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Introduction: The Firewater Myth: North American Indian Drinking and Alcohol Addiction By Joy Leland

LaDonna Harris

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Recommended Citation

Harris, LaDonna. "Introduction: The Firewater Myth: North American Indian Drinking and Alcohol Addiction By Joy Leland." (2022). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/lhnac/19>

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Introduction

by LaDonna Harris

to

The Firewater Myth
North American Indian Drinking
and Alcohol Addiction

By
Joy Leland

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The Firewater Myth

Introduction

Myth-making is an important and distinctly human capacity. By his myths, man seeks to explain and to interpret forces within his universe in such a way as to make himself more at home in that universe. Myths serve, as well, to summarize and symbolize the historical experiences of a people, embodying the traditional wisdom to be gleaned from the past in forms which make it available as support for the values by which a society lives. The class of Promethean myths celebrate the culture heroes of the race, enriching the world of the imagination and serving as inspiration for future achievement, in many ways, in the young.

There is another class of myths by which men live, and often die. In contrast to the ennobling Promethean myths, human societies also generate racist myths which feed the most destructive and distorted fantasies. By the racist myth, man justifies the injustice and the atrocity he commits against another man by claiming that the latter is less than a man, or in some way lacking in some fundamental human attribute. And as Erik Erikson and some other scientific observers of the human spirit have shown us, the most devastating consequence of the racist myths and stereotypes is that they are ~~too~~ many times incorporated and acted upon by the subjects of the myth.

Early in her work, Joy Leleand states that there has been no image "more damaging to the Indians than the 'drunk and disorderly'

image," and notes that many Indians believe ⁱⁿ the "firewater myth" which sustains the "drunken Indian" image. She goes on to state that "the Firewater Myth probably deserves the endurance record for unfounded folklore about the American Indian."

The tenacity of the firewater myth, which holds that Indians are constitutionally prone to develop ^{an} inordinate craving for liquor and to lose control over their behavior when they drink, does indeed make it a likely contender for an endurance record. The fact that American Indians share a genetic background with Oriental peoples, who manifest the lowest rates of alcohol addiction, does not interfere with the notion of a genetic basis for the Native American's reputed alcoholism. The observation that members of many Indian tribes, past and present, could drink without committing the excesses implicit in the myth, has also not stilled belief in the myth.

Miss Leland's focus is on the first part of the firewater myth doctrine, that alcohol creates an inordinate craving for liquor among Indians. Finding that the scattered literature on Native American drinking seemed to indicate that alcohol addiction might actually occur less frequently among this group, ^{she was led to} ~~led her to~~ formulate the hypothesis she sets about to test in her book. "The 'reverse-firewater myth hypothesis' does not merely challenge the notion that Indians are more prone to alcohol addiction than dominant-society members; it offers a counterproposal that Indians may be even less susceptible to this affliction." Her study compares the

the reported drinking behaviors of North American Indians with the classical behavior^s~~ed~~ and symptoms presumed to be indicative of alcoholism and alcoholic addiction.

I will not disclose her major findings and thereby allow the reader the opportunity to arrive at the final conclusions along like with the author. I would~~/~~, however, to comment on some of the difficulties which the author encountered on her way to testing the hypothesis, as they reflect the extremely tenuous foundations upon which the firewater myth has rested.

From first to last, we are met with semantic and theoretical confusion about what constitutes alcoholic addiction as well as the difficulty involved in accurately interpreting similar and dissimilar behaviors in different cultural contexts. Thus, on a list of forty-two symptoms of alcoholic addiction derived from the study of mainstream ~~alcoholic~~ populations, we encounter the symptom "avid drinking". But, we learn, rapid drinking is (1) standard drinking style in many Indian groups, (2) ~~is~~ not restricted to problem drinkers among Indians, (3) a natural accompaniment of drinking to get drunk, and (4) encouraged by the liquor prohibition on many reservations which influences the drinker to finish his bottle before he is caught. The confusion is even more pronounced in evaluating the evidence for the occurrence of the symptom which is considered to be the crucial indicator of addictive drinking - that of loss of control over drinking. Descriptions of extended drinking

among Indians, in which some of the Indians observed do not control the initiation of the bout, would seem to indicate loss of control over the drinking. However, loss of control must be distinguished from absence of control, and it is the first, not the second, which is required by the definition. If an individual never had control (as was the case in aboriginal Indian societies) or if he belonged to a group which had adopted a set of controls different from and incompatible with those of the dominant group, then he might become a great problem to others, but not because of loss of control. Again and again, the differences in cultural context argue for a difference in meaning to be attached to the drinking behavior.

Perhaps the most illuminating finding in Miss Leland's study is that despite the enormous literature generated by the students of alcoholism, there exists no empirical study addressed to the actual criteria used by medical practitioners for the diagnostic category of "alcoholic".

So there it is for all to see. Three hundred years of laboring under the myth of the "Alcoholic Indian" and we learn that common agreement about the use of the term has yet to be reached by the professionals who deal with alcoholism.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Miss Leland for the research efforts contained in her book. It represents one more assault on the outworn, distorted self-image of the Indian sustained over the years by a variety of racist myths. The Native American's new self concept and high esteem call for an end to the stereotyping and an evaluation

of our capabilities by a vision freed from the distorted precon-
ceptions of the past. Miss Leland has contributed to this clarity
of vision.