Roles of Ethnicity in the Age of Drinking Initiation in Nigeria

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Nigeria is a multi ethnic, multi tribal and multi cultural land. There is no ethnic group in which alcohol use does not exist. However alcohol use is so well documented in some ethnic groups such that it warrants special reference. The Ogoni, Ikwere, Kalabari, Ijaw, Itsekiri, Urhobo, Ika, Ejagam, Yala, Efik, Bini in the Niger Delta, the Igbo in the East, the Tiv and the Birom in Benue Plateau and the Kaje in the North of Nigeria. In some cultures alcohol is a necessity in the practice and performance of most of the traditional rites. Alcohol is involved in the rites of marriage, rites of passage, child birth and naming ceremonies, marriage, graduation, birthday, and burial ceremonies. Infants, children and adolescents get exposed and initiated into the use of alcohol at different stages depending on ethnic or tribal background. Gin brewing depots are common place along river banks, a business which is dominated by the Urhobo, Itsekiris and the Ijaw ethnic tribesmen. This product is distributed through a wide network, and readily finds itself on the tables of most households. It is the traditional African gift from the elders that symbolizes the ‘cherished’ African hospitality Abudu community in Orhionmwon local government Area is comprised of people from more than 15 ethnic backgrounds. These people have been living together harmoniously for over a century in spite of their cultural differences. Their traditions are strictly protected and jealously guided.

This is a study of the influence of ethnicity on the age of drinking initiation in Nigeria.

METHOD: Six major ethnic groups living in Orhionmwon community of Edo state were selected for this study. A sample of 10 households from each of the 6 tribes was used. The heads of household were interviewed using a common questionnaire. The issues raised in the questionnaire include age of first contact with alcohol, age of exposure to alcohol, circumstance, nature of drink used, sex and ethnicity.

RESULTS: Average age of first contact with alcohol was 5½ months. Average age of secret gang-drinking was 11 years. Average age of tolerated open drinking was 16 years. Average age of full involvement in alcohol was 25 years. Both sexes are affected. All the traditional rites are performed with the use of the illicit gin.

Alcoholic drinks are used freely for entertainment during all ceremonies.

CONCLUSIONS: Ethnicity plays a major role in the early-age formation of alcohol drinking habits.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Alcohol, Tradition