

ALCOHOLISM IN THE INDIGENOUS CULTURE OF GUATEMALA

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In any place where rational entities live, they will always tend to group together in groups of families to form groups recognized as societies. For their life to develop normally and for them to live in society, many types of human behavior are involved, which form a set of customs and traditions appropriate to the group, with the influence exerted by nature in the center or place of action in which they develop. . This motivates an extensive network of interrelationships with a diversity of objectives, to give rise to what is called “culture”, which in turn is subdivided according to the different aspects it comprises. Thus, there is a “material culture” and another “non-material culture” (abstract).

Culture is a very important element for societies to survive and essentially influences their development, determining their ways of living. That is why it is a fact that all peoples of the same or different cultures have different ways of living together socially, religiously, politically, economically and culturally.

The dynamism or statism of culture can be caused by forces internal or external to society. Human entities create their own culture and are influenced by strange forces that come from other social groups with whom they maintain close relationships. Men can improve or develop their own culture and can also be the cause of the social scourges that are observed. The latter can also be caused by certain pressure groups with very particular interests, or by events not concomitant with the people that force them to invalidate many situations reached to improve the group.

These scourges could be placed in two aspects to distinguish them more broadly. The first includes the ancestral scourges that come from previous generations and the second, those that arise according to the degree of development of the group, or of underdevelopment - more correctly in our environment - in which it is maintained, as well as the degree of cultural exchange. that exists with other groups.

Social scourges develop very easily due to people's needs to improve their way of life. In many cases, when trying to achieve or achieve improvement, it tends to stray from society and can reach overflow if it is not treated within a methodical development formula. This happens or can happen when the person is not prepared for a struggle that systematizes or ensures that the goal they are trying to achieve can be well used for personal, family and society benefit.

Alcoholism - which is our topic - is a scourge of society of a cultural order. The aspect of alcoholism in the indigenous culture that concerns us now is difficult to place

in a position where we could observe it widely to analyze all the aspects that influence its existence; However, because we have lived in indigenous communities, carrying out observations and studies in rural areas of the country, we have tried to know more or less the situation that is manifested very clearly among our fellow indigenous citizens.

When dealing with this aspect it is also necessary to have some knowledge about what happens in this regard in other cultures. All peoples of the same or different culture have various kinds of sociocultural scourges, disastrous consequences of certain social causes in the elements that form societies.

But along with the aspect of social scourges we are presented with that of anachronism. Alcoholism can be an anachronism of all times, when it is found without any control; But, likewise, since the spirit drink was invented, it has been preserved among human groups as a custom. History bequeaths us surprising facts from ancient cultures, where in powerful empires and among the different recognized social classes, intoxicating drink was always mediated, and even if it was wine that was drunk but consumed in large quantities, it had a strong influence on the strengthening of the scourges. This scourge of excessive drinking gave rise to other scourges, such as orgies, which were observed mostly in the upper classes where all social events, such as politics and war triumphs, were celebrated.

In the contemporary era this drink is preserved and consumed in varying degrees of intensity and there are certain forms of control. In some social groups it is sometimes found in an appreciable proportion, possibly due to the degree of civilization that is practiced, which when the group's norms of conduct are not regulated, can result in the corruption of society; but it is also observed gradually due to the control of some entities, or when it is permissible in the rules of the society where it exists. The fact is that, currently, in many societies, if not all, the use of intoxicating beverages is customary.

Dr. Ponce de Avalos (1958) wrote in this regard that "The simple fact of drinking is not enough to be an alcoholic, because some drink to fulfill a religious rite, others to make friends, others to have a good time, others to experiment." or to warm oneself, to cool oneself, to eat better using it as a condiment, or on the occasion of a party." This definition is very accurate to apply to the indigenous group of Guatemala.

The Guatemalan indigenous people, since the time of the high Mayan culture, consider the intoxicating drink as a "sacred drink." In pre-Hispanic times, only "*chicha*" was drunk, which is a "fermented drink made from different substances, such as cane juice, panela and sugar, fruits, etc." (Sandoval, Lisandro, 1941).

This criterion that the drink is sacred has persisted and currently the chimanes or priests, for example, call liquor in their prayers "the holy drink", which they use to offer to the "Holy World" or the "Holy Animas", when a request is made to them. Such belief extends to all the elements that make up indigenous society, where intoxicating

drink plays an important role in all social ceremonies, religious festivals and home medicine. In Peru it is stated that the Indian "is not a habitual alcoholic" and "consumes less alcohol than many aborigines of other American countries" (Poblete Troncoso, 1938), drinking only at special festivals of his own culture.

Consequently, regarding this type of drink within the indigenous culture, we are inclined to believe that the elements that make up this society are not alcohol addicts, since some social and cultural topics, as well as the limited economic means, allow There is no tendency to lean towards this vice. Of course, there are exceptions, there are cases in which some indigenous people get drunk customarily, but this is seen above all in those elements that have already undergone the acculturation process and that have been poorly "ladinized" or those that are undergoing that cultural change.

But speaking in general terms we can say that the indigenous drinks liquor occasionally, doing it out of joy, for the birth of a child or for celebrating a marriage, they take advantage of market days when they come to town to do their business transactions, to settle some matters. personal where liquor almost always mediates; He also drinks out of feelings or simply out of motivation from people of the same ethnic group, or he does it out of sadness when a relative dies and then he drinks at the wake and after the funeral. But once these reasons have passed, the indigenous person no longer drinks intoxicating beverages and avoids, without realizing it, the promotion of drunkenness that can cause harm to his body, his family and his society.

National and religious holidays, as well as the rituals that are part of their abstract culture, are other reasons in which the indigenous drink liquor. To give a complete idea of the concept that the Guatemalan aborigine has of liquor, we will say something about the brotherhoods where the ceremonies that are carried out are characteristic.

The social-religious organization of the brotherhoods in the Aboriginal environment is an important reason to enjoy total respect from the community. Those who reach positions within these institutions enjoy preponderant prestige that allows them to develop their activities and relationships with greater breadth and ease. Unfortunately, this social position leads the indigenous person to consider themselves obliged to drink the liquor that is offered to them in all the events in which they participate, since refusing would be to offend the dignity of those people who have elevated them to such a position. At the same time, he would violate ancestral customs by not toasting the venerated saint and the health of all the members of the brotherhood.

This happens during the festivals that said institution celebrates during the year, the main reason being the date that the saints set for the venerated saint and that is when the change of members who occupy the different positions that direct it takes place. This is when the people who have been designated to take charge of the brotherhood are forced to carry out a series of acts in accordance with the liturgy of the

church and the brotherhood to which they belong. The festival in many cases lasts several days, but the main one is the one that determines the saints' calendar. These acts are carried out in the parish church with masses and with the presence of the image of the venerated saint, which is then transferred to its corresponding place in its "new home", in processions that travel through the town. The new brothers pay a visit to the house of the outgoing "first brother" to collect the belongings of the brotherhood, where they toast this liquor that everyone present drinks and who answers the toast, giving the visitors more liquor.

On the main day at the new headquarters of the brotherhood, a great party is held in accordance with all the rituals that the indigenous has cultivated and is attended by the people who hand over the positions to the newly elected, the main members of the other brotherhoods of the town and other guests, as well as family members. They all arrive accompanied by their respective wives. To begin this festival, which is enlivened by the marimba, the drum and the rockets, a solemn ceremony is held in which the main prayer of the brotherhood raises his prayers to God and the saint they venerate, doing so in the name of all those who receive the brotherhood, so that they do not encounter any obstacles in their religious administration.

When the prayer has finished his prayers, he stands up and then a glass of liquor is offered to the incoming members, then to the outgoing members, followed by the invited brothers and, finally, the private and family guests.

Everyone participates in the party and among other things they are offered special food and cigarettes. Also, those who want to dance can do so freely. The many drinks consumed that cannot be avoided cause many visitors to become very drunk; But the case often arises of people who do not have the slightest desire to drink liquor or do not want to do it in excess, either because they are indisposed or because it is simply not to their liking at that moment. Whoever acts like this, there is no doubt that he is present only because of a social or religious commitment, or because perhaps his presence contributes to making the act more important, but he carries a container of liquor in his pocket and pours the drink that is offered to him into it, not belittling the hosts for the attention they give him. The same thing happens with food, if the person does not want to eat it there, he can take it home without making any commitment. In this way, everyone is correctly governed by their social norms in accordance with the different topics of their own culture. Once the ceremonies are over, all the guests leave.

It can be deduced from the above description that the ingestion of liquor by the indigenous is of a ceremonious nature, since he has a high concept of liquor, this being a clause typical of his culture that can never be translated into an alcoholic vice.

One more reason why the indigenous drinks is because in rural communities there are almost never healthy entertainments that morally and spiritually clear the individual and he tends to dissipate a thought by drinking liquor. In the cities, the case

is different, there are many entertainments in which people can entertain themselves in their rest time.

When drinking for the reasons that we have described, the indigenous person is never ashamed after a drunken spree, nor does he care if they see him when he is drinking, because since it is not customary, he does not care what people from his same group say, much less what those from the ethnic group different from him say, who do not know the concept he has of liquor, nor do they understand the reasons why he drinks.

The case of drinking liquor is only seen in adult men with greater frequency, single men do it "to a lesser extent", because being in that social condition they are still under the power of their parents, one reason; another because within their culture they are allowed to drink only when they have begun to provide their services in civil and religious organizations, essential activities to be able to stand out in their society. Women never drink except when offered by their father or husband.

For those reasons, typical of the indigenous culture, many men get drunk and there are cases in which some women also do it, but they usually go with their husband to take care of him while the drunkenness lasts. Some cases can also be seen in which when the individual wanders the streets, he shouts in bad Spanish the few words of this language that he knows, opening his heart by showing the resentment that he feels towards the ethnic group that has made him withdraw culturally.

There are other cases, we will not deny it, in which women suffer the consequences of their husband's drunkenness, but it is due to the poor quality of liquor that is sold and that, when ingested in a strong dose, causes him to lose his memory, argue and fight, many times with other men or with the lady herself, whom sometimes she even mistreats. Such an attitude is punished by the authorities and that man ends up in jail where he must spend more money than he spent when purchasing the liquor, to pay the fine and be free again, two disbursements that lower the economic level of the person. the family.

It must be remembered that the standard of living of the indigenous population is very low, as is their income, and when liquor is drunk in that environment, the exorbitant prices come "to the direct detriment of the indigenous economy."

Due to the lack of economic resources, many indigenous people turn to intoxicating beverages to satisfy nutritional deficiencies, something that happens among indigenous people from different cultures in America.

Poblete Troncoso (1938, page 170) says that in Peru "if alcoholism is exceptionally widespread in some regions it is, in part, due to the need to replace a normal diet that cannot be provided due to low salaries and the difficulty supply or by the artificial energy provided by alcohol".

Dr. Juan Comas in his study "Public Assistance and the Biological Development of the Indigenous" (1943), describes opinions of several authors and when he talks about the Otomi of the Mezquital Valley, in Mexico, he says: "another researcher points out that their food ration consists of: 34.70% pulque"; The rest consists of foods with minimum percentages. Comas notes the opinion of another author (A. Fabila, 1938, pp. 175-176), always about the Mezquital, as follows: "A fair number of students attend school a little intoxicated by ingesting pulque, since, Their parents lacking other food to offer them, they give them the enervating liquid to drink... and because of this situation it is common... for them to fall asleep in the middle of the morning under the drowsiness of pulque."

Comas also tells us that another author (Manuel Basauri, Jr., Page 36, 1929) believes that the Tarahumara Indian of Chihuahua, Mexico, "lives in a miserable condition, suffering from chronic hunger and in full physiological decline. There is nothing extraordinary about resorting to alcohol, which excites him and gives him, even momentarily, the illusion of strength and pleasure."

These opinions are extremely interesting experiences for us, which help us understand the problems of alcoholism among the indigenous people of America. Turning our attention to Guatemala, we find that in the large region of the department of Alta Verapaz there are several hundred thousand indigenous people who correspond to the Kekchí group. Among them, the typical drink called "*BOJ*" is characteristic. Boj is a fermented drink. In the past, only the indigenous people knew it and it was their only intoxicating drink. Then the "ladinos" learned about it and popularized it by introducing various forms of preparation that, sometimes in turn, the indigenous people have accepted it because of the speed and ease with which it is prepared. All the municipalities of Alta Verapaz have adopted different forms of production. There are several types of boj, for example that of the Ladinos and that of the indigenous people for consumption. ordinary and another, that they themselves prepare for their parties, which is special.

The preparation of this enervating liquid is strictly prohibited by the respective authorities; However, it is a widespread drink throughout the department, although clandestinely. In many places, in most cases in villages and hamlets, water is scarce and, therefore, all family members (adults and children) use this drink as a very natural thing, since they do not do it with intoxicating feeling, but to satisfy a human need: thirst.

Many people from Alta Verapaz, indigenous and non-indigenous, do consume it as a spirit drink, because its price is minimal and because of its mild effect, although its sale is very secretive. The former consume boj due to their limited economy, which does not allow them to always purchase the authorized liquor that is sold. Furthermore, it is an ancestral cultural custom. In this way, the drink has become widespread among all residents, to the point that everyone tries to ferment the drink in their own home and

ensures that it is never missing in any social or religious event. Of course, there are also many places where *boj* is completely unknown.

Boj is a drink that gradually intoxicates because its effect is quite mild, hence it allows you to satisfy a desire and, as already said, on many occasions a need, but given that it is a fermented drink, as such it surely causes harm to the person. organism. We do not know what these evils are, since we do not know if any laboratory analysis has already been done on *boj*; Furthermore, we are not aware of any specific study having been carried out on said drink. That said, we excuse ourselves from giving our opinion and leave such concern to those who are interested.

Now, among the Ladinos, alcoholism takes on gigantic proportions because their economic means are better than those of the indigenous, in addition to being a cultural factor within their society that converges with its interests, something that is not seen among the aborigines.

The native gets drunk one day in the town, but that same day he returns to his home where he has no liquor to continue getting drunk and confidently endures the effects that liquor produces. He doesn't know, either, if this can cause any harm to his body. The discomfort that liquor leaves in the body when it has been drunk in excess, commonly called "goma," (a hangover) is cured by the aborigine by consuming only atoles, among them white corn atole, which with a few black beans and chili complements the "remover of gum.", that drink being a considerable food. Quite the opposite happens in the ladino group. It is commonly observed that many drinkers, after a binge, continue "drinking" for several days; It is also noted that many people still drink the next day to cure the gum discomfort. On the other hand, the Ladino belonging to the middle class and those of lower social position have adopted that indigenous cultural factor of drinking "*atol blanco*" after a drunken binge, but, unfortunately, there are many cases in which they do so accompanied by liqueur.

Another important point is that the indigenous people often use liquor in curanderismo. It may well be the healer, who is trusted, or one of the family members who diagnoses any illness suffered by a family member. Depending on the type of illness that the healer considers the person suffers from, this is the medicine he prescribes, which is homemade. Sometimes the concoction consists of herbs found in the surrounding area, as well as some condiments; and other times it is the brandy alone or compounded with other substances, which can cure the patient's illness.

They also use the liquor, prepared in a special way, as a restorative in the case of women who have just given birth to a child, or as an anesthetic when they suffer from some exasperating pain, so they take it in regular or strong doses; Liquor is also essential to give oneself the strength to carry out some activity that one does not dare to carry out consciously, without having sufficient courage to be influenced by alcohol when ingested.

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