The Role of Alcohol among North American Indian Tribes as reported in The Jesuit Relations

by R. C. DAILEY

RÉSUMÉ

On a toujours soutenu que l'alcool avait été la cause principale de la dégénérescence des Indiens de l'Amérique du Nord. Cette opinion est exprimée très clairement dans les Relations des Jésuites. Un examen de ces documents nous révèle, toutefois, que les Jésuites se trompaient en affirmant que les comportements exagérés des Indiens — license, violence, etc. — étaient dus à l'alcool. L'alcool ne faisait qu'intensifier l'expression d'émotions déjà présentes. On termine par un index sur l'usage de l'alcool tel que rapporté dans les Relations.

Whenever one considers the reasons for the destruction of the North American Indian it is commonplace to find alcohol cited as the principal cause.[1] Certainly this was the opinion of the early French Jesuits who sought to convert the Indian tribes of New France. For them, alcohol was the major obstacle to the success of their mission. *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* (Thwaites 1896-1901) are filled with references to liquor and its adverse effects. As the subject of Indian drinking is currently of interest to several disciplines, particularly anthropology, I felt it might be of value to assemble all the data from this important ethnohistoric source in one place. In view of this, I have analysed in some detail what the Jesuits wrote about Indians and their use of alcohol as they witnessed it in the early historic period. As a further aid to interested readers, I have included at the end of the paper an itemized index of all entries in the Relations which pertain to Indian drinking and related topics.

Though the idea that alcohol destroyed the Indian has been accepted since the days of the Jesuit mission, it is, on the other

[1] I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to Miss Merike Lugus for her assistance in the preparation of this paper.

hand, often overlooked that liquor was not the only item of European culture that had an impact. It is, therefore, virtually impossible to isolate the effects of one European culture trait from those of another. Here, even the role of the Jesuits themselves cannot be omitted.

Initially, alcohol was introduced to the Indian through the fur trade. However, it quickly came to have far-reaching social, economic, and political implications for Indian and white alike. In evaluating its place in history the popular view has been to stress the role of liquor as the villain and to accept the fur trade as an absolute necessity. This is not unexpected since despite the threat of both secular and ecclesiastical punishments, ranging from the stocks to excommunication, nonetheless, efforts to abolish the liquor traffic were unrealistic. For one thing, without a successful fur trade the solvency of the colony could not be assured. For another, even if the French had ceased to use alcohol in their relations with Indians, there was no agreement with the Dutch or the English that they would also stop the practice. Indian allies were important in the power struggle for the control of North America. The regular distribution of alcohol was a means of maintaining Indian loyalties as well as gaining new friends.

Though the Jesuits inveighed against what they saw as a wholesale debauching of the Indian, they were unable to secure more than token support for total interdiction. Bowing to church pressure the colonial administrators in France did agree to stop the liquor traffic, and several of the governors of New France actually attempted to enforce the regulations, notably Champlain and the Governor of Tadoussac but in the long run they were ineffective. In his *Canada and its Provinces,* Shortt (1914:468) has nicely summed up the problem : "The real issue, therefore, which the church and the colonial government had to face was whether the Indians should have brandy and orthodoxy at the hands of the French, or rum and heresy at the hands of the Dutch and the English."

My concern here, however, is not to review the history of the problem further, but to examine the effects of the introduction of alcohol on the Indian. Three questions come to mind : (1) What behaviour among the Indians was attributed to the effects of liquor?

(2) Was this behaviour new to the Indian way of life? and (3) How did the Indians view this behaviour, and in particular, was it disruptive to them?

As to the first question, a few direct quotes will serve to identify the kind of behaviour most frequently condemned by the Jesuits. Liquor was blamed for most of the general disorders and physical violence among the Indians. "Every night", they wrote, "is filled with clamors, brawls, and fatal accidents, which the intoxicated cause in the cabins" (Vol. 46, p. 105). Whole villages were sometimes affected : "It (drunkenness) is so common here, and causes such disorders, that it sometimes seems as if all the people of the village had become insane, so great is the license they allow themselves when they are under the influence of liquor" (Vol. 51, p. 217). These drinking parties are said to have lasted as long as the liquor supply, usually three to four days but sometimes as long as two weeks.

The "disorder" to which the Jesuits refer, included fatal accidents, murders and maimings — not even one's own friends and relatives were spared : "Last summer, four Onneiouts (Oneida) were killed by their comrades, while Drunken; yet this accident did not make the others any wiser" (Vol. 51, p. 125). "I count seven who were murdered by drunkards in two months" (Vol. 62, p. 67). "When these people are intoxicated, they become so furious that they break and smash everything in their houses; they utter horrible yells and shouts, and, like madmen, seek their enemies to stab them. At such times, even their relatives and friends are not safe from their fury, and they bite off one another's noses and ears" (Vol. 67, p. 39).

In addition to physical violence, drinking "disorders" included immorality. Young men would cause girls to get drunk in order to seduce them, or they would both drink willingly and solicit one another. Drunkenness was blamed, too, for the breaking up of families : "Disunion and the dissolution of their marriage invariably result from their drunkenness, owing to the sorrow and despair of their wives when they see themselves despoiled by their drunken husbands who take everything from them to obtain liquor; and who are deprived of the proceeds of the hunting, which belong to them, but are taken from their husbands before they reach the village

by their creditors" (Vol. 67, p. 39, 41). Consequently, women and children went hungry and villages were neglected. "... drink is a demon that robs them of their reason, and so inflames their passion that, after returning from the chase richly laden with beaver skins, instead of furnishing their families with provisions, clothing, and other necessary supplies, they drink away the entire proceeds in one day and are forced to pass the winter in nakedness, famine, and all sorts of deprivation" (Vol. 46, p. 103). One case was reported where a whole village was destroyed by a warring Iroquois band, because all its members were drunk and had neglected to leave even one sentinel (Vol. 47, p. 141).

Now to the second question, how much of the above behaviour which so bothered the Jesuits was new to the Indians' way of life? Or to put it another way, what behaviour patterns would have manifested themselves following white contact even if liquor had never been introduced? While no conclusive answer is to be expected, one might begin by examining the behaviour patterns reported at the time of contact. Consider first their mode of eating, and especially the custom of consuming everything at one sitting. It becomes clear then that it was only the alcohol which was new, not the practice of consuming everything at once. Hence, the "brandy feasts" as they were called, were on the same pattern as the "eat-all feasts" described in the following quotations : "In feasts, it is the rule by general consent and custom of the race, that all the food shall be consumed. If anyone eats sparingly and urges his poor health as an excuse, he is beaten or ejected as ill-bred, just as if he were ignorant of the art of living" (Vol. 1, pp. 285, 287). Similarly, in the case of liquor, "... give two savages two or three bottles of brandy, they will sit down and, without eating, will drink one after the other, until they have emptied them" (Vol. 6, p. 253).

Even more important was the question of physical violence. Though the Jesuits blamed alcohol for increasing murders, and a general diminishing of the Indian population, there is no evidence to confirm this. Indeed, murders motivated by dreams or sorcery or revenge in gambling bouts may have been just as prevalent before Indians began using alcohol as they were afterwards. Hence, it seems appropriate here to consider the similarity between intoxicated behaviour and that resulting from dream experiences. Moreover, since

the effect or power of alcohol was not understood by the Indians, intoxication was included in the category of the supernatural. Under its influence the inebriated person was given full license to behave as he pleased, even if it meant killing a person. This was the identical treatment accorded those compelled to act out their dreams. The significance and power of these is demonstrated in the following passage : "What each boy sees in his dreams, when his reason begins to develop, is to him thereafter a deity, whether it be a dog, a bear, or a bird. They often derive their principles of life and action from dreams; as for example, if they dream that any person ought to be killed, they do not rest until they have caught the man by stealth and slain him" (Vol. 1, p. 287). This kind of murder was not restricted to their own people : the French, too, were in danger of becoming victims : "If during the night they dream they must kill a Frenchman, woe to the first one they meet alone. They attach great faith to their dreams" (Vol. 4, p. 217). On this point it would be interesting to know whether there was a decrease in the traditional methods of attaining spiritual experience after the introduction of alcohol, i.e. fasting alone for days, and whether alcohol was used as a short cut, as seems probable.

It was considered essential for the welfare of the community as well as for the individual that his dream be carried out in detail, for only then would the soul of the man be satisfied. The soul was a powerful part of the person, acting independently from the rest of the body, making its wishes known through dreams : "For they think that there are in every man certain inborn desires, often unknown to themselves, upon which the happiness of individuals depends" (Vol. 1, p. 259). Actually, more than the happiness of the individual was involved : "All that they dream must be carried out : otherwise, one draws upon himself the hatred of all the dreamer's relatives, and exposes himself to feel the effects of their anger" (Vol. 51, p. 125). It was as important to discover the desires of the soul as it was to carry them out. Many of their illnesses were believed to be caused when these wishes remained unrecognized or forsaken. The only cure was to satisfy them. If the desire was not recognized, a medicine man would provide the service of drawing it out. Since dreams were the sole means of communicating with the spiritual part of the body, it is not surprising that the dream quest was so prominent. Everyone

was at one time or another involved in this quest, particularly the young males. A person in the process of dreaming was considered somehow sacred; as was an intoxicated person. There must have been much similarity in the behaviour of the inebriated man and the dreamer half starved, full of expectations and hallucinating. Both could be seen running about seemingly possessed, disturbing the village with their screams.

There was another social situation in which violence or disorderly behaviour occurred. Gambling was a common recreational activity. As the stakes were high it was not unusual for a man to lose everything he owned, including his children (Vol. 16, p. 199-201). "Gambling never leads to anything good; in fact, the Savages themselves remark that it is almost the sole cause of assaults and murders" (Vol. 10, p. 81). Again this suggests that brawls and murders were not unknown before the introduction of liquor, despite the fact that the Indians were noted for their stoicism and lack of aggressive demonstrations.

There was one celebration in particular which provided a social setting wherein it was legitimate to display behaviour similar to that shown in drunken brawls. "This celebration is called Ononhouaroia, or 'upsetting of brain', because all the youth, and even the women and children, run about as if they were mad, insisting upon obedience being paid to their Demons by making them a present of something which they proffer with an enigma, and which has been suggested to them in a dream" (Vol. 23, p. 53). To these Indians the idea of "upsetting the brain" was known and accepted. Losing control over their mental processes had no shame attached, and indeed, was a sought after means of transcending the physical to obtain a spiritual experience. Because this experience was highly valued and admired, they would openly and proudly announce their intention to drink, shouting, "I am going to lose my head; I am going to drink of the water that takes away one's wits" (Vol. 52, p. 193).

In the early historic period when only traders were in contact with Indian communities, these forms of explosive behaviour while dangerous were not disruptive. However, as white settlements were built and contact became more and more regular, the Indians soon realized that the act of "losing one's wits" had to be controlled.

A common method was to tie down those of their comrades who became violent when intoxicated. In other instances potential inebriates were required to surrender their weapons: "... indeed, so sensible are they of their own infirmities when in this state that when a number of them are about to get drunk, they give up their knives and tomahawks, etc., to one of the party who is on honour to remain sober, and to prevent mischief, and who generally does behave according to this promise. If they happen to get drunk without having taken this precaution, their squaws take the earliest opportunity to deprive them of their weapons" (Weld, p. 480, this was already 1795-1797). However, it is impossible to be sure to what extent such precautions were used, or to what extent these methods were influenced by the laws and penalties of the white man. A murder excused by the Indians would receive the death penalty from the whites. "... an Algonquin in a drinking-bout killed with three stabs of a knife a poor soldier who was quietly working in a house at Montreal. Arrested on the spot, the Algonquin thought he would escape punishment because he was drunk and did not know what he was doing. He was condemned notwithstanding to be hanged; but as the executioner was away he was killed by a blow on the head" (Vol. 68, p. 267). Most of the reports of attempted control describe Indians who were in fairly close contact with whites, either under the influence of the Jesuits or the surveillance of the white man's law. Even though some of the restrictions were undoubtedly voluntary, they were still dependent on the co-operation of the white traders. Also, the restrictions were meant to curb extreme violence and bloodshed more than intoxication itself.

The frequently reported drinking brawls where violence occurred do not seem so unusual when compared with gambling behaviour as already discussed, or with the torturing of captives. The Iroquois, for example, were noted for their fierce torture practices, though many authorities suggest that this reputation is highly exaggerated. Many of the cases where individuals were assaulted or murdered by intoxicated men actually involved Christians as was the woman in the following passage: "A drunken man who had just crippled another old woman entered her cabin. The only person who was with her at once ran away, and abandoned her to that furious man,

who with a wooden pike, bruised her entire face, broke her jaw, pierced her shoulders and left her for dead on the spot" (Vol. 57, p. 171). The important difference made by alcohol was that now such hostilities were turned against their own friends and relatives, particularly if they happened to be Christian. However, it is uncertain on what scale this took place. It is possible that it did not happen very often but that when it did, it created such an impact on the minds of listeners that it became a sort of infamy that was reported several times without reference to time or place. It must be remembered that the Jesuits were writing to an audience in France, whom they were obliged to please and shock in order to get financial support. This is not to deny the violence against their own friends that was touched off by liquor, but only to question its frequency and intensity, and motive. These incidents demonstrate, among other things, that the Indians could not have completely "lost their minds" since when they drank they were sufficiently aware to carry out purposive and directed action.

These kinds of murders were not too different from those committed by Christians in Europe, who tortured and burned infidels and "witches" in the name of God. In a way, this type of behaviour is a defensive reaction against forces which threaten the cohesiveness of the society. Also, this was one way that the Indians could demonstrate their aggressiveness towards whites. Symbolically it is very neat: the white man provided the means, liquor, with which the Indian could murder those who had fallen under the white man's influence. Furthermore, no guilt or blame was attached since it was the liquor that had control over the person.

As for the increase in immorality and licentiousness imputed to the effects of liquor, there is not much to say. The native's moral code which among other things condoned premarital sex was so removed from the Christian code that the Fathers could conceive of it only as caused by some evil force such as liquor.

I think one may conclude with some justification that alcohol did not introduce any strictly new forms of behaviour. Of course, some were intensified, and as frequency was increased, daily routines were upset. The only unique behaviour that could be attributed to liquor was the actual search for alcohol. This led inevitably to more

contact with the white man, to dependency on him for its supply, to loss of their own goods, to the neglecting of homes, women, and children, and to indebtedness and economic penury.

Yet it would be incorrect to conclude that liquor really caused no problems that were not already present. Such would be premature since the dangers of liquor were recognized by the Indians themselves. But I believe it is necessary to recognize the similarities between drunken and socially accepted behaviour with the understanding that intoxication was somehow alien, thus leading to some sporadic attempts to curb it.

This brings me to the final question : was drunken behaviour causing disruption to the Indian himself ? There were many who believed that liquor caused misfortunes, and that it would someday bring about their destruction. This was especially true of mission Indians but there were others too who wanted restrictions on the liquor supply and on insobriety. "Some of their captains have come to plead with the French not to sell them brandy or wine, saying that they would be the cause of the death of their people" (Vol. 5, p. 51). Another captain (Abenakis) wanted to address the Deputy of the English : "Thou deputy of Pleimot and Boston, paint our words on paper and send them to those on whom thou art dependent; and say to them that all the allied Savages dwelling on the river Kenebek hate fire-water," or brandy, "as much as they hate the Hiroquois; and that if they have any more of it brought hither to sell to the Savages, the latter will believe that the English wish to exterminate them" (Vol. 38, pp. 35, 37). The Indians themselves began to exercise a measure of discipline and in some cases with the help of whites, formed councils to decide on penalties for drunkenness. Offenders were even put to the chevalet or were forced to leave the village and their plot of land. Acts of murder were not everywhere excused and some murderers were executed (Vol. 9, p. 145; vol. 9, p. 203; vol. 62, p. 53; vol. 63, p. 103; vol. 68, p. 267).

Despite these rather severe penalties Indians continued to use alcohol on a grand scale. And while to the white man it was the liquor itself which caused the disruption, to the Indian it was the difficulties involved in obtaining it. For example, it was the long trips to trading centers, or towns like Three Rivers, that were

disruptive — not only to those who went but also to those who were left behind in the villages. Even if they did not seek out the liquor, the French would travel 200-300 leagues to meet up with the Indians to entice them with brandy. Cases where liquor was brought back to the village for the purpose of feasts could not be called disruptive from the Indian's point of view if the feast involved the members in a common activity and followed a familiar pattern. Rather, the major disruption occurred when the men left the villages to go on hunting parties and returned sometimes weeks later, empty-handed, indebted, and intoxicated. Meanwhile, the women and children were left without food in the villages.

Interaction with whites was always to the disadvantage of the Indian who could not control his desire for liquor. Even when he had no money, he would run up such debts that for months to come he would receive nothing in return for his furs. As already mentioned, families starved over the winter, or they broke up because the husband could not provide for them. "These savages, loaded with debts and despoiled by their creditors, who leave them not even their guns, are frequently obliged to quit the country and go among the English, because they cannot hope to pay what they owe" (Vol. 67, p. 41). When the Indians pleaded for the restriction of liquor trade, they were at the same time pleading for the restriction of any contact with whites. Liquor came to symbolize white contact and its demoralizing effects. The assumed relationship between drunkenness and disruption was a serious one — perhaps it never occurred to the Jesuits that the white man's way of life and his business practices could have negative effects. For them, liquor became the scapegoat. Drunkenness was the catch-all category that was to blame for any vices or disorder that occurred. Their own shortcomings were rationalized to be the fault of liquor, so that drunkenness was blamed even for the fact that the Indians were hard to Christianize. "But the greatest evil done here by drunkenness is, that its consequences Utterly estrange the savages from Christianity" (Vol. 62, p. 67). The Fathers lamented that if only drunkenness could be abolished, the natives could and would settle down to the Christian way of life. As the Jesuits saw it, there were two demons, drunkenness and dreams, and they could not decide which caused the greater disorder or which interfered more with the

conversion of the natives. Later, even the dream quest was thought to be due to drunkenness, as it was inconceivable that someone would voluntarily involve himself in non-Christian rites unless he was somehow possessed. But the evil connected with liquor had to do at least as much with its procuring as with its intoxicating effects. It is true that while inebriated they would commit crimes against their own people which they later regretted. It is interesting though, that the blame was attached to the white man and his liquor, not to oneself. This is evident from the following statements : "It is thou... and thine, who killed him; for, if thou hadst not given us brandy or wine, we would not have done it." "Thou art my brother, I love thee; it is not I who wounded thee, but the drink which used my arm" (Vol. 5, p. 49, 51). They were well aware of who supplied them with liquor, even against their own wishes at times, so that any disorder stemming from it could ultimately be blamed on the white man. If the Indians made any causal connection, it would probably have been between disruption and white man, not merely disruption and drunkenness.

Perhaps it is not valid to distinguish between drunkenness and contact with whites since in a way they are inseparable. On the other hand, the white man's behaviour and business tactics added considerably to the consequences of Indian drunkenness. He was in control of the amount of liquor sold, the prices charged and the credit and loans given. Indirectly, he determined whether a man would have any money left to feed his family or whether he would in fact, go back to his family at all. It was not the case that the Indian had the power to *force* the white man to give him liquor — in fact, he was happy when the white man refused. Quite aside from the management of liquor, the white man's way of life and his values were very different, and when imposed on the Indian, helped greatly to disorient or demoralize him. This aspect of social contact and the problem of assimilation has already been the topic of many books, and concerns this paper only indirectly. In any case, it was not white man's liquor alone that caused disorder.

The question of moral blame here is a very interesting one as it helps us to understand how the Indian could ask the white man to stop supplying him with liquor at the same time as he was drinking it. How can one blame the white man if the Indian sought

him out and demanded liquor at any price? On the other hand, how can one blame the Indian if the white man continued to supply even after the former had pleaded him to stop? In the eyes of the whites, the Indian was the weaker, in fact, they often thought of them as children. Anybody who understands the law of supply and demand would realize that a plea to stop the supply is not equivalent to an actual reduction in demand. It was up to the Indian to show a determination to end the demand. Unfortunately, he was not familiar with this economic law. His behaviour was based instead, on a moral code involving trust and honour. On this account the Indian and white man never understood each other. If anything, the Indian, to the white man, appeared untrustworthy and immoral. The Indian made his situation very clear to the white man, a tactic which to us seems naive, but to the Indian, honourable. He admitted he could not resist alcohol as long as it was available. He never thought of this as constituting a weakness. Thus he put the onus on the white man to stop the trade. Here may lie the roots of the long historical dependency of Indians on whites. If the white man complied with the code of honour, he should stop the supply. Since he did not, the Indian put all the blame on him and his liquor. He could not blame himself for his behaviour while under the influence because he was not even in possession of his mind at the time, and as has been intimated, they thought when one can transcend one's body, the person is qualitatively different. Another mistake the Indian made was to trust the white man to be interested in his welfare. This may have been a touch of ethnocentrism on his part. At that time, whites were not interested in his welfare. They only wished him well enough to trap more furs, with liquor providing the principal incentive.

Why did the Indian drink? There is no single explanation, but this analysis of the Relations suggests the following. One of the most obvious is the novel physical sensation brought on by the physiological effects of alcohol in the body. Many Indians seem to have felt that under its influence they became exceptional people such as great orators. Secondly, there is the suggestion that some Indians used alcohol so that they would be excused for committing acts of violence they would otherwise have had to suppress. Thirdly, as whites assumed more and more control over Indian affairs, the

former integrating effects of warfare and other village-wide activities were replaced by the search for and communal use of alcohol. Lastly, and most important, liquor greatly facilitated the attainment of dreams which was for the Indian his most valued experience. Through alcohol he was able to achieve a degree of ecstacy never possible in prehistoric times. But though the Indian interpreted these intense emotional outbursts as the only real form of human experience, to the early European and particularly the Jesuits, alcohol remained, as Parkman has written (1909:388): ".... a fiend with all crimes and miseries in his train: and, in fact, nothing earthly could better deserve the epithet infernal than an Indian town in the height of a drunken debauch. The orgies never ceased till the bottom of the barrel was reached."

Florida State University

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