



Religious Uses of Alcohol among the Woodland Indians of North America

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Abstract. – As a rule, early European observers perceived only the excessive, violent, and licentious aspects of American Indian drinking behavior, and present studies focus strongly on its destructive features. A survey of the large body of historical source materials, however, reveals numerous but widely scattered examples, dating back to the mid-seventeenth century, of attempts on the part of the Woodland Indians to integrate the imported alcoholic beverages into their religious ceremonies and rituals. According to anthropological alcohol studies, most societies which permit drinking know both a sacred and a profane use of liquor. Its integration in religious ceremonialism shows that native uses of alcohol were both more complex and more normal than views about Indian drinking hold. [*North American Indians, ceremonial uses of liquor, sacred drunkenness, alcohol studies, narcotic complex of the New World*]

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When, in early 1680 the Dutch travellers Jasper Danckaerts and Peter Sluyter came across a drinking spree, Indian style, they were clearly shocked. Approaching an Algonquian settlement in Govanus, present-day Brooklyn, they “heard a great noise, shouting and singing in the huts of the Indians.” As they immediately realized,

the inhabitants “were all lustily drunk, raving, striking, shouting, jumping, fighting each other, and foaming at the mouth like raging wild beasts” (Danckaerts 1946: 179). However, what at first looks just like another description of disorderly drunken Indians, turns out to be a native healing ceremony. After a lengthy sermon on the evils of liquor the two pious Dutch Labadists mention that these “Indians had *canticoyd* there to-day, that is, conjured the devil, and liberated a woman among them, who was possessed by him, as they said” (180). It is only thanks to this casual comment that it becomes clear that the riotous scenes of drunkenness were, in fact, part of a ceremonial performance. The word *cantico* or *canticoy*, an Anglicized version of the Lenape or Delaware Indians word *gentkehn*, to dance or “to sing and dance at the same time” (Brinton 1890: 187), was used by colonists as a general term for native religious ceremonies (Gehring and Grumet 1987: 119n). The participant’s raging, so revolting to the White observers, was part of a shamanic healing session.¹

¹ Even when such ecstatic ceremonies were celebrated *without* liquor, Whites did not perceive them any other way. Of one of the “Cantica’s or dancing Matches” of the Long Island Algonquians an early English observer reported, that they “only shew what Antick tricks their ignorance will lead them to, wringing of their bodies and faces after a strange manner, sometimes jumping into the fire, sometimes catching up a Fire-brand, and biting off a live coal, with many such tricks, that will affright, if not please an *English* man to look upon them, resembling rather a company of infernal Furies than men” (Denton 1966: 11). On the