



## Religious Uses of Alcohol among the Woodland Indians of North America

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**Abstract.** – As a rule, early European observers perceived only the excessive, violent, and licentious aspects of American Indian drinking behavior, and present studies focus strongly on its destructive features. A survey of the large body of historical source materials, however, reveals numerous but widely scattered examples, dating back to the mid-seventeenth century, of attempts on the part of the Woodland Indians to integrate the imported alcoholic beverages into their religious ceremonies and rituals. According to anthropological alcohol studies, most societies which permit drinking know both a sacred and a profane use of liquor. Its integration in religious ceremonialism shows that native uses of alcohol were both more complex and more normal than views about Indian drinking hold. [*North American Indians, ceremonial uses of liquor, sacred drunkenness, alcohol studies, narcotic complex of the New World*]

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When, in early 1680 the Dutch travellers Jasper Danckaerts and Peter Sluyter came across a drinking spree, Indian style, they were clearly shocked. Approaching an Algonquian settlement in Govanus, present-day Brooklyn, they “heard a great noise, shouting and singing in the huts of the Indians.” As they immediately realized,

the inhabitants “were all lustily drunk, raving, striking, shouting, jumping, fighting each other, and foaming at the mouth like raging wild beasts” (Danckaerts 1946: 179). However, what at first looks just like another description of disorderly drunken Indians, turns out to be a native healing ceremony. After a lengthy sermon on the evils of liquor the two pious Dutch Labadists mention that these “Indians had *canticoyd* there to-day, that is, conjured the devil, and liberated a woman among them, who was possessed by him, as they said” (180). It is only thanks to this casual comment that it becomes clear that the riotous scenes of drunkenness were, in fact, part of a ceremonial performance. The word *cantico* or *canticoy*, an Anglicized version of the Lenape or Delaware Indians word *gentkehn*, to dance or “to sing and dance at the same time” (Brinton 1890: 187), was used by colonists as a general term for native religious ceremonies (Gehring and Grumet 1987: 119n). The participant’s raging, so revolting to the White observers, was part of a shamanic healing session.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Even when such ecstatic ceremonies were celebrated *without* liquor, Whites did not perceive them any other way. Of one of the “Cantica’s or dancing Matches” of the Long Island Algonquians an early English observer reported, that they “only shew what Antick tricks their ignorance will lead them to, wringing of their bodies and faces after a strange manner, sometimes jumping into the fire, sometimes catching up a Fire-brand, and biting off a live coal, with many such tricks, that will affright, if not please an *English* man to look upon them, resembling rather a company of infernal Furies then men” (Denton 1966: 11). On the

Two and a half centuries later some ethnographers, too, occasionally mention the religious use of alcohol by Northeastern Indians. Diamond Jenness (1935: 67 f.) notes its use in Ojibwa divination and as an offering to the spirits. Among the Naskapi-Montagnais, Frank Speck points out its potential to induce dreaming: "The underlying theory is that the soul-spirit, being gratified and strengthened by the alcohol, will do the necessary work leading the dreamer to success in his next venture" (1935: 182). Among the Menominee, Alanson Skinner (1915: 193 f.) reports the role of drinking in shamanism and Felix Keesing acknowledges that liquor came to have an important religious significance (1987: 55).

In spite of such references the uses of alcohol in religion, ritual, and healing have been widely neglected<sup>2</sup> or just marginally mentioned (Levy and Kunitz 1974: 73 f.; Hamer and Steinbring 1980: 16–18, 22) in studies on Native American drinking. And this even though as far back as 1730 the French commandant at Fort Détroit, Pierre de Noyan, drew attention to the great importance of liquor in rituals. Speaking of France's Indian allies in the Great Lakes region, he exclaimed that liquor "has become the basis of their religion! These superstitious men can no longer recover from their diseases, unless they make festivals with brandy; their sorcerers or jugglers now know no other remedy" (1904: 75). In claiming that the natives knew *no other* remedy but liquor, Sieur de Noyan was certainly exaggerating. Small wonder that his observation on the spiritual significance of alcohol has received but scant attention from anthropologists and historians (Hamer 1965: 287; Jaenen 1987: 63).

Some more recent ethnohistorical studies, however, have stressed the importance of religious uses of liquor. In his insightful overview of the subject, Christian Feest (1981: 208) points out that particularly among Central Algonquians liquor was widely used both in mourning ceremonies and by ritual practitioners. James Merrell contends

other hand, when trader James Adair wrote of a group of Chickasaws: "By some fatality, they are addicted to excessive drinking, and spirituous liquors distract them so exceedingly, that they will even eat live coals of fire" (1966: 235), it could have been a shamanic performance rather than drunkenness that he witnessed, since the handling of fire was typical of certain frenetic trance techniques and rituals. For some early-seventeenth-century observations among the non-drinking Hurons cf. Grant (1952: 325); Wrong (1939: 200); Thwaites (1896–1901/12: 23).

2 Cf. Horton 1943; Vachon 1960; Dozier 1966; MacAndrew and Edgerton 1969; Lurie 1970; May 1977; Unrau 1996.

that the Catabwa Indians "fitted drinking into their ceremonial life" (1989: 39). Richard White mentions that around 1800 among "the Delawares, liquor had become embedded in ceremonies – particularly the annual Big House ceremony – in condolence rituals, and in the fabric of hospitality and sharing" (1991: 498). Similarly, Laura Peers states that alcohol was "incorporated into Ojibwa culture" and had "become an accepted item for use in religious offerings" (1994: 42) by the late 18th century. Finally Peter Mancall argues that "perhaps the most significant sign of the religious importance of intoxication was the role that drinking came to play in mourning rituals" (1995: 76).<sup>3</sup> Mancall associates liquors' role in mourning to the high death rate from disease and war, giving the Indian communities "ample opportunity to practice such rites" (79). Such an explanation, however, is not completely convincing, since the incorporation of liquor in mourning ceremonies was part of a larger pattern of religious uses, as I will try to show in this paper.

The sizeable but still little used body of historical source materials (missionary records, travellers accounts, fur trader journals, captivity narratives, and other documentary records of the 17th through 19th century) contain numerous indications to the effect that many of the Northeast Woodlands societies embedded liquor in religious ceremonies, particularly shamanic divination and healing, medicine societies, rites of thanksgiving, in mourning rituals, and as offerings to the spirit world. Indeed, it appears that North American Indians were quite as adept at inducing trance states with the help of alcohol as many other cultures all over the world (Lewis 1975: 39).

### The Early Colonial Period

After 40 years among the Micmac, the French trader and adventurer Nicolas Denys (1908: 82, 444–450) wrote the most detailed single description of the patterns of alcohol use and drinking behavior

3 However, what Mancall cites as "the earliest sign of use of alcohol" (1995: 76) in mourning rituals turns out to be a misplaced observation from South America. The "solemn feast upon the death of a cassique [*sic*] chief," in the course of which Indians drank for many days, and which David Peterson de Vries (1971: 81) describes, was witnessed by the widely travelled Dutchman, not along the North American coast but among South American "Caribs and Arwackes" (84). In similar fashion Mancall uses a picture of sixteenth-century Tupinamba drinking in Brazil as an illustration of the famous Southeastern "black drink" (1995: 66).

of a seventeenth-century North American Indian tribe. His report focused on what he called their "drunken orgies" (449), the excessive, violent, and licentious aspects of drinking, which were usually the first to be noticed – and denounced – by White observers, and which scholars today increasingly conceive as periodic drinking saturnalia, as a bacchanalian time of ritual reversal, as an often planned and carefully managed "time-out" from everyday normative restrictions.<sup>4</sup> But the observant trader also described some of their social and religious "festivals" (337–339). And referring to these Micmac ceremonies he mentioned that "since they have taken to drinking wine and brandy they are subject to fighting" (Denys 1908: 443 f.) on these occasions. Although made *en passant*, this is a most valuable observation, as it shows that mid-seventeenth-century Micmacs not only indulged in drinking bouts but also took to drinking during some of their ceremonies – probably funerals and mourning rituals.

Similarly, William Penn mentioned the celebration of a Delaware *cantico*, i.e., an unspecified religious ceremony, from which sprang a misunderstanding with a White neighbor who had used to sell rum to the Indians but then "denied to sell them any More" (Dunn and Dunn 1986: 106 f.). Apparently they wanted additional liquor for the performance of their ritual and when a certain colonist refused to sell them any they decided "to gett into his house and take away his Rum" (107). Like the culturally closely-related Natives of Long Island whom the Dutch travellers encountered, these late-seventeenth-century Delawares were already familiar with drinking during their *canticos*. But like the French trader Denys, William Penn mentions the ceremonial use of alcohol without ascribing to it any further importance.

"The Jesuit Relations" report the consumption of liquor during a Mohawk feast, albeit without specifying the nature of the celebration (Thwaites 1896–1901/53: 191–193). Its use in Iroquois healing, however, was unmistakably described by the Franciscan Father Louis Hennepin. A "juggler," he writes, divines the healing procedure, then "The other Savages go all together into a Stove, and sing as loud as they can baul, and make a ratling with Tortoise Shells, or Pumpkin made hollow, and Indian Corn put into 'em; and to this Noise the Men and Women dance: nay, sometimes they get drunk with Brandy bought of the Europeans, and then they make a horrible din and clut-

ter" (1903/II: 485 f.). Probably Father Hennepin's observation relates to the Cayuga or Seneca, with whom he had close contact around 1680. It could be the description of an Iroquois healing society's performance. A Sulpician missionary confirms the use of brandy during the Iroquoian so-called dream or fools festival, the *gannonhaoury* (or *ononharoia* as it was known among the Huron). During the "carnival," he writes, French traders made the whole village drunk and then performed the "*debauch*" called "Gan8ary" (i.e., Ganouary), "in which one runs about stark naked carrying a keg of brandy under the arm" (Belmont 1952: 56 f., 45). To be sure, this is not a very insightful description of the Iroquois Midwinter rite, but it indicates that spirituous liquors were occasionally incorporated into this important annual ceremony by the late 17th century.

Finally the French officer and traveller Baron de Lahontan (1905/II: 469) saw the burning of spirituous liquors in a sweat lodge ceremony, probably among the Great Lakes Algonquians.

Taken together, seventeenth-century evidence is sparse indeed. Nevertheless, it appears that by the end of the century liquor was at least occasionally embedded in healing rituals among some Northeastern tribes, such as the Delaware, Iroquois and possibly the Central Algonquians. The Micmac, too, seem to have used it fairly frequently in ceremonies, but unfortunately Denys, who certainly knew of similar uses from France (where drinking was regularly part of baptisms, burials, and church fairs), did not consider such information worth recording. As can be seen in the case of the Dutch travellers Danckaerts and Sluyter, it was all too easy for European observers either to overlook the ceremonial use altogether or to simply mistake it for another disorderly drunken brawl. This may in part account for the relatively few early observations. But turning to the 18th and 19th centuries we will see that both the scope and the depth of information improve somewhat.

### Shamanic Rituals and Healing

In the summer of 1857, Henry David Thoreau canoed through Maine's wilderness. When his Penobscot Indian guide fell sick, he asked for – brandy. Joe Polis, his guide, was a doctor (Thoreau 1988: 321). He probably wanted that brandy not as a medicine but as a means to establish contact with the spirit world: "Me doctor, – first study my case, find out what ail 'em, – then I know what to take" (397), he said by manner of explanation

<sup>4</sup> MacAndrew and Edgerton 1969; Lurie 1970; Trenk 1996.

when he asked Thoreau for some liquor. Since Thoreau didn't carry any, Joe Polis had to resort to gunpowder instead. He mixed it with water, drank it off and was "considerably better" the next day (398 f.).<sup>5</sup>

The stimulation of shamanistic ecstasy through liquor, which Thoreau's Indian guide had to forego, was widely practised in the Northeast. While a captive among the Delaware, young John M'Cullough in 1760 took part in a healing ritual during a communal drinking spree. His Indian adoptive brother had been ill for weeks and believed someone had bewitched him. In the course of a drinking binge lasting several days, he was treated by a woman who, as M'Cullough emphasizes, was said to be a "witch." Actually this "sucking doctor" – a specialist who sucked the sickness out of the patient's body – suddenly fell down on her hands and knees and, convulsing wildly, promptly began to suck at the body of the sick person, extracting a shell fragment from the ailing part. Shortly thereafter the patient recovered, and remained in good health the following four years M'Cullough lived with the Delaware (1977–1983: 112 f.). Here a healing ceremony appears to have been embedded in a drinking binge. According to M'Cullough's report, the treatment was performed quite by surprise, arising as it were, spontaneously out of the drinking spree. One cannot avoid the impression that it was the alcoholic intoxication itself which inspired this medicine woman to attempt the healing.

There is abundant evidence on the use of alcohol in Central Algonquian shamanism. First, there were the *wabeno* shamans, who were healers of diseases and makers of love and hunting medicines, and whose cult appears to have expanded dramatically around 1800: "Friend, friend, whiskey for the wabana," such were the words addressed to the American Superintendent of Indian Affairs, when he participated in a session which he mistook for "offerings to the devil" (McKenney 1959: 206–208). That night his whiskey was drunk jointly by all the participants of the ceremony. Similarly, the fur trader Alexander Henry, the younger, noted that the Ojibwa used to drink during the *wabeno* sessions (1988/I: 103).

Apart from the *wabeno* shamans, there were other specialists who valued alcoholic intoxication. During the 1826 Fond du Lac treaty conference Thomas McKenney witnessed the performance of

a "jongleur," called *jessakid* by the Ojibwa, a shaman who conjures the spirits in the shaking tent. When the American was about to leave, it was announced that "the devils were thirsty, and wanted something to drink." McKenney, who understood all too well this "call for whiskey," gave them "little, and that little well diluted" (1959: 208). Alexander Henry was once present at an unsuccessful healing attempt on New Year's Day in 1801: An Ojibwa medicine man, "half drunk," worked himself into such a frenzy that he broke his drum, whereupon he threw it down onto the ground and trampled on it, ending the healing session (1988/I: 103). This appears to have been a bad omen, for according to Henry's entry of 15th January, the unfortunate patient only survived this failed treatment by a mere two weeks (107).

It seems that the ability of certain shamans to control wind and weather could also be increased by means of alcohol: Fur trader Duncan Cameron (1960: 262) writes that adverse winds had forced him to delay his planned departure for days. An Indian then suggested that, if Cameron gave him enough liquor to get drunk, he would make the winds die down. A similar proposal was made to another fur trader in 1793, when reaching the storm-torn shores of Lake Huron. He, however, could see nothing in the request but a last desperate attempt of the Indians to come by some alcohol, so he refused. The "conjurer" then threatened to cause winds to blow even more violently for a full eight days (MacDonell 1965: 86).<sup>6</sup>

Twentieth-century ethnographic sources show that Great Lakes Algonquians retained the use of alcohol in shamanism. Ojibwa informants told Diamond Jenness (1935: 67 f.) that the spirit helpers of the *jessakid* consumed the tobacco and whiskey offerings in the shaking tent. In the course of the session, the public gathered outside was able to perceive clearly the smell of the tobacco smoked by the spirits in the tent. Among the Menominee the shaman needed the alcohol "partly to pour libations to the gods, and partly to drink in order that he may acquire the proper frenzy" (Skinner 1915: 193). During the séance, the spirits drank together with the shaman, who took great care not to get drunk, but only stimulated. Finally the audience, too, was invited to drink, "that they may enter into the spirit of the occasion" (194).

5 At least on one occasion Ojibwas, too, seem to have drunk gunpowder mixed with water in order to establish communication with the spirit world (cf. Jenness 1935: 48).

6 It was apparently only as payment that a shaman of the Virginia Algonquians requested two bottles of rum for a rainmaking ceremony, which, however, he seems to have performed sober (Beverley 1947: 204 f.).

## Medicine Societies

James Isham, a clerk of the Hudson's Bay Company, wrote in 1743 about a celebration of the Northern Cree: "I think I never was so full of mirth, then once in Seeing their Conjuring & Dancing, when in Liquor, – they'l Dance hand in hand round a fire when presantly one comes up side way's, & blow's another Downe with his breath, who falls Like a Dead man, so by them all, he then Blow's in their Ear's, and other parts which brings them to Life againe" (1949: 98). This description is strongly reminiscent of the most spectacular rite of the Grand Medicine Society, the shooting ceremony with the sacred shell (*megis*), which is considered a symbol of life. Some students of Algonquian religions doubt whether the Cree ever knew the Midewiwin or Grand Medicine Society (Vecsey 1983: 176). Yet there can be little doubt that those Great Lakes Indians who did know it, did indeed incorporate liquor into its performance, in a way similar to that witnessed by James Isham.

The Midewiwin, an association of medicine men and women, was the most important collective ritual among the tribes that practised it. While numerous historians and anthropologists consider it a postcontact institution, Central Algonquians regarded it as their aboriginal religion. When on 1 December 1804 fur trader Thomas Connor was asked for some liquor by the Ojibwa Indians with whom he traded, he wrote in his diary: "the Rascally Indians have agreed to make their Mittay Ceremony & beg'd Rum which I refused & abused them as they deserve" (1965: 260). While these Indians probably had to make do without, others were more fortunate. A fur trading post's daily journal notes in 1820: "all the Indians Dancing, the House [Midewiwin lodge] contains near 160 Persons. They kept it up till sun set, eat 3 Dogs & drank 1 1/2 keg Rum due them" (Peers 1994: 81). According to Northwest Company trader Alexander Henry early-nineteenth-century Ojibwa considered liquor indispensable for the celebration of their annual ceremonies including the "Grand Medecine" (1988/I: 168). Potawatomi Indians, too, regarded liquor as an enhancement for the celebration of their ceremonies. One of their speakers in 1817 told the Canadian Superintendent of the Indian service "that their chief needed some rum to make a Metaiway (Medewiwin) feast." But the latter only "upbraided" them "for their drunkenness" (Clifton 1975: 108). Similarly, Edwin James witnessed men and women drink great quantities of alcohol in the course of a medicine feast celebrated by the

Menominee. According to him, those who had reached a state of complete intoxication were carried away by their friends (Kasparycki 1990: 4). Seth Eastman's painting "Medicine Dance of the Winnebagoes," of the first half of the 19th century allows the presumption that the Siouan-speaking Winnebago, too, had probably integrated alcohol into their celebrations, for in the centre of the picture, which provides a glimpse into the sacred medicine lodge, a keg of brandy can be seen (Schoolcraft 1851–1857/III: 285 f.).

The Santee-Sioux or Dakota of Minnesota, too, knew the Medicine Society, which White observers usually called their *wakan* or Medicine Dance. When in 1805 the explorer Zebulon Pike paid a visit to Chief Wabasha's village on the upper Mississippi, he noted that its inhabitants were celebrating "their great medicine" or "dance of religion." But although Pike realized that the Indians were drinking, he didn't relate it to the ceremony in progress (Coues 1987/I: 43–48). However, Samuel Pond's authoritative report on the Dakota leaves no doubt that they once had indeed incorporated liquor in their "medicine lodge." Whiskey, he states, "was sometimes drunk at wakan-dances," although in his time "the practice was severely reprehended by many of the Dakotas" (Pond 1986: 96). Pond, a remarkably tolerant missionary, seemed to consider this drinking hardly "more unseemly than the Christmas carousels" which the Indians had ample opportunity to observe among White neighboring settlers.

Similarly, eighteenth-century Iroquois appear to have drunk brandy at the meetings of their secret medicine societies. At any rate, drunkenness was the reason why Seneca prophet Handsome Lake forbade these societies around 1800. Arthur Parker comments on the written record of the prophet's teachings: "It is related that at one period whiskey had so far debauched the Indians that their once sacred ceremonies, like those of the early Christians at Corinth, were made the excuses of the grossest licentiousness and drunken-revelry. Whiskey had entirely supplanted the feast foods" (1913: 51n.). Parker's comment reveals a lack of understanding for any spiritually motivated intoxication, but it does show that right up to the beginning of this century there subsisted among the Iroquois a recollection of the sacral use of alcoholic drinks, although the use was deemed an *abuse a posteriori*.

## Thanksgiving Rites

The major religious ceremony of the people called

Delaware was their annual fall Big House Rite or Gamwing, a world renewal of universal thanksgiving (Miller 1997; Harrington 1921: 81–145). During the second half of the 18th century, some Moravians lived in close contact with the Delaware Indians. In their writings we find for the first time an overview of the Delaware religious ceremonies and rites, all of which the missionaries describe as “sacrificial feasts” (Loskiel 1840: 20). Heavy drinking was an integral part of all these rites: “Festivals are usually closed with a general drinking bout” (Zeisberger 1910: 139; Loskiel 1840: 22). An entry in the journal of the Moravian White River Mission of October 1804 reads like an illustration of the foregoing general statement. “Many heathen Indians rode through our place on their way to a sacrifice in Woapicamikunk,” it says. “After the sacrifice was over, they took a barrel of whisky and drank so much that some of the heathen died from the effects of it. So pitifully these poor people come to their death at their supposed service of God” (Gipson 1938: 314). Scandinavian naturalist Peter Kalm contributed an illustrative anecdote, too. He recounts how a Delaware once looked in at a Swedish religious service in Pennsylvania. “Ugh! A lot of prattle and nonsense, but neither brandy nor cider!” (1987: 220) he exclaimed and left, somewhat disappointed. For it is to be observed, adds Kalm, that the Indians “all drink immoderately” at their meetings.

A further rite of thanksgiving among the Woodland Indians was the Green Corn ceremony. John Witthoft’s comparative study (1949) shows how little is known about this important celebration in the Northeast, while somewhat more information is available on its Southeastern version, the so-called Busk. In a similar manner to their report on the Gamwing, the Moravian Brethren wrote in their diaries about a ceremony that took place “every year at the time of corn harvest” i. e., the Green Corn rite. In order to celebrate it “a large quantity of whisky” was necessary, and people drank and danced day and night (Gipson 1938: 190). Oliver Spencer’s narrative of his captivity among the Shawnee and Ohio Iroquois or Mingo describes the “feast of green corn” in some detail (cf. Spencer 1968: 102–113). But in particular it illustrates the Moravians’ observation that “festivals are closed with a drinking bout.” Although the celebration witnessed by the young captive was headed by Coo-h-coo-cheeh, a medicine woman and nativist prophetess, the drinking of liquor was not frowned upon. With the exception of Coo-h-coo-cheeh both men and women “were more than half drunk” by the afternoon. The frightened Spencer, watching

the scene from a distance, writes: “They now drank more frequently; some dancing, some whooping; and some quarreling, until at length ‘uproar wild and deep confusion reigned’” (113). So this celebration ended very much like all ceremonies among the neighboring Delaware did according to the Moravians – in complete intoxication.

In the Southeast, the Green Corn ceremony, or Busk, was by far the most important annual celebration. It was a rite of thanksgiving and at the same time a means of purifying the whole social order. In Southeastern societies the drinking of liquor was likewise not excluded from its celebration, as is sometimes assumed (Braund 1993: 125).<sup>7</sup> During its initial phase (a Busk took either four or eight days) the men fasted and emetics were taken to achieve a state of ritual purity; at this time the drinking of spirituous liquors was strictly prohibited. But after the new fire was lighted, a time began which in the early 18th century the Creek Indians spent “mit Essen, Trincken und Tantzten” (eating, drinking, and dancing), according to the German traveller Philipp von Reck (cit. in Bernatzik 1954: 86). And when he spoke of drinking, he certainly did not mean water. A hundred years later, John Howard Payne gave a quite detailed description of a Busk. He states that after a period of fasting and purification, people indulged excessively, not only in food, but in drink, too, “for,” as he writes, “every pathway and field around was in the morning strewed with sleeping Indians” (Payne 1932: 190). By the end of the 19th century, the orgiastic Drunken Dance which Frank Speck (1907: 139) calls “a great favorite” among the Creek, seems to have been incorporated into the Busk. Similarly, the Iroquois knew a Drunken Dance which was much favoured by the Tuscarora. The Tuscarora, the sixth Iroquois nation, had originally come from North Carolina and had only in the 1720s joined the League. Before the Drunken Dance was suppressed by the prophet Handsome Lake, people “sang and danced this dance when partly intoxicated, being furnished with whiskey during the performance. The dancers performed in the middle of the Long House” (Speck 1995: 155).

<sup>7</sup> “Creeks did not drink alcohol in a ceremonial context” (Braund 1993: 125). But in his charming travel diary from 1735, Reck (cit. in Bernatzik 1954: 78, 86) mentioned its extensive use in hospitality rituals as well as in a war ritual in which the men drank heavily most of the night – perhaps similar to a Northeastern rite, “the whetting of the grindstone with rum to sharpen the hatchet of war” (White 1991: 372).

## Mourning Rituals

Almost everywhere in the Northeast alcohol appears to have been essential in mourning rituals. Evidently liquor lends itself to use in funerals and mourning ceremonies, for it can both intensify feelings of grief and drive away sadness.

The Moravians stressed that in addition to the celebrations, forming the annual ceremonial cycle of the Lenape, alcohol was also used in burial, mourning, and condolence rituals. Delawares prized whiskey as a valuable burial gift. "I have seen a bottle of rum or whiskey placed at the coffin head, and the reason given for it was, that the deceased was fond of liquor while living, and he would be glad of a dram when he should feel fatigued on his journey to the world of the spirits" (Heckewelder 1819: 270). Alcohol was considered indispensable to appease the soul of the deceased. To this end the Lenape knew the use of "both meat and drink-offerings" (Zeisberger 1910: 140). For the latter exclusively rum was used. Before drinking, everyone went to the burial site where some rum was poured out. An old man then spoke to the soul of the deceased. Finally all the rum had to be drunk right down to the last dregs (Zeisberger 1910: 140, 117; Loskiel 1840: 22). These "rum sacrifices" were seen as a "religious act" ("als eine gottesdienstliche Handlung") and were often performed regularly once a year at the grave of a deceased person. Delawares, finally, symbolized the end of the mourning period by drinking, for after a while the mourners consented to be persuaded "to get up, drink rum and be comforted" ("aufzustehen, Rum zu trinken und Trost anzunehmen") (Loskiel 1789: 58, 156).<sup>8</sup>

Mary Jemison, who spent four years as a captive and a further seventy-one of her own free will with the Seneca, remembered in 1823 that in former times among the Iroquois (probably before Handsome Lake's prohibitionist reform), "frolics" were held nine days after the funeral for the dead at which all the women got intoxicated (Jemison 1990: 158). In 1743, when Pennsylvania naturalist John Bartram on his travels through Iroquoia wrote in his diary "The *Indian Squaws* got very drunk and made a sad noise till morning" (1966: 54), he might have unknowingly witnessed such a ritual. But not only women drank on such occasions.

Warren Johnson, brother of the distinguished Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Sir William Johnson, noted in 1760 of the Mohawk, that they "drink merrily" (1996: 257) at their funerals. And at a late-eighteenth-century Iroquois funeral an "Indian walked before the coffin to the grave, with a three gallon keg of rum under each arm and a bottle in his hands; the chiefs spoke, the warriors fired volleys over the grave, and then the mourners got completely drunk by nightfall" (Fenton 1965: 339, fn. 25).

In much the same manner as the Delaware and Iroquois, the Montagnais-Naskapi (McKenzie 1960: 425) and the tribes in the Great Lakes region also drank at their funerals. The Indian allies of New France appear to have expected their "father," as they called the French governor, through his diplomatic intervention, not only to help "cover the dead" but also to comfort the mourners by providing brandy (White 1991: 140 f.). Fort Mackinac commandant De Peyster, one of the British successors of the great French "father," noted on a list of the gifts expected by the Indians "Kegs of *milk* (rum) to dry their tears" (Keesing 1987: 89). In his remarkable captivity narrative John Tanner relates how in the mid-1790s his Indian foster mother, an Ottawa chief and priestess of the Midewiwin, was "cast down with grief" after the accidental death of both her husband and son and "began to drink" (Tanner 1956: 27). It is not improbable that she started drinking in a funeral or mourning ceremony, as there is plenty of evidence that by that time it was customary among Ottawa and Ojibwa to drink on these occasions in order "to bewail the Death" (Connor 1965: 269, 266) and "to wash the grief from the heart" (Henry 1988/I: 108, 98, 121 f.). While still a novice in the fur trade, Daniel Harmon once witnessed at the Grand Portage some Ojibwas "of both sexes, drinking and crying over the corpse" of a man killed in a drunken brawl. As part of the ritual the mourners not only drank but also offered the dead man some liquor "supposing him to be as fond of rum when dead, as he was when alive" (Harmon 1973: 17, 146). Similarly, there was a case reported when Winnebago and Menominee mourned together a man, who had been slain while drinking, by celebrating jointly a drinking carousal upon his grave (Keesing 1987: 123). At the funeral of Winnebago chief Four Legs, the wife of an Indian agent observed that "grief and whisky" had "softened" the hearts of the bereaved (Kinzie 1948: 296 f.).

Finally, liquor's potential to "produce a flow of tears" – as Colonel Snelling was once told

<sup>8</sup> In the English translation of Loskiel (1840) some of the Moravians' observations on the Delaware Indians' use of alcohol are missing which are present in the German original (Loskiel 1789).

by a Dakota man, who begged for a bottle of whiskey – was likewise appreciated by the Santee Sioux of Minnesota, who also integrated alcohol into their mourning complex (Keating 1959/I: 433, 261). According to the colonel, the Indians in the vicinity of his garrison would invariably ask him for whiskey whenever someone had died. They wanted to “drown all care in liquor,” as they themselves said. Without it, Colonel Snelling suspected, they were unable to express their sorrow in tears.

Quite unexcelled is the description of a Fox Indian orgy as recounted by explorer and fur trader Peter Pond, which had begun as a mourning ceremony. Pond (1965: 35 f.) witnessed in the early 1770s a great mourning ceremony at Butte des Morts, in the later state Wisconsin. The mourners began the ceremony by smoking the calumet. Then they poured some rum on the grave, drank some themselves, and smoked again. Pond described the proceedings with a benevolent disposition; it seemed to him that the mourning Indians certainly knew how to enjoy themselves with this celebration. But that was only the beginning. As soon as the rum began to show effect, they began to sing and remember the deceased, finally they all started to weep. Then, so it seemed to Pond, the realization prevailed that all these shows of sorrow could not possibly help the dead person, but that the living, on the other hand, could well avail themselves of the rum, in order to “wash away their sorrow.” So on they drank and soon became as happy as only merrymakers can be. By nightfall all the participants were drunk. To the White observer the conversation of men and women now seemed more lively and the atmosphere more amorous. First one couple disappeared into the bushes, then others followed. Suddenly finding himself unwittingly cast into the role of voyeur, Pond remarks in his incomparable spelling: “I Could Obsarve Clearly this Bisnes was first Pusht on By the women who mad thare Viseat to the Dead a Verey Pleasing one in thare way” (36).

### Liquor Offerings to the Spirits

Liquor was also introduced into Bear Ceremonialism as practised widely by the northern hunters of Asia and America (cf. Hallowell 1926). One of fur trader Alexander Henry’s Ojibwa hunters begged liquor of him. He had killed a grizzly bear and wanted to celebrate a “feast of rum,” as he had made a vow: “This is a very common custom among the Saulteaux [Ojibwa] when they kill any uncommon animal they make a feast of

Liquor. If liquor cannot be got the feast is made of some of the best provisions they can procure, but [as] liquor is always considered as having the greatest virtue in appeasing the manes of the Bear and rendering thanks to the Manitou I was obliged to satisfy the fellow” (Henry 1988/I: 73). As Henry mentions here, apart from its use in Bear Ceremonialism, alcohol was used in celebrations in honor of and for the appeasement of other animal spirits as well. The subarctic Cree seem to have gladly taken recourse to liquor whenever an opportunity presented itself, as Isham witnessed on the occasion of a “goose feasts” (1949: 76 f.), for example. And the ethnographer Ruth Landes writes that the Ojibwa believed the humanlike bear shared the Indians’ passion for “sweets and liquors” (1968: 27). At their Bear Ceremony they shout: “Manito, here is tobacco for you, and berries and sweets that you like! All that you wish! And here, a bottle of whisky to show our respect!” (35).

The spirits of the dead, too, wish to be pacified with alcohol. The Cree and Ojibwa poured a little brandy into the fire (Isham 1949: 94; Grant 1960: 364). From the Potawatomi, Keating learned that they sprinkled whiskey onto the grave, but only a little, “doubtless from the belief that the living require it much more than the dead” (1959/I: 114) as he surmised. And the Jesuit Father Pierre-Jean de Smet (1905/I: 173) also observed the custom among them of offering whiskey as a burial gift, a custom which prompted him to comment that it would be a very good idea to get rid of all whiskey this way. A similar custom existed among the Miami, too, where relatives of a dead person, who in life had shown fondness for alcohol, would throw some into the fire on his behalf (Trowbridge 1938: 54). Alcohol-coveting spirits of the dead, whom the Ojibwa called “shadows,” would sometimes pester the living (for example, by throwing stones at night, waking them with a start) until the latter understood their wishes and poured some whisky for them into the fire (Jeness 1935: 107).

Apart from the spirits of the dead, there were other kinds of alcohol-thirsty spirits. Henry David Thoreau (1988: 11) learned from Penobscot that wayfarers sometimes made an offering of a bottle of rum to *pomola* (or *bmola*), the spirit of Mount Katadn, the highest point in Maine. Old Kauasot, a Menominee, was granted the gift of clairvoyance by his guardian spirit. Therefore he had to make offerings of tobacco and liquor regularly (Skinner 1913: 51). Another Menominee dreamed of a longhorn steer and whiskey. Henceforth he was to drink whiskey “like cattle would,” as his tutelary



spirit had shown him in his dream (Spindler and Spindler 1984: 48 f.). Finally, an Ojibwa once appeared "the Spirit of the Water" of Lake Superior during a storm by sprinkling some whiskey "as being something very valuable" and by strewing some tobacco onto the water. In his "youthful dream" he had seen "smooth, quiet water" and now for the first time he was able to test "its power" (Densmore 1979: 81). This episode, too, can serve to show how indispensable alcohol had become in spiritual life and to what extent its sacrificial function had become similar to that of the sacred tobacco, with which it is frequently mentioned in one breath.

Among the Christian Mashpee Indians of Cape Cod a researcher noted as late as the turn of the century, that they built little spirit houses for the dead, and there offered food and whiskey. Due to this practice these places were called "taverns" (Flannery 1939: 141). This appears to be a survival from past, pre-Christian days. It is quite possible that the custom dates from a time in which the Indians of New England, too, used alcohol ceremonially. The so-called *mikumwassuck* or "Little People" of the Passamaquoddy are feared and hated spirit beings. They have hairy faces like the Whites and are considered "heavy drinkers." But since among the Christian Passamaquoddy there was probably no longer anyone willing to make offerings of alcohol to them, they are said to have once stolen the sacramental wine out of the church (Stevens 1981: 128).

### Summary and Conclusions

The evolution of American Indian drinking patterns from the 17th to the 19th century includes the use of alcohol in a religious context: in shamanism; in the medicine societies' performances; in the annual rites of thanksgiving and New Year celebrations such as the Delaware Big House Ceremony and in Green Corn Ceremonialism; remarkably widespread at funerals, in condolence, and remembrance rituals; finally, it was used together with the sacred tobacco as a favoured offering to the spirit world. We can now see more clearly that when the early-eighteenth-century French commandant, Pierre de Noyan, wrote about the Great Lakes Indians that liquor "has become the basis of their religion" (1904: 75), he was not completely wrong; he was only exaggerating. There is also some deeper meaning in Robert Beverley's much-cited observation that the Indians of Virginia went about their drinking "as solemnly as if it were part of

their Religion" (1947: 182), because drinking quite often was indeed part of the native religions.

How is it that this spiritual use of alcohol has received so little attention? We have seen how Europeans at first simply overlooked the spiritual character of many an Indian drinking carousal.<sup>9</sup> The Dutch travellers Danckaerts and Sluyter were not alone in misunderstanding the ceremonial character of drinking and seeing only a wild drink orgy when in fact a healing ceremony was in progress. Other observers, too, failed to see anything exceptional in the fact that at certain ceremonies such as funerals, there was drinking in profusion, because they were well acquainted with such practices in their own culture, as was the case, for instance, with the Frenchman Nicolas Denys. Finally, many natives, having learned to live with the unabashed derision and condemnation of the Whites concerning all their religious beliefs and practices, will have taken good care to keep secret certain rites involving alcohol. This is what Canadian fur trader George Nelson, a man interested in native religions, was to find out. On a certain day he had sold some rum to a group of Northern Cree and then, by chance, he came upon these Indians' lodge while on a hunting trip. He was surprised to see that instead of getting drunk the usual way, they were celebrating a "feast of rum," as he called it. He writes: "I communicated this a few years after to a couple of Gentlemen – one of them longer in the country than myself denied it – and enquired of his wife who had lived a long time with the Indians – she corroborated his denial – I perceived the cause, and told him that it was because *they* do not chuse [*sic*] that we become too well informed of all their ceremonies: it was to no effect, and I had almost a mind to credit the woman too myself, but by *insinuation* I find I am perfectly right" (Brown and Brightman 1988: 101).<sup>10</sup>

The banishment of drinking from native ceremonialism can be traced back to the rise of the nativistic prophets, who first appeared around the mid-eighteenth century in the "Old Northwest,"

<sup>9</sup> However, when Edwin James wrote: "Intoxicating drinks do not appear to be ever made use of by the Omawhaws for superstitious purposes" (1823/I: 245), he must have been aware of religious uses.

<sup>10</sup> Nelson gives several examples of the traders' habit of "laughing at and ridiculing" native religious ceremonies and beliefs "as is the custom with us" (Brown and Brightman 1988: 29, 58, 66). From the time of the very first contact even Whites who spent most of their lives with the Indians were in the habit of ridiculing their beliefs (cf. Blair 1911–1912/I: 27, 40, 92).

and who often zealously combated drunkenness and any use of alcohol (cf. Dowd 1992: 32–46). In December 1805 the Moravians wrote “of a Schawano Indian” (i. e., Tenskwatawa) who has “arisen among the heathen as teacher” that the best thing about his message was that he forbade the drinking of alcohol: “If only the Indians would follow this injunction!” (Gipson 1938: 402). In the late 19th century a Winnebago refused to join the Medicine Lodge on grounds that he was old and couldn’t control his “desire for drink any longer” (Radin 1983: 90), thus being unable to live according to the rules of the Society.<sup>11</sup> Some decades earlier, Lewis Henry Morgan had heard said of the Medicine Lodge of the Winnebago in Kansas that “no intoxicated or intemperate person that is under the influence of liquor” (1993: 69) might participate. Drunkenness, observed Frances Densmore at the beginning of the 20th century, was considered quite incompatible with the “ethics of the Midewiwin” (1979: 87) among the Ojibwa. The same attitude prevailed among the Shawnee towards all their religious celebrations (Morgan 1993: 52; Voegelin 1944: 253, 397), and among the Delaware towards their Big House rite. In the opening speech of a Big House Ceremony among the Oklahoma Delaware around 1900 the participants were exhorted not to drink any liquor and reminded of the strict rule that for the duration of the event “no drinking or improper conduct is allowed” (Harrington 1921: 145, 133).<sup>12</sup> By the close of the 20th century the banning of alcohol from religious celebrations has come to be taken for granted. At a Sauk Drum Dance religion ceremony a speaker admonishes those present to stay sober with the words “God’s moving away from you the more drunk you get” (Reinschmidt 1994: 23). In the light of the historical materials presented, this attitude would seem to illustrate almost a complete reversal of the former attitudes of Central Algonquians and other Woodland Indians towards alcohol use. If then native ceremonial use of alcohol as documented in historical sources is so little perceived *today*, it could also be because in retrospect it simply appears too improbable.

Nevertheless the use of spirituous liquors has survived into the 20th century among shamans of the upper Great Lakes area. Before the introduction of “ardent spirits,” a Menominee informant told anthropologist Alanson Skinner, “it is said to have been harder for a man to place himself *en rapport* with the mysteries” (1915: 193). Some Menominees valued alcohol “as a go-between between mankind and all powers of good and bad, above and below” (Skinner and Satterlee 1915: 496). They said: “The closer a shaman is to the powers, the more he needs liquor to get them to guide and tell him what he cannot know in his soberness,” and added that “the powers accept this method of coming to them” (496). Thus shaman practices in the Northeast converge with those in Siberia and South America where intoxicating liquors were widely used to induce trance states and to communicate with the spirit world (cf. Alvarsson and Hultkrantz 1995: 8). At this point we can join Feest (1981: 206) in saying that native North American drinking practices seem to have developed fairly independently to a point where they often duplicate native Central and South American patterns of alcohol use.<sup>13</sup>

Anthropological alcohol studies highlight the fact that in most societies where people drink, drinking is commonly not only a highly patterned, socially and culturally integrated activity but is usually also either a profane or a sacred act (Mandelbaum 1965: 281; Douglas 1987). Research on American Indians, however, has focused mostly on the secular, disruptive and destructive aspects of drinking to the point of altogether ignoring ceremonial uses. Historical sources, though, remind us that North American Indians did once know a religious use of intoxicating drinks, making their experience with liquor appear more complex, and at the same time giving it back some of the “normality” which has been widely eliminated from the common view of “Indian drinking.”

11 Unlike his father, the old man in question, Crashing Thunder, apparently did *not* abide by this prohibition (Radin 1983: 138).

12 Moravian missionary Abraham Luckenbach had heard of a prohibition to drink alcohol during a Big House ceremony around 1805 (Gipson 1938: 614). It is clear, though, that this was a time of extreme nativistic enthusiasm.

13 Particularly well-documented is the drinking pattern of the Tarahumara or Rarámuri of Northern Mexico from the 17th century till the present time (cf. Lumholtz 1987: 253–257, 348–352; Kennedy 1963; Deimel 1980: 58–70; 1996: 14–16; 1997). A fascinating description of sixteenth-century Tupinamba drinking in Brazil is given by Léry (1990: 74–77). For a recent description of Tupi-Guaraní alcohol use cf. Castro (1992: 119–133).

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