

view on the dynamics of early postcolonial politics, and the role the African and American African key figures played in the events of the time.

With this book, Gaines has produced a valuable addition to the debate about the history of Pan-Africanism in Africa, and bridged a gap in our knowledge, in terms both of the period he treats and of the subject matter. Gaines also shows how a biographical approach can help us understand the history of the Pan-African movement better, with respect to anti-racism and anti-colonialism, as well as from an African point of view, but through the eyes of the African diaspora.

University of Groningen

MICHEL R. DOORTMONT

THE CULTURAL BIOGRAPHY OF DUTCH GIN IN WEST AFRICA

doi:10.1017/S0021853708003794

The King of Drinks: Schnapps Gin from Modernity to Tradition. By DMITRI VAN DEN BERSSELAAR. Leiden: Brill, 2007. Pp. xiv + 268. €69 (ISBN 978-90-04-16091-0).

KEY WORDS: West Africa, Ghana, African modernities, consumption, culture/cultural.

The stock of commodity histories continues to appreciate. Commodities are theoretically defined by reference to their exchange value, that is, the value they realize in the market. But the meaning or value attached to them, like other things that define them as commodities, is not consistent or stable but fluctuates over time and within contexts. In this case, though the Dutch gin imported into West Africa itself remained unchanged – colourless 40% distilled alcohol flavoured with herbs and spices, sold in square bottles – in cultural terms, it acquired meanings which changed over time, at different places and for different people.

When you read the book's sub-title you need a second look: 'schnapps gin from modernity to tradition', not the other way round. This sums up the book's argument. In the case of most consumer goods across the world, a certain path is followed from invention to mass consumption: a product is innovated; the latest new thing becomes the thing to acquire, there is the snobbery of showing it off, to be exclusive, modern; a craze ensues and a fashion is sparked; habitual consumption forms; the market widens, prices fall, the market deepens and mass market consumption occurs; a popular product's market may mature, and rival brands of the same generic product might be a challenge, but the consumption of the product is assured (until something 'new' comes along and the cycle starts again). Dutch gin in West Africa had a counter trajectory, however: from mass consumption to restricted circulation.

The book's author, Dmitri van den Bersselaar, is Lecturer in African History at the University of Liverpool, and, appropriately for the book's subject, comes from Schiedam, the acknowledged centre of the Dutch gin industry. He is equally as at home in charting the rise of the Dutch gin distillation industry as in describing the changing African markets demanding more and more cheap gin. Van den Bersselaar carefully charts five phases of gin's trajectory: first, as a relatively small part of the larger trans-Atlantic slave trade. Gin and other imported drinks did not completely displace local beverages, however: they co-existed, complemented and competed with each other. When the slave trade ended, the gin trade continued,

reaching large volumes in the second half of the nineteenth century. This is the second phase, which reached its peak between 1880 and the First World War when West Africa imported millions of gallons of gin, as locals used it for conspicuous personal, communal and ritual purposes, even as currency. Gin became embedded throughout the African lifecycle: from naming ceremonies, entertaining guests at weddings and chieftaincy instalments to funeral obsequies and pouring libations to the ancestors. By the first decade of the twentieth century, half of Dutch gin production went to West Africa.

The gin trade provoked fierce debate: was it advancing development or fashioning an economy based on the unproductive consumption of alcohol? The gin trade was caught between two prevailing colonial perspectives on Africa's economic development: the Darwinian-based notion that Western civilization had a duty to protect Africans from all bad external economic influences, and the civilize-through-trade concept which sought to modernize Africans by economically exploiting colonies to their fullest potential. Humanitarian concerns and economic interests became entangled. Positive views of gin claimed its necessity in developing the local economy. Some admitted that the gin trade formed a necessary evil, but did not fail to emphasize its civilizing role as a transitional currency, promoter of cash-crops-for-export ('a bottle of gin is dangled before the nose of the natives', as one British Member of Parliament memorably described it) and a desirable commodity among those with money to spend. On the other hand, critics used the temperance equation to further their cause: drinking gin bad, abstinence good. They believed the imposition of a 'Gin Civilization', through what the *Temperance Chronicle* called 'truculent, gin-soaked, spoilt natives', would mean Ghana and Nigeria would have purely zero-sum economies, with gin merchants' profits gained at the expense of the African population.

The third phase, from the 1920s to the end of colonial rule saw tighter and tighter national and international restrictions placed on gin, in efforts to divert local consumerism onto more acceptable, less dangerous, purchases. In fact, with a transfer of technology in the 1930s, local 'illicit' gin (more a rum flavour than a juniper one) decimated gin imports. The fourth phase until the late 1980s saw gin's continued decline in popularity, as lager beer dominated. Since then, we have entered into a fifth phase, where born-again Christianity and radical Islam have shunted gin off into a highly regarded niche of African ritual and as a beverage of choice for chiefs and elders. Bottles of 'old square-face' accompany visitors to the local chief, and attributes of its ancient powers are occasionally summoned in its libation to the recently deceased or over the bonnet of a family's newly acquired car.

This is a good-quality book, written in easily accessible language. Just a couple of spelling mistakes spotted (pp. 160 and 213 – the first brewery was owned by the Nigerian Brewery Limited). While the book is admirably illustrated with advertisements and photographs from across the years, it is an expensively priced paperback. This 'cultural biography of Dutch gin, with an emphasis on marketing, consumption and consumerism' is an excellent exploration of how Dutch gin evolved from a new, fashionable product linked to 'the global', to become a 'traditional' drink associated with rituals, the sanction of tradition and distinctly local African identities. Throughout the centuries, gin is a commodity that is concurrently foreign but also intimately connected to local culture. It may be a deeply unfashionable drink today, but at the same time gin is accorded great respect as a traditional drink, 'the king of drinks'. This is recommended reading for commodity historians and Africanists alike.