorji 2007, 66). But, today, consumption of alcohol by children is strictly prohibited by the health advisors and the government of Bhutan. Several legal restrictions have also been imposed against the consumption of alcohol by children in Bhutan. In the article 'Alcohol policy compliance among retailers in Bhutan' (2021), Tshewang Gyeltshen et al. mention that every alcohol retail

store in Bhutan has to strictly adhere by the legal norms of not selling alcohol to any individual, who are below the age of 18. In case the alcohol retail shops are found guilty of violating the rules, then their licence to sell alcohol is suspended and they are subjected to severe punishments (6–8). Besides the retail shops, in case any household is found guilty of allowing/encouraging children to consume any form of alcohol, then every elderly member of the family (above 18 years of age) will be prosecuted.

However, while playing archery and *khuru*,¹³ consumption of alcoholic drinks is allowed because it is believed that drinking boosts the confidence of the players and makes them enthusiastic and happy. Locally brewed alcoholic drinks are also widely consumed during occasions like marriages, birthday parties, and anniversary celebrations. These contextual instances of consuming locally brewed alcohol unveil the social, cultural, and religious values of consuming alcohol on the one side and the urge to preserve the indigenous richness of traditional Bhutanese cultures on the other. The following section will take these discussions further by analysing the multiple ways

¹³ A traditional Bhutanese sport, which involves throwing of darts.

through which the practice of brewing, consuming, and sharing local alcoholic drinks is enabling the Bhutanese to resist the invasion of Euro-North American/colonial socio-economic cults and ethics.

4. Dewa: Brewing Indigenisation and Filtering Westernisation

Before we try to understand the various ways through which locally brewed alcoholic drinks are allowing Bhutan to socially, culturally, religiously, and economically combat the western (Europe and North America) designs of capitalism/colonialism, it is important for us to briefly analyse the culture of brewing and consuming various forms of alcoholic beverages amongst the different indigenous communities in South Asia. So, let us look into some of the traditional alcoholic beverages that are consumed across India in the contemporary era and their contexts of use. Since time immemorial, varieties of locally brewed alcoholic drinks are consumed in North East India. Jyoti Prakash Tamang in his article 'Diversity of fermented beverages and alcoholic drinks' (2010) notes that 'more than 250 types of ethnic fermented food and alcoholic beverages are produced and consumed in North East India' (98). For instance, the preparation and consumption of rice beers are very common among the indigenous tribal communities of North East India (Ghosh and Das 2004, 378). For the *Dimasas* ethnic group, who mostly reside in the Sikkim Himalayas, *Judima* is an integral part of their life. The article 'Indigenous technology for food processing by the tribes of Dima Masao (North Cachar Hills) district of Assam for social security' (2013) outlines: 'During religious festivals, freshly prepared *judima* is offered to the family gods and goddesses. During birth, a drop of *judima* is administered to the lips of the new born baby to protect from any evil force. *Judima* is essential to solemnise marriage ceremonies. Traditionally, the newly wedded bride visits her parents' house once in a year, and when she returns to her husband's house she carries *judima*' (Chakravarty, Sharma, and Tamang 2013, 38).

Besides North East India and the Sikkim Himalayas, varied forms of alcoholic drinks are consumed in the South Asian regions, like rice wine, cereal wine, palm wine, flower-based wine, and fruit wines combined with jaggery (Thakur, Savitri, and Bhalla 2004, 330). In India, Nepal, and Indonesia several alcoholic beverages are consumed as starters during lunch and/or dinner. Some of the alcoholic starters that are prepared from varieties of plants and cereals are as follows:

a. *Ragi*: It is an ethnic starter that is highly common in Indonesia. It is made from rice, millets, cassava, or any other starch-based cereal. A starch-based cereal is powdered and then it is mixed with different types of herbs and spices. After the mixing is thoroughly done, the mixture

is roasted and then mixed with water. Then, the watery mixture is thickened with *ragi*¹⁴ powder, shaped into balls, and fermented at 25°C–30°C for 72 h. The fermented balls are sun-dried and then they are used to prepare alcoholic beverages, which are consumed as a starter (Saono et al. 1974, 190–5).

- b. *Mana*: This alcoholic starter is consumed by the various ethnic communities in Nepal and is prepared from wheat grains. After soaking wheat grains in water overnight, they are steamed for half an hour, shifted to a bamboo basket, drained, and converted into a lump. The lump is covered with a straw mat or paddy straws, fermented for seven days, and then dried in the sun. After it is thoroughly dried, the lump with green moulds is preserved to prepare *mana* (Tamang 2010, 112).
- c. *Ghanti*: It is a jaggery-based alcoholic drink, which is widely consumed before a meal in Himachal Pradesh. According to Ayurvedic sciences, the consumption of *ghanti* before lunch and/or dinner enhances the digestion process and gives strength. It also improves appetite (Sekar 2007, 146).
- d. *Jann*: It is a fruit-based alcoholic starter and is commonly consumed by the Naga tribes. It is prepared from fruits like orange, apple, pumpkin, banana, and cane sugar. Before fermentation, cane sugar is used to increase the sugar content of the wine. While preparing the *jann* with apples, the latter is chopped into pieces and then mixed with a fermenting medium known as *balam* powder. If the *jann* is prepared with bananas, then the bananas are mixed with *balam* without removing the skin. The process of preparing the *jann* with pumpkins is quite elaborate. A small hole is made in a large-sized pumpkin and then the seeds and the loose tissues are removed. After the removal of seeds and long tissues, boiled rice is mixed with water and *balam* powder. This is poured inside and the hole is re-sealed. Fermentation takes place inside the pumpkin and gradually the formation of *jann* takes place (Roy et al. 2004, 47).

Despite the high consumption of western (Europe and North America) brands of alcoholic drinks, these indigenous communities have successfully countered the influence of western-branded alcoholic drinks. This resistance has not only enabled them to remain connected to their social, cultural, geographical, economic, communal, and religious roots but also helped them to successfully evade the toxic forces of 'modernity/rationality' (Quijano 2007, 169). Through brewing various types of local alcoholic drinks, Bhutan also makes an effort to resist the influence of western-branded alcoholic beverages and widely the encroachment of the metaphysical empires of capitalism in an identical manner. Concerning metaphysical

¹⁴ Here the word *ragi* refers to a kind of millet. In other parts of the paragraph, the word *ragi* refers to the name of the alcoholic beverage, which is consumed as a starter in different parts of Indonesia.

colonial empires, Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni says that 'if you remove colonialism without removing it epistemically, it will not disappear' (2020). Through the introduction of western-branded alcoholic drinks, many commercial organisations in Bhutan have been making an effort to perform 'a double cultural decapitation' (wa Thiong'o 2009, 64) in Bhutan by trying to disengage the Bhutanese from their indigenous social, cultural, religious and economic practices on the one side and by trying to uproot their traditional systems of knowledge on the other. These forms of double cultural decapitation ultimately lead to 'mnemonic decapitation' (Zerubavel 2004, 84). As mnemonic decapitation takes place, it becomes easy for the metaphysical empire of capitalism to perform various forms of 'epistemicides',¹⁵ 'linguicides'¹⁶ and 'culturecides'¹⁷, (wa Thiong'o 1986, 54). So, to resist the modern/colonial designs of western capitalism, Bhutan has been making efforts to develop an indigenous form of modernity that is directed towards *dewa* or eternal happiness. *Dewa* cannot be achieved solely through materialistic happiness. Spiritual happiness also plays a crucial role. To experience spiritual happiness, it is important to conserve and practice the indigenous systems of knowledge. The culture of brewing, consuming, and sharing alcoholic drinks in Bhutan widely contributes towards the practice of indigenous knowledge and generates spiritual happiness. According to Karma Ura: 'Wealth (*gorpa*) is necessary but only to the degree that it helps attain freedom from want and allows people to pursue fulfilling activities and avoid inflated expectations damaging to their true happiness. Accumulation of wealth (*gorpa*) appears hollow if all of human effort is concentrated in its pursuit, leaving little freedom and happiness' (2005, 2). This practice of development as a pursuit for eternal freedom and happiness, through the consumption of locally brewed alcoholic drinks, is underpinned with multiple forms of challenges as well as opportunities.

4.1. Challenges

In the process of preserving the indigenous social, cultural, religious, and economic traditions through the production and consumption of local alcoholic drinks, some of the challenges that contemporary Bhutan is facing are as follows:

- a. Health Issues and Marketing Strategies: The over-consumption of alcoholic drinks has been triggering several health issues across Bhutan and this has been a major point of concern to date (Dorji 2011, 46–51; Royal Government of Bhutan 2019, 9). In 2019, the 5-year report (2013–2018) of *The National Policy and Strategic Framework to*

Reduce Harmful Use of Alcohol has revealed that 'alcoholic liver disease was the leading cause of mortality in Bhutan from 2006 through 2010. There was a fourfold increase in admissions with alcohol dependence from 2004 to 2009 in the Jigme Dorji Wangchuck National Referral Hospital' (Royal Government of Bhutan 2019, 9). The four-fold increase has not only been caused by the locally brewed alcoholic drinks, but also by the over-consumption of western-branded alcoholic drinks. Then, why only the production and consumption of local alcoholic drinks are reducing and not the western-branded alcoholic drinks? The invasion of western-branded alcoholic drinks has injected a false notion amongst the sellers and the consumers in Bhutan that the locally brewed alcoholic drinks are causing more harm than the western-branded alcoholic drinks. Through a brief survey, which I have conducted in March 2020 (the questions and the responses of the participants in the form of a table are outlined in the research methodology section), it was found that many people believe in a false logic that the consumption of western-branded alcoholic drinks is more hygienic and healthier than the locally brewed alcoholic drinks. Moreover, a majority of the reasons (as outlined in the table in the research methodology section) are not underlined by any form of logic or reason.

Though the survey reveals that most of the individuals believe that western-branded alcoholic drinks are more hygienic and healthier and a few believe the opposite, both types of alcoholic drinks are equally harmful. In general, the high consumption of alcoholic drinks in Bhutan causes major health issues. So, the health dichotomies that have been created based on consuming western-branded alcoholic drinks and locally brewed alcoholic drinks are baseless. There exist no statistical records that justify that locally brewed alcoholic drinks are more harmful than western-branded alcoholic drinks. These imaginative narratives have been deliberately curated as a marketing strategy to build markets of western-branded alcoholic drinks in Bhutan and demobilise the market for local alcoholic drinks (Dorji 2007, 67).

- a. Social and Economic Challenges: These capitalistic acts of demobilisation are having a drastic impact on the social and economic conditions of contemporary Bhutan. The introduction and marketisation of western-branded alcoholic drinks are socio-culturally decapitating the locals on the one side and disrupting the traditional economic practice of producing and selling local alcoholic drinks on the other. According to surveys, which had been conducted by the National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan in 2003, 2007, and 2010, the consumption of locally brewed alcoholic drinks like *ara* and *bangchang* in 2003 and 2007 was much higher than that of the imported beers and wines. But, the 2010 survey report reveals that the highest-selling alcoholic drink was the imported beers and the sale of locally

¹⁵ Killing and replacing the indigenous systems of knowledge.

¹⁶ Killing and displacing the languages of the indigenous communities.

¹⁷ Killing and displacing various forms of indigenous cultures and traditions.

brewed alcoholic drinks was much lower as compared to that in 2003 and 2007 (Dorji 2011, 47–51). The report also documented that the production and consumption of local alcoholic drinks are gradually losing their pan-Bhutanese socio-cultural significance. At present, it is mostly produced and sold in the eastern parts of Bhutan (Dorji 2007, 74). Apart from creating various problematic narratives of medical sciences, the invasion of capitalism has also distorted the socio-cultural values of the indigenous society of Bhutan. During the survey in 2020, it was found that most of the participants not only believe that the western-branded alcoholic drinks are more hygienic and healthier than the locally brewed alcoholic drinks, but also believe that the consumption of western-branded alcoholic drinks makes them feel smart, modern, universally valuable and economically privileged. Many of the participants shared that the culture of consuming locally brewed alcohol appears to them as unsmart, unmodern, and a sign of economic backwardness. This westernised/colonised mindset is economically affecting those households whose income widely/exclusively depends on the production and sale of local alcoholic drinks.

A National Statistics Bureau survey report (2003–2010) on the import, production, and sale of different alcoholic drinks in Bhutan notes the alarming fall in the sale of locally brewed alcoholic drinks across Bhutan and the constant increase in the sale of western-branded alcoholic drinks that are imported as well as manufactured in the country (Dorji 2011, 39–40). These situations are compelling many households to give their indigenous economic practice of producing and selling local alcoholic drinks, which they have been practicing for several generations, and to look for other modes of economic sustenance.

4.2. Possibilities

Despite these social, cultural, and economic challenges, some of the possible initiatives, which have already been taken and which can be developed at the individual as well as at the organisational level, to preserve and promote the collective indigenous culture of producing, consuming, and sharing local alcoholic drinks in Bhutan, and to resist the westernisation of local Bhutanese cultures are as follows:

- a. Building theme-based cultural tourism: A major part of Bhutan's economy is dependent on the tourism sector. Therefore, the government consistently makes a consistent effort to uphold the indigenous social, cultural, religious, and economic traditions of Bhutan as prominently as possible. Apart from introducing the tourists (especially the European and the North American tourists) to various forms of indigenous arts, crafts, potteries, architectures, spices, and food items, tourist guides also invite the visitors to taste different varieties of locally brewed alcoholic drinks.
- b. Reducing the import of western-branded alcoholic drinks: Besides sharing the culture of consuming locally brewed alcoholic drinks with the tourists, due to various health and economic concerns, the government has also reduced the import of western-branded alcoholic drinks. Though restrictions have also been imposed on the production of local alcoholic drinks, it has enabled the households in Bhutan to increase their production and distribution across the country. Gradually, it is also allowing the indigenous communities to revive and diversify their traditional economic practices.
- c. Organisation of alcoholic beverage fests: Apart from the above-mentioned initiatives, which are already being implemented in Bhutan, the government, in collaboration with various cultural institutions across the country, can organise annual alcoholic beverage fests in the places that are frequently visited by tourists. With due respect to the importance of spreading awareness against the over-consumption of any alcoholic drink, the fests can promote the various homemade alcoholic beverages to the tourists and other visitors from within and outside Bhutan. The organisers should also encourage the sale of locally brewed alcohol, especially to foreign tourists. On the one side the beverage fests, through the tourists, will allow the promotion of the alcohol-centred indigenous socio-cultural practices of Bhutan across the globe, and on the other side, it will also revive and re-mobilise the market for the locally brewed alcoholic drinks.
- d. Exporting locally brewed alcoholic drinks: The government also should start exploring the possibilities of exporting locally brewed alcoholic drinks across the globe. If the locally brewed alcoholic drinks can be sold outside the country, then it will have a positive impact on the economic progress and will encourage the practice of traditional economic activities. The government should also ensure that the locally brewed alcoholic drinks are exported in non-branded

forms. In other words, instead of branding, packaging and industrially manufacturing the traditional alcoholic drinks, they should be exported by directly purchasing the homemade alcohol from the local households. Other than generating economic benefits, this initiative will also pose a challenge to the autonomous branding, packaging, and marketing policies of the commercial organisations.

5. Conclusion

Altogether, this article makes an effort to unfurl the various social, cultural, and religious practices that are associated with the traditional culture of producing, consuming, and sharing local alcohol in Bhutan. The article begins in a story-telling manner and through a couple of stories it briefly reflects on the socio-cultural history of locally brewed alcoholic drinks in Bhutan. Then, the socio-cultural history is elaborated further by identifying the varieties of locally brewed alcoholic drinks and by understanding the different social, cultural, and religious contexts in which they are consumed. The article brings forth the various challenges that have been created through importing western-branded alcoholic drinks and also by manufacturing them in Bhutan. In the process of discussing these aspects, the article also outlines how, based on health and medical sciences, several imagined narratives have been manufactured to justify the superiority of the western-branded alcoholic drinks and the inferiority of the locally brewed ones.

This article serves as a possible resistance to such problematic narratives and therefore concludes by analysing the various initiatives that have already been taken and can be taken in the near future to resist the western-branded alcoholic drinks and to revive and diversify the alcohol-centric indigenous social, cultural, religious and economic practices of/in Bhutan. Without violating the health and legal restrictions, the proposals for the revival of alcohol-centric indigenous socio-cultural practices are also a reminder for every indigenous community across the world to challenge the Eurocentric self-profiting social, cultural, health, and economic narratives that centre on alcohol productions and consumptions and revive the native socio-cultural practices that centre on the locally brewed alcoholic drinks.

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