



En oino álétheia

Alcaeus (Greek poet, 6th Century BC)

In vino veritas

Pliny the Elder (Roman, 1st Century AD)

In Wine There is Truth

English translation

A faded, light-colored illustration in the background. It depicts a hand holding a sword upright, with a branch of leaves extending from the right side. The hand is wearing a ring and a bracelet. The sword has a decorative hilt. The overall style is reminiscent of a woodcut or engraving.

ALCOHOL

Social Drinking in Cultural Context

Janet Chrzan

Chapter One: Introduction



**“Wine does not intoxicate men: men
intoxicate themselves”**

Chinese Proverb

**“Beer, if drank with moderation,
softens the temper, cheers the spirit,
and promotes health”**

Thomas Jefferson

Anthropology and Alcohol

Anthropology examines human action and beliefs using a four-field approach:

Socio-Cultural: Belief systems, kinship organization, political and religious structures, economics

Archeological: Past influences on social structure, environment, and ecology

Linguistic: Language and communication

Physical: Health, medicine, and environmental influences on physical functioning on the individual and community level

How does alcohol function in your culture and among your friends and family? Can you list how alcohol is used or thought about in each of the four fields of anthropological enquiry?

Anthropology and Alcohol: questions to ask to understand how a culture thinks about and classifies alcohol use

- **What are the cultural definitions of intoxicants (psychoactive or cultural activity?) What are the metaphors, meanings and narratives of use?**
- **What are the ceremonial roles of intoxicants (rites of passage, religious festivals and rituals, etc.)**
- **Does the culture focus on the dysfunctional or functional aspects of alcohol use? Are there cultural categories for use vs. abuse? How is abuse ameliorated – with medical techniques, spiritual practices, or social tools?**
- **What are the social context of use – how does alcohol function within the social system and why (Who drinks? Who shouldn't? When should people drink and why should they drink?)**
- **If there is a commercial market for alcohol, what metaphors and narratives are used to popularize alcohol use and to advertise brands and/or types of drinks?**

Dwight Heath: Cultural Rules for Alcohol Use

From *Drinking Occasions: Comparative Perspectives on Alcohol and Culture* Philadelphia: Taylor and Francis, 2000

- 1. In most societies, drinking is a social act, embedded in a context of values, attitudes, and other norms**
- 2. These values, norms, and attitudes.... influence the effects of drinking, regardless of how important biochemical, physiological, and pharmacokinetic factors may also be....**
- 3. The drinking of alcoholic beverages tends to be hedged about with rules.... Often such rules are the focus of exceptionally strong emotions and sanctions**
- 4. The value of alcohol for promoting relaxation and sociability is emphasized in many populations**

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5. **5. The association of drinking with any kind of specifically associated problems is rare among cultures throughout both history and the contemporary world**
6. **6. When alcohol-related problems do occur, they are clearly linked with modalities of drinking, and usually also with values, attitudes and norms about drinking (what's normal for consumption defines the abnormal that is a problem)**
7. **7. Attempts at Prohibition have never been successful except when couched in terms of sacred or supernatural rules.**

Anthropology and Alcohol: Discussion Questions

- 1. Alcohol and other intoxicants have served four functions throughout history and across cultures – nutritional, medicinal, religious and social. What are some examples of alcohol use in each area that you have witnessed?**
- 2. If you have ever been intoxicated, think about how it made you feel. Did you think different thoughts than you usually do? Have different feelings? React differently to the world around you? What happened while you were inebriated and how did you ‘understand’ your experiences?**
- 3. When someone says the word “Alcohol”, what are the first three words or phrases that come into your mind?**
- 4. When you see a drink in someone’s hand, what do you think? How do you evaluate what they are doing? Do you judge them on WHAT they are drinking? Do you make inferences about what kind of a person they are based on what they are drinking and how they are drinking it?**
- 5. Do you think drinking alcohol confers status? And if it does, how and why? Is it the type of drink, the manner of drinking, the place of drinking or the knowledge and experience of the drinker that signals positive or higher status?**