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MONEY, MILK AND SORGHUM BEER: CHANGE AND CONTINUITY AMONG THE IRAQW OF TANZANIA

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In this article I shall focus on two central products that derive from the two spheres of the production regime of the Cushitic-speaking Iraqw,[1] an agro-pastoral people living in northern Tanzania. Both sorghum beer and milk have high significance in the lives of the Iraqw, not only owing to their nutritional value, but also on account of their potential as symbols in continuous discourses on relations between individuals, between groups of people, as well as between human beings and spirits and deity.

Both products have deep historical roots among the Iraqw. Cushitic peoples, who entered the area 3,000 to 5,000 years ago, were probably the first food-producing inhabitants of East Africa, and sorghum is presumed to have been one of the earliest crops to be cultivated in this region. Linguistic and archaeological evidence seems to confirm that Cushites were also the first East Africans to keep cattle and exploit their milk yield (Ambrose, 1982: 113; Ehret, 1967; Sutton, 1981: 576–9).

Through a presentation of how the Iraqw handle and make use of these two products I shall try to illuminate the manner in which both become associated with qualities that are perceived as positive and desirable.[2] With the spread of the market economy and of money as a medium of exchange, the symbolic contents of sorghum beer and milk seem to have come under considerable pressure. As products in demand, they may today circulate in impersonal relations which lack the social and religious qualities that they traditionally communicated. The monetisation of sorghum beer and milk has not, however, caused a breakdown in established practices, nor in the structures of meaning in which such practices are embedded. This article will try to illuminate some of the processes which seem to be of importance in explaining this remarkable cultural continuity in the face of fairly radical social change. These examples seem to highlight more general dynamics of change and continuity among the Iraqw, which I will return to and discuss further at the end of the article.

I wish to emphasise that the data on which the article is based were mainly collected within one village, Maghang, in the southern part of the area currently dominated by the Iraqw. The Iraqw must in no way be regarded as a culturally homogenous group, and the findings and conclusions presented here may not be applicable to other Iraqw-speaking populations differently located in time or space. The Iraqw of today are characterised by social and cultural diversity, some of which may be attributed to the impact of Catholic and Lutheran missions, compulsory education, national administration, market forces, and intensified contact with other ethnic groups. Such cultural variation should be kept in mind when I use concepts such as 'the Iraqw' and 'Iraqw culture'.

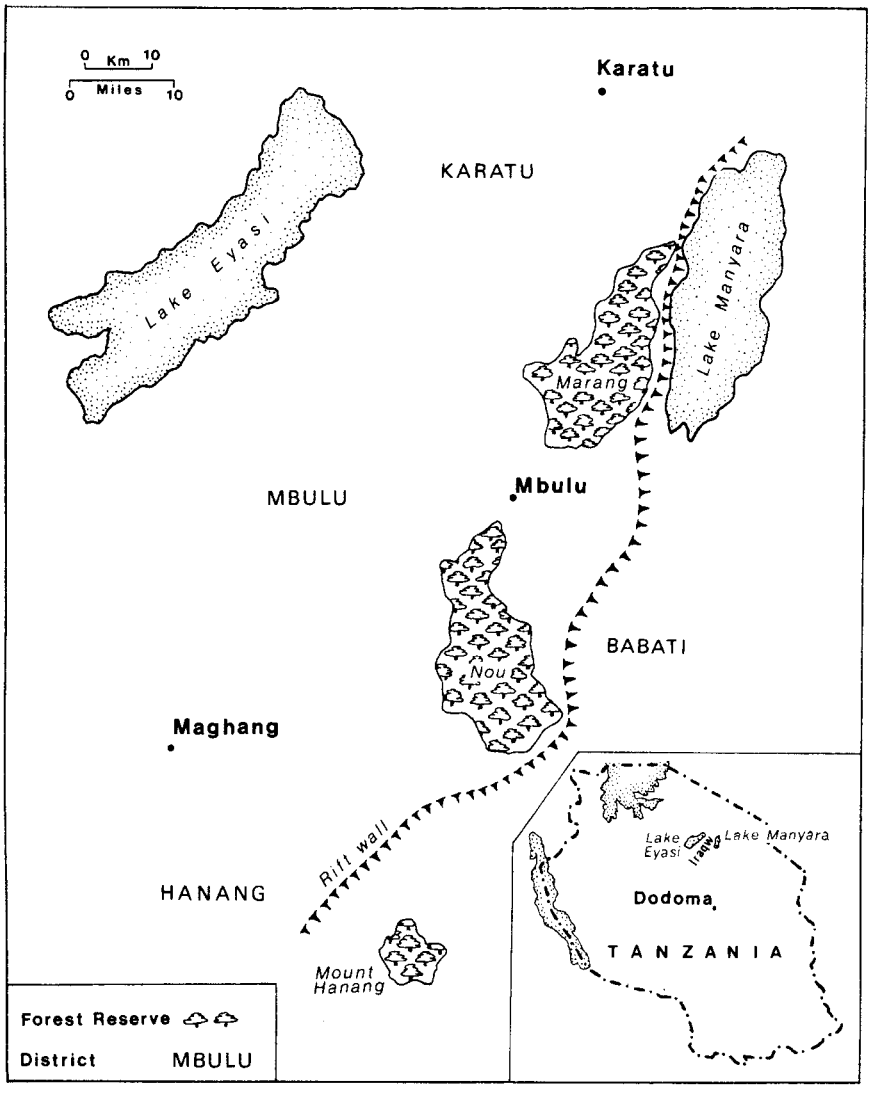

FIG. 1. *The location of the Iraqw. (Based on Snyder, 1993)*

SORGHUM BEER (*BUURA*)[3]

During the first weeks of my fieldwork in Maghang I was struck by the number of people who introduced themselves by the name Buura ('Beer'). A child frequently gets a name according to the circumstances, often relating to what the father was doing, that characterise the time and place of birth. That Buura is by far the most common name in Maghang may therefore reflect that a sizeable number of fathers were brewing, drinking, or were otherwise

involved with sorghum beer when their children were born. A brief glance at the social activity of any Iraqw village will confirm that many of the inhabitants do indeed spend a considerable amount of time handling beer. Another striking feature of my first weeks in the village was that numerous individuals showed considerable interest in whether or not I drank, or enjoyed drinking, beer. Later I came to understand that the question was a way of classifying me as a person. Whether one drinks or not reflects important social and religious boundaries in Iraqw society.[4]

During the different phases of the agricultural cycle a considerable part of the cultivation is done by work parties (*slaqwe*). A group of neighbours join forces and work each other's fields in rotation. The one who owns or has usufruct rights over a field which is to be cultivated on a particular day will brew *buura*. Then, after the work is completed, the participants will gather at the household of the host, where they will be served food and sorghum beer. During the rainy season, when agricultural activity is at its peak, everyday life for Iraqw men becomes a series of such work parties. For the households that take part, this system ensures that the necessary tasks which provide the basis for the coming harvest are carried out. The worker/consumer ratio of different households may vary considerably, owing to fluctuations of a more or less temporary kind. Newly established family units with small children will commonly have little manpower but many mouths to feed. Had they to perform the chores without assistance such units would, owing to labour shortage, necessarily experience difficulties during the most labour-intensive stages of the agricultural cycle. Similarly, for all participating households the system provides insurance against the effects of any temporary reduction of labour capacity, for example owing to disease. Other labour-intensive tasks, such as digging wells and building houses, may also be accomplished through the institution of *slaqwe*.

If a household suffers some kind of misfortune that threatens its viability (if, for instance, the herd is decimated by an epidemic or a fire destroys the homestead), various institutionalised practices ensure that the household will receive the necessary assistance from neighbours and relatives. An essential feature of these institutions is that the household head arranges a beer gathering for the individuals he has asked to help. The guests will arrive with gifts, or promises of gifts, such as domestic animals or building materials, which will contribute to the restoration of the unfortunate household's viability.[5]

Sorghum beer is characteristically served on occasions where reciprocity or solidarity is realised in action. According to traditional religious beliefs the manifest unity and harmony of the local group are a prerequisite for establishing an amicable relationship with the supernatural, and especially with the Iraqw female deity, Looaa. This is expressed directly in proverbs and sayings which tend to be variations of the core message: 'If we all agree with each other, then Looaa must agree with us.' Through the co-operation that takes place in the fields and through the joint consumption of food and sorghum beer, the Iraqw thus fulfil the fundamental demand of mutual accord and solidarity which is the presupposition for contact with Looaa. The time of drinking is therefore also the occasion for ritual prayers (*firo*). Looaa, the supreme being, is thanked, and any harmful or evil influence from

Neetlangw ('water spirits') and *daa/aluuse* (sorcerers) is cursed. The atmosphere characterised by solidarity and unity is further emphasised by the formal structure of the *firo*. Messages presented by the leader of the prayers are continuously supplemented and supported by confirming statements from one or more respondents. The speaker will gradually build up his argument and will, with increasing intensity, reach an emotionally charged conclusion to which all the participants will respond by enthusiastically repeating the key message, or by proclaiming in unison that they all agree with what has been said. Each new finale is accompanied by vigorous and approving gestures.

Conflict between individuals or between groups of people threatens this unity and solidarity, and consequently also the relationship between the local community, the spirits, and the deity. People present are commonly quick to initiate measures to prevent any disagreement from erupting into a serious stick fight. Fights do occur from time to time, however, and often result in court cases where the differing views are presented before a group of elders. A central element of such court cases is the reconciliation, usually through a ritual meal, of the parties in conflict. After particularly violent outbursts, this may involve the slaughter and consumption of a domestic animal. In most cases, however, a certain amount of sorghum beer will be brewed by one or more of the parties, and they will both be required to drink from the same gourd. The court case is concluded with ritual prayers (*firo*), where the restoration of peace and solidarity among all men is communicated, thereby re-establishing the essential prerequisites for maintaining a good relationship between the local community and Looaa.

The use of sorghum beer as protection against, or remedy for, conflict is conveyed even more concretely in other contexts. For example, sticks[6] may be smeared with *buura* if there is reason to believe that there are latent conflicts between individuals at a social gathering. Sorghum beer, together with honey or honey mead, is also a central element in rituals seeking to withdraw and neutralise curses.

The handling of sorghum beer is in itself a highly ritualised procedure. The beer is always poured from the pot into the drinking vessels in two or four stages, never in one or three. Sorghum beer may not be drunk while standing, nor should anybody seat himself while holding a gourd of beer in his hands. Drinking vessels of various kinds may be utilised, but need to be sufficiently big to contain enough beer for several people. The gourd must also be continually passed back and forth between individuals who belong to the same social category, age and sex being the most important criteria. The spatial separation between male elders and youth becomes less rigid as the drinking proceeds, allowing participants to form cross-generation drinking groups. At this stage the Iraqw beer party becomes like what Karp (1980: 104) noted about Iteso beer drinking: 'a form of social communion, a commensal sharing in which persons who participate are stripped of the capacities in terms of which they interact in non-beer drinking contexts'. The drinking of sorghum beer is in these ways performed in a manner which reflects generally desired social qualities, such as reciprocity and the sharing of goods.

The use of *buura* as a mediator of positive social qualities is also extended to relations between the living and 'the spirits of the dead' (*gi'i*).[7] In order to keep or restore a good relationship with the *gi'i*, offerings of sorghum beer, milk, and, in serious cases, meat are presented, usually at the threshold of the house of the deceased or at his or her grave. Sorghum beer is also a central element in various other ritual occasions. During the important *geetla/angw* ritual, which marks the end of one agricultural cycle and the beginning of a new one, a huge beer pot is, in two senses, the centre of the arena.

Buura seems both to reflect and to generate qualities that are perceived as desirable and good in social relationships. These qualities are highlighted in situations where circumstances call for precautions to protect oneself, i.e. in situations which demand distance, not closeness and sharing. Certain events, such as death, abortion, strikes by lightning, premarital births, or the shedding of blood (especially if it is caused by an object made of iron) on the ground, all cause ritual pollution. The individuals affected by such events will be required to keep a certain physical and social distance from the rest of the community, i.e. they will be in a state of *meeta*, a term Snyder (1993: 177) has translated as 'the quarantine created to contain pollution'.[8] Direct contact with a person in *meeta* is considered dangerous, and, when meeting individuals whose background is unknown, people will take measures to avoid a close relationship. On occasions where sorghum beer is served, such preventive measures seem to be accentuated. Individuals affected by ritual pollution may sometimes work in the fields together with their neighbours, but at the end-of-the-day beer gathering they must consume their food and beer at some distance from the compound of the host. This would indicate that the intimacy communicated through the joint consumption of sorghum beer renders a beer gathering more vulnerable to the transfer of ritual pollution. This is therefore compensated for by keeping a wider physical distance than is common on other occasions.

Funerals are among the few social occasions where sorghum beer is rarely or never served. The reason must be found in the unclean condition of the family and the household of the deceased, i.e. they will be in a state of *meeta*. The fact that the traditional wedding is another important social event usually characterised by the absence of beer may be related to structural tensions between the two patrilineal descent groups involved which would render the symbolism of beer inappropriate. When the marriage results in children, however, the relationship seems to become more relaxed, and in-laws may now be invited to a beer gathering.

The socially integrative aspect of *buura* is given another expression by the way many immigrants from other ethnic groups perceive it. The Iraqw seem to have been highly inclusive in their relations with representatives of differing ethnic groups.[9] It is frequently stated that anyone who wishes to settle among them may do so, provided there is enough land and the immigrants are willing to adjust to certain Iraqw norms of behaviour. Individuals of foreign origin who live in Iraqw-dominated areas may be heard saying that they fear drinking sorghum beer with the Iraqw, as the latter allegedly possess certain herbs that are frequently mixed with the beer that is served to strangers. Such medicines are said to have the effect of making the drinker forget his homeland, and of implanting in him a strong

desire to remain with the Iraqw and their beer gatherings. When immigrants who have no wish to settle permanently among the Iraqw are suspicious of sorghum beer as a medium for assimilatory, iraqw'ising or alcoholising processes, this is hardly surprising if we consider what *buura* stands for within Iraqw society. The inclusiveness that sorghum beer communicates in most diverse contexts is a quality that this particular group of immigrants for different reasons, at least to a certain extent, want to avoid.

Beer as payment?

In the existing literature about the Iraqw, beer is portrayed as a 'payment' for the services that the participants in a work party are providing for the host (cf. Winter, 1968: 4; Fukui, 1970: 134; Raikes, 1975: 271). A closer look at the apparently straightforward exchange between work and beer, however, reveals features that may not be adequately explained by such concepts.[10]

Arranging a beer gathering as a way of mobilising labour is done solely in connection with activities which are not directly associated with 'modernity'. Digging wells, building and repairing traditional houses, and cultivation for subsistence, for example, may all be regarded as activities that reproduce the welfare and viability of the local community. In this respect such projects may be labelled 'traditional', in contrast to other more individually oriented or 'modern' tasks such as the production of cash crops or the construction of houses from burnt clay or concrete blocks. In Maghang beer gatherings are frequently arranged for the former purpose, but rarely or never for the latter.

The pastor of the local Lutheran church has argued that many traditional Iraqw customs are in accordance with Christian ideals and are therefore worth preserving. He sees the solidarity and co-operation represented by the work party as a good example. The pastor sought at one point to modify the institution in accordance with the Church's restrictive views on the consumption of alcohol. Meat and other highly valued foodstuffs were substituted for sorghum beer, and Christian prayers for the traditional litanies. The experiment failed, however, to mobilise even members of the local congregation. This example does not provide a basis for general conclusions, but it does indicate that the notion of beer being used as a 'payment for labour' does not provide us with an adequate explanation of the transactions that take place in connection with the beer gathering. The fact that sorghum beer is an indispensable element of the work party is related more to its symbolic content than to its material exchange value.[11]

The transactions of the work party are not complete when the final sip of beer is taken. The host is further obliged to take over the roles of his guests on later occasions; failure to do so will be regarded as a breach of proper conduct. The exchange of labour within the institutional frames of the work party may perhaps best be understood as the realisation of what Sahlins (1972) has termed 'generalized reciprocity', or in other words, that each person gives according to what he has (in this case agricultural manpower), and each person receives according to his needs. With this understanding, the difference between the beer gathering of the cultivator and that of the unlucky man who has lost his herd becomes a matter of degree and not kind. In the latter case, it becomes meaningless to represent the transactions of

such institutions as à balanced exchange of objects—for example, cattle for beer. It is no more meaningful, I argue, to regard the beer pot as containing the salary for a day's work. The transactions of the work party may be more fruitfully understood as a continuous exchange of manpower between the various participating households. Such reciprocal relations may last for several generations, compensating for fluctuations in available manpower of single households.[12]

The function of sorghum beer at the work party is thus not primarily as a medium of exchange; beer is rather a symbol of, or the nucleus of, long-term reciprocal relations between members of participating households. Several participants at a work party responded emphatically to my hint about a possible exchange value of beer: 'This is not payment. We are just *helping* each other!' When an unfortunate household, by arranging a beer gathering, is able to re-establish a herd or rebuild a house within a short period of time, this act of solidarity from relatives and friends is best understood as an extreme variant of the daily activity taking place within the institution of the work party.

Monetised beer

Up to this point I have described what may be labelled as the 'traditional' context of *buura*. However, much of the beer that is consumed in Maghang today clearly lacks the symbolic and religious qualities I have elaborated upon above. In all Iraqw localities with a certain population density there will be at least one *kilabu* (Swahili, pl. *vilabu*), a popular and often crowded market place for the selling and buying of *buura*. Even a brief look at the setting and activity of the *kilabu* will reveal some differences to the beer gatherings I have described above. Non-monetised sorghum beer is served and consumed indoors (except by individuals in *meeta*), while commercial beer is usually sold from rudimentary stands and consumed outside in the shade of buildings or trees. A second immediate impression is that the consumption of beer seems to be considerably heavier at the *kilabu* than in other settings. A closer look at the social activity of the *kilabu* will reveal further differences. No ritual prayers are performed, and the atmosphere is generally more casual, relaxed or humorous; laughter and loud verbal arguments, sometimes erupting into fighting, may frequently be heard, and the handling of beer is free from many of the restrictions and norms of the traditional beer gathering. Cross-generational and cross-sex drinking groups are formed, the beer may be consumed in a standing position, and the size of the vessels seems to be decided solely by practical considerations.

Although the drinking which takes place at the *kilabu* is clearly less formal and more individualised than in the traditional setting, it is nevertheless common to see groups of customers sharing the same gourd. One may even find persons in *meeta* drinking together with others they are required to keep a good distance from in other settings. Informants would claim that ritual pollution is less dangerous in the *kilabu*, a fact that is consistent with other 'modern' situations or locations, such as a nearby hospital, the Mbulu bus, or the local market place, which, to a certain extent, are exempt from the normal rules of *meeta*. Despite the differences from the traditional settings, the drinking of beer in the *kilabu* retains a strong element

of sociability and reciprocity. People do not primarily go there to drink a certain liquid with a certain consistency; they go there to be together with others in a special way. In some cases one may even say that the ability to communicate sociability is heightened in the new context. Lutherans, who in general are supposed to be restrictive in their consumption of alcohol, in some cases have an apparently more relaxed relationship to beer when it is served in the *kilabu*. This may be linked with the close associations between sorghum beer and 'pagan' religion when it is served in the traditional setting.

Many of the traditional qualities of sorghum beer are, however, apparently absent in the *kilabu*. The Iraqw readily confirm that they perceive important differences between beer consumption in the two different situations. 'This is not beer of *slaqwe*!' may be heard as the negative answer to a person who asks for a sip of beer from his fellow Iraqw's gourd in the *kilabu*. The sociability of the *kilabu* and the kind of beer which is consumed there is probably as new as the very word for the place where the beer is served: *kilabu* has got both its meaning and its orthography from the English word 'club'.

Elders in Maghang claim that sorghum beer has been sold for as long as the Iraqw have had access to money. This means that it has most likely been possible to exchange money for beer throughout most of this century. Enquiries about the circumstances surrounding the early history of sorghum beer becoming a market commodity revealed few signs of resistance stemming from traditional attitudes. On the contrary, a good commercial beer brewer is, and allegedly always has been, highly valued and respected for his or her expertise. This contrasts with what Håland (1990) and Barth (1981: 171) found among the Fur of Sudan. There the selling of beer was associated with shame and to a certain extent equated with prostitution, i.e. traditional values and norms inhibited market transactions involving beer. When the importance of such norms was reduced in certain villages in Darfur, it was a result of social change which strongly influenced traditional transactional patterns between man and wife, a relationship in which beer was deeply embedded symbolically.

There are, however, certain features which seem to indicate that the introduction of sorghum beer into new contexts has not been entirely straightforward. The shame associated with the selling of beer in Darfur was expressed spatially by the peripheral location of the beer market in relation to other commercial activities in the village. This was also the case in Maghang until 1974, when the implementation of the policy of *ujamaa* led to radical changes in the composition of the village. Since then various *vilabu* have been established at, or moved to, more central locations in the village. Another example is that efforts to levy taxes on domestic production of beer have met especially strong resistance, causing massive boycotts not only among ordinary Iraqw but also among their elected leaders (Quorro, 1971: 55; Malley, 1970: 23). In addition to its function as a remedy for strained social relations, beer has also been used as a fine in traditional court cases, i.e. if found guilty a defendant may be obliged to brew a certain amount of sorghum beer. An effort to integrate beer as a fine for failing to participate in public development projects is reported to have failed completely, owing to generally strong resistance in the community (Malley, 1970: 41). Despite

such examples, however, the general impression is still that the commercialisation of sorghum beer, or its transfer to an entirely new context, has met with relatively few signs of resistance.

Other features reveal, however, that the relocation of beer from a domestic or traditional framework to the market has not been, and is still not, free from complication. At the end of the agricultural cycle, usually in September or October, most households will arrange the *geetla/angw* ritual. This ritual has several more or less explicit functions, the most important of which, in this context, is that it determines whether or not beer may be sold, i.e. the previous year's harvest of sorghum may not be sold until the ritual is held. Breach of this rule is associated with shame, and Looaa is expected to punish the offender. Through the ritual, sorghum beer is enabled to cross the barrier between the traditional and the modern contexts. Put in another way, the *geetla/angw* ritual is required in order to redefine the symbolic and religious qualities of sorghum beer and thus make it compatible with market transactions.

From this there seems to be good reason to claim that there are two kinds of beer among the Iraqw: commercialised beer and traditional beer. Before I elaborate on this point I shall present another product that, among the Iraqw, is associated with an even higher degree of intimacy.

MILK

Milk is the most highly valued ingredient in the traditional Iraqw diet, a cultural feature which, in this case, is in perfect accordance with the nutritional value of milk. According to health personnel working in the area, the malnutrition syndrome of kwashiorkor is practically non-existent among the Iraqw. This contrasts with its prevalence among the Iramba, a neighbouring group subsisting on much the same diet as the Iraqw but with the important exception that the Iramba do not have the same access to protein-rich pastoral products, particularly milk.

In Maghang there is a café which serves tea and coffee, and on some days the proprietor is able to provide milk to mix with the warm drinks. Invariably this milk is imported from Kenya via Arusha, either in powder form or in cartons. The long-distance transport of milk from Nairobi to a remote locality in Tanzania may appear puzzling, considering the fact that this area is one of the richest in cattle in the entire country. Cattle and cattle products in general flow *out of* this district in large amounts. The European employees of a nearby Lutheran hospital will readily comment on the 'peculiar' ways the Iraqw handle their milk products. Despite continuous requests from the missionaries, many of whom have raised children in the area, the Iraqw have proved unwilling to sell the milk from their many cows. The milk that has been consumed by the missionaries and their children has therefore largely been imported all the way from Kenya. Indeed, such imports have taken place during the rainy season at times when nearby Iraqw households were unable to consume the entire milk yield of their cows. Some of the missionaries have, however, on some occasions been *given* milk as a gift.

In order to seek an understanding of these puzzling features, a fruitful starting point may be to explore the circulation of milk within Iraqw society.

Milk produced by the cows that belong to a certain household is very rarely brought outside the limits of the compound; in other words, it is milked, refined and consumed primarily by the members of the household. When milk is served to visitors the common denominator of the guests is that they have a close relationship with their host. Young girls may moreover hide some milk away in order to present it as a gift to boy-friends. The relations in which milk circulates are thus usually confined by the boundaries of the household and, when crossing that boundary, are characterised by love or trust.

It seems reasonable, following Håland (1990: 11), to regard milk as a metonym for a relationship that is universally characterised by an extreme degree of intimacy, love and trust, i.e. the relationship between mother and child. Indeed, in some respects the Iraqw conceptualise the mother–milk–child relationship as a unity, comparable with that of the relationship between a pregnant woman and her foetus. An abortion and the death of a child that is still being breast-fed are both categorised as tragic events causing the same serious type of *meeta*. This in stark contrast to the categorisation of deaths among children that are weaned, which, if classified as requiring *meeta* at all, are of a much more benign kind. The weaning of a child is perceived as the initiation into a new phase of life, a transition that is marked ritually.

As a metonym for the mother–child relationship, milk may be used metaphorically only in relationships that share some of the same intimate qualities. To allow milk to circulate in relationships lacking such qualities is considered shameful. When outsiders receive milk as a gift, it is an unmistakable sign of devotion or love, or at the least it is a strong invitation to establish or reproduce a close relationship. Europeans and other educated immigrants are usually aware of the fact that milk may transfer bacteria which cause serious diseases such as brucellosis and tuberculosis. When offered milk in an Iraqw household, they will in many cases politely reject it, out of fear that the milk has not been boiled. The double tragedy of such situations is that the guests seem to be completely unaware of what their Iraqw hosts are communicating by offering them milk, just as the hosts may be unaware of the health scruples of their guests.

The rationality behind Iraqw unwillingness to sell or dispose of milk is apparently twofold. Children and calves are regarded as particularly vulnerable to sorcery or polluting influences on the milk of their mothers. At the nearby hospital, which has approximately 2,000 deliveries per year, death in childbirth is not uncommon. The motherless child in such cases will be in a state of ritual impurity. At the same time it will be needing milk in one form or another. Lactating Iraqw mothers have not proved willing to breast-feed such children, since their own children would be severely threatened by contact with the pollution of the other child. The solution at the hospital is usually to have mothers from other ethnic groups provide the necessary milk, or to give the children commercially produced substitutes.

The same rationale applies to cow's milk, i.e. the calf will suffer or die if the milk of its mother comes into contact with sorcery or with pollution. Women in general are regarded as less polluted than men, not as an inherent quality decided by sex, but rather owing to the fact that, since men lead a

broader social life, they are exposed to more of the invisible influences of sorcery and ritual pollution. Although boys 'who do not travel around much' may in some instances do the milking, it is usually, purportedly for the reasons mentioned above, a female task. When milk is given away, the owner of the calf must be certain that the receiver has no evil intentions and must trust that he or she will not, out of carelessness, expose the milk to sorcery or ritual pollution in any form. Trust and confidence, as dimensions of the relationships in which milk circulates, are therefore not only metaphorically related to the mother–child relationship but are also connected with ideas about the calf's vulnerability to what happens to the milk which, by natural law, it was supposed to have. To bring milk to the market implies that the owner loses control over who comes into contact with it, thereby exposing his calf to serious danger.

The fact that sorcery applied to milk is perceived as a threat to the calf has implications for another characteristic of milk. When offering beer to a visitor, one may frequently see that the host takes a sip of the gourd before it is served the guest. The intention is to assure the visitor that no harmful substances have been mixed with the beer. I have never seen this procedure followed in cases involving milk, the reason purportedly being that a sorcerer would experience harm to his own calves only if he mixed his milk with malign substances, thereby making such practices self-defeating.[13] One might therefore add purity as another characteristic of milk; the milk from a cow whose calf is alive is never dangerous to the person who drinks it.

During my first discussions about milk I was frequently made aware that it is not considered proper to articulate the Iraqw word for milk, *ilwa*. Instead I was advised to use the term *xwaante*, literally meaning maize soup.[14] Many informants would simply state that 'it is not good' to pronounce the word. Some would say that *ilwa* is associated with affluence, and that the use of the word would imply boasting, i.e. an expression of bad social qualities. Others would explain that the Iraqw ceased to use the term 'when milk became scarce'. The story is that in the beginning, when the Iraqw spoke of their *ilwa*, Looaa heard and concluded that they had too much of it. The result was that she, as the source of fertility for all things in the world, reduced the amount that she gave to the Iraqw. The substitute word *xwaante* is therefore allegedly used in order to induce Looaa to increase the amount of milk again.

Qualities of the mother–milk–child constellation are not only transferred metaphorically to other human relationships, but also occur in relations between the Iraqw and their deity. Looaa is female because 'she is like the mother of the Iraqw'. Hence the milk that is manipulated from the cows is regarded as Looaa's gift to her children. This is seldom as clearly stated as in ritual prayers for fertility. Rain clouds are referred to as 'breasts', and worries about the state of people, cattle and land are expressed in phrases such as 'The breast we are sucking is drying up'. Milk thereby becomes a metonym for the ultimate relation, i.e. the relationship between the Iraqw and their god. Thus the reason for not articulating *ilwa* seems to be connected with its sacred aspects.[15]

Monetisation of milk

While making enquiries about the circulation of milk I was invariably told

that milk might not be sold, and my informants claimed to know of no cases in the village where milk had been exchanged for money. These statements seemed to be consistent with my observations during fieldwork. One day, however, I was invited to a meal at the household of one of the many immigrants to Maghang. Knowing that this person was one of the few in the village who did not keep cattle, I was surprised to find that he was able to offer me several glasses of milk. When I asked about the origin of the milk, he somewhat reluctantly explained that he had established an agreement with a nearby Christian Iraqw family regarding the daily delivery of two bottles of milk. For this service he paid a certain amount of money, which turned out to be less than 5 per cent of the purchase price of the imported milk that was served in the village café. The agreement was established on the conditions that he was not to serve the milk to anyone outside his household, and that he was to keep the transaction secret. Further enquiries revealed that there was at least one other case in the village, and the situation was the same: a non-Iraqw immigrant bought milk from a Christian Iraqw, on the same conditions. The manner in which the norms and values constituting the sphere barrier were violated, and the specific social categories involved in the transaction thus seem to confirm the general existence and strength of the barrier.

'Modern milk'

Up to this point I have focused solely on milk that is produced by indigenous zebu cows. In adjacent areas, development projects and a few individual Iraqw households have bought cows of European origin. These animals, called 'modern cows' both in Iraqw and Swahili, yield significantly more milk than 'traditional cows', and are usually kept in order to produce a surplus that can be marketed. The sale of this milk, i.e. its circulation in impersonal relations, is not concealed in any way, and the elaborate regulations that surround the circulation of 'traditional milk' are absent. 'Modern milk' and 'traditional milk', objectively very similar or identical in colour, form and taste, are apparently conceptualised as radically different from each other.[16]

Creating the category 'modern milk', and leaving it unaffected by the religious and symbolic constraints of 'traditional milk', keeps the new product neutral in a manner that facilitates its sale as a market commodity. In this way the Iraqw have been able to integrate a new and valued element, milk as a commodity, into their conceptual framework. But establishing a distinction or a barrier between 'modern' and 'traditional milk' has yet another implication, if not intention; it assures the protection of the symbolic and religious aspects of 'traditional milk'. What has taken place may thus fruitfully be regarded as a process or a procedure of adjusting to change in a manner that serves to maintain social and cultural continuity.

MONEY AND CHANGE

The introduction of money into many African societies that previously had no such medium of exchange has been recorded as having been accompanied by massive change. The impersonality or 'the shatteringly simplifying' idea

of money is accused of having destroyed established social relations and of having broken down cultural distinctions in a rather mechanical manner (Bohannan, 1959).

Another perspective is presented by Parry and Bloch (1989), who insist upon the need to look at how a particular culture comes to view money rather than at what kind of world view money in itself gives rise to (p. 19). In their review of how money is symbolically represented in various societies, Parry and Bloch find not only considerable cross-cultural variation, but also that the meaning of money may vary within one culture. Furthermore, in the instances when it has been possible to identify cross-cultural similarities in the way money is represented, according to Parry and Bloch, the similarities are not due to the innate qualities that have often been attributed to money, such as the alleged tendency for money to do away with cultural distinctions and to depersonalise social relations. Instead they would suggest that such superficial similarities represent:

> a kind of epiphenomenon of regularities which exist at a deeper level. That is, they are a consequence of regularities in the way in which the transactional world as a whole is symbolically constructed in terms of what we have called long and short-term cycles. [1989: 28–9]

Earlier in their introductory chapter they clarify these concepts in the following manner:

> Each of our case studies, we argue, reveals a strikingly similar concern with the relationship between a cycle of short-term exchange which is the legitimate domain of the individual, often acquisitive, activity, and a cycle of long-term exchanges concerned with the reproduction of the social and cosmic order; and in each case the way in which the two are articulated turns out to be very similar. [1989: 2]

The distinction 'at a deeper level' is thus analytically more significant than the more conventional monetary/non-monetary dichotomy. Money is not necessarily present in the 'short-term' sphere, nor is money confined to it. Impersonal or 'short-term' transactions are of course possible without money as a medium of exchange and, as Parry and Bloch have pointed out, money may be involved in 'long-term' transactional patterns. When traditional cultural and social structures are destroyed, as in the classic Tiv case (Bohannan, 1959), money in itself is not to blame. What really happens, according to Parry and Bloch, is that the short-term cycles infringe on the domain of the long-term transactional patterns:

> When the short-term cycle threatens to replace the long-term cycle then the world is rotten. It is in such circumstances that a morally indeterminate instrument becomes something morally opprobrious. [1989: 28]

In the Iraqw case, sorghum beer and milk can be seen as metonyms for agriculture and pastoralism, i.e. the vital relations between the Iraqw and the environment on which they subsist. As metaphors they occur in relationships of immense importance for those involved, i.e. relations between close

relatives, friends and neighbours, but also between human beings, spirits, and the deity. To use the terms of Parry and Bloch, sorghum beer and milk appear to be central vehicles for the Iraqw reproduction of 'long-term social and cosmic order'.

On the other hand, sorghum beer and milk may both be found as market commodities, circulating in impersonal or 'short-term' transactions, without having any immediately evident destructive effects on the 'long-term cycles', i.e. on the traditional circulation patterns and cultural content of the two products. The selling of beer and 'modern milk' apparently do not cause 'the world to become rotten'.[17]

As the commercialisation of sorghum beer and milk does not seem to threaten the traditional symbolic and religious qualities attributed to those products in other contexts, this achievement must be related to the construction and maintenance of a conceptual boundary between different kinds of beer or milk. The existence and relevance of such dichotomies are, as I have sought to illustrate above, evident in the daily life of Maghang.

My informants stated that they did not know the ultimate reason why the cows of European origin produce something so entirely different from what the cows of the more familiar types do. They were well aware of the fact that the role of the *geetla/angw* ritual in preparing sorghum for market transactions was a rather new one, but no one was able to explain how and when this new function was added to the more traditional ones. I did not expect a clear answer to these questions, but, with some knowledge of Iraqw culture and history, I would not have been surprised if I had got one.

Robert J. Thornton, who has published a comprehensive ethnographic study of the Iraqw, writes that he was struck by 'the apparently *ad hoc* nature of many of their rites and rituals'. One of his examples is the following:

> when the Tanzanian government insisted that the Iraqw and the Masai make up and be friends, a group of ritual experts got together and invented a ritual that involved a Masai and an Iraqw woman exchanging infants and suckling them at each other's breast. [1980: 147]

Another example of such 'ritual inventiveness' may perhaps help to shed further light on the processes in question. In the 1950s a Lutheran hospital was established about 10 km from Maghang, and the health services provided by the European missionaries soon became popular among many Iraqw in the surrounding areas. Shortly after the opening, however, the hospital ran into difficulties because of the pollution beliefs of the Iraqw. Inside the building patients died, unmarried women gave birth, and iron caused bleeding during operations and blood tests, events all strongly associated with ritual pollution and the *meeta* precautions. Patients insisted that the dying must be brought outside the building, and healthy individuals refused to donate blood for their anaemic or newly operated on close relatives. According to informants in Maghang, the main problems were solved practically overnight. During a meeting of influential ritual leaders and Iraqw elders it was decided that the hospital compound should be exempt from certain types of *meeta* regulations, and that what took place in this particular location should be regarded as the work of Looaa. The result

of this decision, which allegedly was reached after lengthy prayers to Looaa, was that the Iraqw in adjacent areas could benefit from the evidently efficacious treatment the hospital was able to provide without exposing themselves to the dangers of the extremely strong concentration of ritual pollution that, according to traditional definitions, should be linked up with the location and the health personnel working there.

It is worth noticing that the redefinition of the hospital compound did not alter the fundamental idea that certain events lead to ritual pollution, requiring a state of *meeta*. On the contrary, such beliefs seem to have become strengthened by such processes. By defining the hospital as a place where ritual pollution may not be transmitted, contradictions between practice and religion are avoided, i.e. practice is no longer a threat to the rationality of pollution and *meeta*. The integration of new ideas and new practices is thus achieved in a manner which ensures the continuity of certain fundamental beliefs.

The creation of the dichotomy between the hospital compound and its surroundings therefore has the same consequences as the distinctions drawn between different kinds of beer and milk. Monetised sorghum beer and milk represent valued 'new' products and involve desired new practices that are integrated into the daily life of the Iraqw, and this is taking place in a manner which ensures continuity in existing transactional patterns and symbolic structures. In Parry and Bloch's words, these processes are directed at controlling the articulation between 'short' and 'long-term cycles' in order to prevent the former from replacing the latter. The inventiveness or creativity required to achieve this is highlighted by the story about the dramatic redefinition of the hospital compound. Although we may not be able to trace the origin of the beer and milk dichotomies in the same way, the general dynamic seems to be the same. These newly created distinctions must obviously be accepted and internalised and such cultural integration is the result of a continual creative discourse rather than an overnight procedure. The story of the redefinition of the hospital compound, whether reflecting historical realities or not, may be seen as a contribution to such a discourse. It serves as a myth which legitimises new ways of looking upon, and acting upon, the world.

The processes I have pointed to may perhaps help to resolve an apparent paradox in the way the Iraqw are perceived and evaluated by outsiders. Neighbouring peoples tend to classify the Iraqw, together with other 'conservative' peoples like the Maasai or the Datooga, as *watu wa kabila*, literally 'tribal people' if translated from Swahili (cf. Wazaki, 1966: 247; Ishige, 1969: 99; Arens, 1979: 60, 69). At the same time, Iraqw society has been characterised by profound changes throughout the last century, and the study of those changes seems to reveal a remarkable degree of adaptability and flexibility (Rekdal, 1994). Philip Raikes, who has conducted a comprehensive economic study of Iraqw cultivators in Karatu, states that 'in North Iraqw, it would be hard to discern any resistance to change stemming from traditional attitudes' (1975: 333). The study of thought and practice surrounding sorghum beer and milk among the Iraqw illustrates a simple point that seems to shed light on the apparent paradox, i.e. that there

is not necessarily a contradiction between profound social change and a high degree of cultural continuity.

The processes that I have explored in this article, with Iraqw culture and society as my vantage point, may, I suggest, indicate that a certain not uncommon way of representing so-called 'traditional' or 'tribal' societies ought to be adjusted. These societies are not, and have never been, simply the passive victims of external modern forces 'having an impact' on them in more or less predictable ways. We are talking about living societies that consist of living and creative human beings, and which, like all societies, have mechanisms and procedures for coping with change in a manner which ensures cultural continuity.

NOTES

[1] In Swahili, the Iraqw are frequently referred to as the 'Wambulu', a term that is derived from Imboru, the locality of the administrative centre for Mbulu District where most of the Iraqw reside. According to Mous (1992) the Iraqw number about 500,000.

[2] The topic of this article does not allow adequate emphasis on the less desirable aspects of beer and other alcoholic drinks used by the Iraqw. Excessive drinking is a major source of human suffering worldwide (e.g. Desjarlais *et al.*, 1995: 91–7), and the Iraqw are certainly no exception. Homicide, suicide, violence, and particularly domestic violence, neglect of children, and criminal offences like theft and corruption, are all phenomena which frequently are connected with excessive drinking.

[3] *Buura* may in fact designate a whole range of alcoholic drinks. In everyday usage, however, it refers to beer brewed either from sorghum (*mangwaré*) or from sorghum mixed with maize flour (*buusa*). In this article I use the word in its restricted meaning.

[4] I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who made me aware of Ivan Karp's work (1980) on beer drinking among the Iteso, an argument about the social significance of millet beer which resembles the one presented here. There are also striking similarities in ethnographic detail between the two peoples.

[5] Bagshawe (1926: 65), who in general had little positive to say about Iraqw customs, mentions that the Erokh 'are extremely good to each other in cases of distress'.

[6] These sticks are made from hardwood and may be lethal weapons.

[7] In the existing literature about the Iraqw the *gi'i* are usually translated as 'ancestral spirits'. This seems to be somewhat misleading, as the *gi'i* are in some cases the spirits of deceased young and unmarried members of a household.

[8] The practices and institutions covered by this term are commonly referred to as *metimani* in the literature. This is probably a Swahili-influenced version of the original Iraqw word (adding the Swahili prepositional suffix *-ni* to the conjugated Iraqw form *metimaan*). The alteration is a reflection of the fact that this distinctively Iraqw set of beliefs is frequently commented upon, and to a certain extent stigmatised, by Swahili-speaking peoples. See Snyder (1993) for a more elaborate presentation of the most important *meeta* practices.

[9] This general attitude towards foreigners seems to have provided the basis for extensive immigration over the last century. It may have contributed significantly to an extremely high rate of population increase (cf. Southall, 1961: 161; Winter and Molyneaux, 1963) and a correspondingly extensive territorial expansion. In fact most of the approximately 150 Iraqw clans trace their origin back to a male from a neighbouring ethnic group.

[10] In a general discussion of similar institutions Sahlins (1972: 219) concludes that 'wages' in the usual sense are not at issue. He proposes rather another principle behind such transactional patterns, i.e. 'that those who participate in a productive effort have some claim on its outcome'.

[11] This is consistent with the fact that honey mead may be used as a substitute for sorghum beer in areas characterised by extensive culture contact with Datooga-speaking groups. Honey mead among the Datooga shares many important symbolic features with sorghum beer among the Iraqw.

[12] In the hinterland of Maghang it is possible to find several examples of neighbouring households that have upheld such relations despite long-distance migration.

[13] Sorcerers are believed to get their powers from *Neetlangw*, or 'water spirits', which are also regarded as the ultimate origin of the various forms of ritual pollution. Harmful substances that do not have their origin in *Neetlangw* are not considered to have any effect on the calf. On the contrary, milk may actually be applied as a purifier, for example on stones that have been used to heal snake bites.

[14] Maize soup is frequently supplemented with some milk, especially when it is to be consumed by small children.

[15] In this connection it is interesting to note that the neighbouring Maasai are recorded as using the word for milk (*kule*) to denote what really is maize soup (*enkurma*) (Århem, 1987: 7), exactly the opposite of what the Iraqw do. The rationality behind this is, of course, entirely different. By using milk as a euphemism for maize soup the Maasai classify the ingredients of their diet in accordance with how it ideally ought to be.

[16] Knowledge about such cultural distinctions may be essential in studies of economic activity. In Philip Raikes's impressive study of wheat-cultivating Iraqw in the Karatu area, he states: 'Once again, it is hard to impute a value since very little milk is sold locally. The only guide available is that the Karatu Catholic Mission sold fresh milk at 50 cents per pint, and was entirely unable to cope with demand at this price. One may thus assume that the price would have been at least 60 cents' (1975: 191). These 'assumed' sixty cents are then used to estimate the total income of 'small farmers' in shillings per year. According to the table, milk (from traditional cows) constitutes approximately 20 per cent of this amount (*ibid.*: 191, 193). In other parts of the thesis the reader is informed that the cows at the mission were of European origin (*ibid.*: 336).

[17] See Baxter (1984) for an interesting account of similar attempts to control 'sacrilegious' market transactions in butter and barley among the Arssi.

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the symbolic qualities of sorghum beer and milk among the Iraqw of northern Tanzania. The author illustrates how the villagers in a southern Mbulu village handle and make use of these two products, and seeks to illuminate the manner in which they both become associated with qualities that are perceived as positive and desirable. With the spread of the market economy, and of money as a medium of exchange, the symbolic content of sorghum beer and milk has come under considerable pressure. As products in demand, they may today circulate in impersonal relations which lack the social and religious qualities that they traditionally communicated. The monetisation of sorghum beer and milk has not, however, caused a breakdown in established practices, or in the structures of meaning in which such practices are embedded. The article illuminates some of the processes which seem to be of importance in explaining this remarkable cultural continuity in the face of fairly radical social change. The examples of sorghum beer and milk seem to reflect and highlight more general dynamics of change and continuity among the Iraqw, and it is suggested that they may help to shed light on certain seemingly paradoxical ways in which the Iraqw have been conceived by outsiders and by members of neighbouring ethnic groups.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article met l'accent sur les qualités symboliques de la bière sorgho et du lait parmi les Iraqw de la Tanzanie du nord. L'auteur illustre l'usage que les villageois d'un village Mbulu du sud font de ces deux produits, et essaie d'illuminer la manière par laquelle ces deux produits deviennent associé avec des qualités qui sont perçues être positives et désirables. Avec la propagation de l'économie de marché et de l'argent comme moyen d'échange, le contenu de la bière et du lait ont été mis sous des pressions considerables. En tant que produits en demande ils peuvent circuler aujourd'hui à travers des relations impersonelles qui manquent les qualités religieuses et sociales qu'ils ont traditionnellement communiqué. L'échange de la bière sorgho et du lait avec de l'argent n'a pas cependant causé de ruptures dans les pratiques établies, pas plus que dans les structures de sens dans lesquelles ces pratiques sont enracinées. Cet article illumine certains de ces processus qui semblent être important pour expliquer cette continuité culturelle remarquable en face de changements sociaux assez radicaux. Les exemples de la bière sorgho et du lait semble refléter et souligner des dynamiques plus générales de changements et de continuité parmi les Iraqw, et il est suggéré qu'ils peuvent nous aider à éclaircir certaines des manières, à première vue paradoxales, par lesquelles les Iraqw ont été perçus par les étrangers et les membres des groupes ethniques voisinants.