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**Community Level Perspectives on Informal Alcohol:
Understanding the Role of Traditional Brewers in Dowa District,
Malawi**

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Honors Thesis

COMMUNITY LEVEL PERSPECTIVES ON INFORMAL ALCOHOL:
UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL BREWERS IN
DOWA DISTRICT, MALAWI

by
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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation
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ABSTRACT

COMMUNITY LEVEL PERSPECTIVES ON INFORMAL ALCOHOL: UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF TRADITIONAL BREWERS IN DOWA DISTRICT, MALAWI

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Alcohol consumption and consequential public health problems have recently increased in Sub-Saharan Africa and alcohol has been identified as the leading contributor to the burden of disease in the region. While Malawi has a relatively low overall alcohol consumption rate, the majority of the alcohol produced and consumed in the country is informal or unrecorded alcohol which present significant monitoring and regulatory challenges, in addition to greater health risks. This article explores the community level perspectives from traditional brewers of alcohol, and provides a comprehensive look into their experiences, perspectives, and the roles they play in their communities. In addition to explaining the composition and production of their alcohols, the brewers interviewed shared their perspectives on the effect of alcohol in their communities, their economic reliance on their trade, mitigating alcohol related violence at their establishments and their thoughts on alcohol regulation by both traditional authorities and the government. These brewers provide an important, and previously

missing, perspective to policymakers and researchers seeking to find innovative ways to limit the harmful use of informal alcohol.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Tables.....	v
I. Introduction:	10
II. Methods:.....	12
III. Results:.....	14
<i>Demographics</i>	14
<i>Types of Alcohol</i>	14
<i>Composition and Production of Alcohol</i>	15
<i>Inherited Occupation</i>	16
<i>Financial Impact of Alcohol on Brewer’s Families</i>	17
<i>Role of Brewers in Community</i>	18
<i>Role of Alcohol in Community</i>	19
<i>Alcohol-Related Violence</i>	19
<i>Regulation</i>	21
IV. Discussion:.....	22
V. Conclusion:	24
VI. References:	26

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1:	15
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Introduction:

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda specifically targets the harmful use of alcohol with Target 3.5, ‘strengthen the prevention and treatment of substance abuse, including narcotic drug abuse and harmful use of alcohol’ (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg3>). Alcohol’s recognition in the SDGs as an obstacle to development illuminates the multi-faceted effects of alcohol across the entire development spectrum (Dünnbier & Sperkova, 2015). The World Health Organization’s Global Status Report on Alcohol and Health states that, ‘the harmful use of alcohol is one of the leading risk factors for population health worldwide’ (WHO, 2018). 5.3 percent of all deaths worldwide are alcohol attributable and the harmful use of alcohol has direct links to many disease conditions such as HIV, tuberculosis, noncommunicable diseases, injuries, and violence (WHO, 2018). Additionally, the harmful use of alcohol has far-reaching effects on other aspects of the development agenda, from poverty to gender equality and responsible consumption and production (Dünnbier & Sperkova, 2015).

Despite relatively low levels of alcohol consumption, Africa bears the heaviest burden of disease and injury attributable to alcohol (WHO, 2018). Alcohol use is the leading risk factor contributing to the burden of disease in southern, Sub-Saharan Africa in terms of deaths and disability-adjusted life years (WHO, 2018; Lim et al., 2012). Having recently passed a National Alcohol Policy, Malawi is of particular interest for alcohol policy formation and the effects of the harmful use of alcohol on development (Mwagomba, Nkhata, Baldacchino, Wisdom & Ngwira, 2018). A 2013 national research study of alcohol consumption in Malawi found that 27.3 percent of males and 1.6 percent

of females reported having consumed alcohol within the past 12 months (Braathen et al, 2013).

Although Malawi's alcohol consumption ranks considerably low in comparison to many Western countries, much of the alcohol consumed in Malawi falls within the informal category, which can be challenging to monitor and regulate. Alcohol is considered informal or unrecorded if it falls into one or more of the following categories: (1) illegally produced alcohol, such as moonshine and/or counterfeit beverages or illegally imported alcohol; (2) homebrew/homemade alcohol without regulations; (3) alcohol that is not registered where it is consumed, or legally imported via duty free shops; or (4) surrogate alcohol not intended for human consumption (Mkuu, Barry, Swahn & Nafukho, 2019; Lachenmeier & Rehm, 2009; Lachenmeier, Taylor & Rehm, 2011; Thamarangsi, 2013). A rapid assessment of substance abuse in Malawi found that up to 90 percent of all alcohol consumed in Malawi is informal alcohol, which typically falls into the category of homebrew made without regulations (Zverev, 2008).

Informal alcohol has greater risks and leads to more harm than formally produced alcohol, as it often contains more impurities and can reach a younger consumer base due to its lower costs (Limaye, Rutkow, Rimal, & Jernigan, 2014). For example, in Malawi, the price of a bottled beer (formal alcohol) is typically around 500 kwacha (0.66 USD), while informal alcohol can be purchased for as little as 20 kwacha (0.03 USD), making it accessible even to young children and the extremely poor (Limaye et al. 2014 & WHO, 2018). Malawi's National Alcohol Policy recognizes the challenges of informal alcohol stating, 'the informal production of alcohol offers huge health risks as it is hardly monitored to assure quality control in terms of alcohol volume and amount of impurities'

(Malawi 2017). Additionally, informal alcohol is often difficult to track, and there is a lack of literature on the production and usage of informal alcohol in sub-Saharan Africa or Malawi. The World Health Organization has stressed the importance of further study to understand both the composition and production of informal alcohol, along with its regulation, both legally and culturally, in low-income countries (Limaye et al. 2014 & WHO, 2018).

This exploratory study aims to address the knowledge gap around the production and consumption of informal alcohol in Africa by focusing on the role of traditional brewers in Malawi. This research examines the complex social forces that regulate informal alcohol in rural communities, including the barriers to entry for producers as well as the policies that local and traditional authorities have implemented in their communities to mitigate the harmful use of alcohol.

Methods:

This research was done in collaboration with the School of Agriculture for Family Independence (SAFI), a Malawian NGO based in Dowa District. The study area included all villages, a total of 14, within a 20-kilometer radius of SAFI. Data collection occurred over two separate periods from May to August 2017 and May to August 2018. To identify and contact study participants, SAFI staff members first introduced the research team to traditional brewers they were aware of through their connections with local communities. Researchers then traveled to all villages in the study area and asked people if they knew of any alcohol brewers in their communities and where to find them. A total of 24 brewers were identified.

After establishing initial contact with a brewer and explaining the research purpose, the research team arranged another time to return and conduct a survey to discuss the participant's experiences as a brewer of alcohol within the community. Twenty of the 24 brewers agreed to participate in the study. The remaining four either refused to be interviewed or insisted on some form of compensation for their time, which was not included as part of the study in the approved protocol.

Before beginning the research, participants were introduced to the consent form and informed that they need not participate in the research and that they could skip any question that made them feel uncomfortable. Interviews were conducted in Chichewa, the local dialect, with one trained staff member from SAFI functioning as a translator. Interviews typically lasted around 20-30 minutes. Four of the twenty participants were interviewed a second time during the summer of 2018.

Interviews included fixed response and open-ended questions that were designed to fill the knowledge gaps associated with the production and use of informal alcohol. Questions focused on the processes and methods for traditional alcohol production, the selling of alcohol, the role that alcohol plays in the personal lives of brewers, and the perceived impact of alcohol on the community. The second round of interviews included questions about brewers' business policies as well as local and tribal regulations imposed on them by community leaders. Researchers worked with a local non-profit organization, Drug Fight Malawi, in constructing the questions and verifying their cultural appropriateness.

Survey responses were recorded and then entered into Microsoft Excel, which was used to generate summary statistics for the fixed-response questions. The open-ended responses were reviewed and coded into common themes for further analysis.

Results:

Demographics

Of the 20 brewers interviewed, 13 (0.65) were women, 3 (0.15) were men, and 4 (0.20) were husband-wife couples working together in the brewing business. The average age of the brewers was 44.75 years old. Brewers had on average 5.15 children and only one brewer, a 29-year-old man, was not married and had no children. Brewers made on average 47,050 Malawian kwacha a month, or about 65 USD. However, two brewers were making 100,000+ kwacha (about 140 USD) a month. The vast majority of brewers (0.85) said their source of income came from both farming and brewing while only three (0.15) said their income came solely from brewing alcohol.

Types of Alcohol

Within the relatively small geographical area of the study, brewers produced a wide variety of different types of beers, wines, and spirits (See Table 1). There were noted differences in composition and production methods even within the same type from brewer to brewer. Almost half of the brewers (0.40) produced more than one type of alcohol, with one brewer couple regularly making four different types of alcohol. Beer was reported as the most common type.

Table 1:
Type of Alcohol Produced

Beer	17
Chinkoke	8
Masese	7
Chombote	1
Ntonjane	1
Spirits	7
Kachasu	5
Derunde	2
Wine	7

Many of the brewers were producing thousands of liters of alcohol each year, especially if they were producing a beer product. One brewer said she was producing 200 liters of wine and 400 liters of *masese* once or twice a week. The beer and wine products had similar prices depending on the brewer, with a liter averaging between 150 and 200 Malawian kwacha (0.21-0.27 USD). Those who were making spirits produced only around 20-30 liters as the portion sizes for sprits were much smaller. *Kachasu*, a popular local spirit, was significantly more expensive with a 300 ml bottle costing 450 Malawian kwacha (0.62 USD). Brewers often utilized hollowed out gourds that had been dried to function bottles to serve their products.

Composition and Production of Alcohol

There was a wide diversity of composition and production methods for each of the categories of alcohol produced among participant brewers. The basic ingredients for beers and spirits consisted of maize, sugar, water, and yeast, with some brewers using millet flour. The maize came in a variety of forms including raw maize, maize bran, maize flour and soaked maize that had been allowed to start growing. The basic process for making beer consisted of cooking porridge out of maize flour and adding either the

raw maize or soaked maize to the porridge before boiling it all together multiple times a day over a few days. The mixture was then placed in pots and allowed to ferment for around three days until it was ready to be served.

The process for the spirits was more complicated and included a distillation process. One brewer's process started with soaking the maize bran, yeast and sugar for three days. She would then put the mixture on the fire and allow it to reach a high temperature before removing it and wrapping it with plastic paper in a distillation device with pipes that allow for the steam to run off into bottles attached to the device. Once the steam flowed through the device into the bottles it changed back to liquid form. Since the first five bottles of each brew are too strong to drink without dilution, she puts them aside and adds them to later bottles.

The main ingredients for wine were tea leaves, sugar, milk and yeast, with only one brewer using fruits such as mangoes, bananas, oranges, and strawberries. The basic process consisted of boiling the tea leaves, often with sugar, and then adding yeast after allowing the brew to cool. Brewers would then let the mixture ferment overnight. In the case of the brewer who used fruits in his wine, an extra step was included where he added the fruits and let the mixture ferment for seven days.

Inherited Occupation

A key theme was that alcohol brewing was a family business passed through matriarchal lines from mother to daughter. Most of the brewers (0.75) had a family member from a previous generation who brewed alcohol. Brewers were most likely to have a mother who was a brewer (0.40) followed by a grandmother (0.20), father (0.15) and aunt (0.05). Among brewers who had family members who brewed alcohol, all but

one of them were taught how to brew alcohol by that family member. Thirteen (0.87) were taught either by their mothers or another female relative in their family and have continued the business in their own families. One brewer even mentioned that she had started teaching her 10-year old daughter how to brew alcohol.

Financial Impact of Alcohol on Brewer's Families

Many brewers mentioned how their income from alcohol production has provided them with vital financial support for their families. When asked what would happen to their families if the brewing of alcohol was made illegal or they were unable to sell alcohol anymore, all but three of the respondents mentioned that they would become very poor or that their family's survival would become very difficult. One woman said that, 'survival would be too hard, (we) can't survive.' Another woman said, 'If we had to stop (brewing and selling alcohol), we would end up losing some of our children because I would not be able to support them. I also support all my grandchildren.' Additionally, many brewers mentioned that money from brewing has enabled their children to gain educations that would have been inaccessible without the added income. One man reported that he sent all four of his children to secondary school with the alcohol income and that three of them have already graduated, a rare feat in this area of Malawi. Other brewers also mentioned how they are able to pay for secondary school fees or primary school uniforms for their children through their alcohol businesses.

One woman mentioned that if she was no longer able to brew alcohol it, 'would be hard, because I am used to having money daily.' She went on to explain that the money that she earns through her alcohol business is hers and that she does not have to share it with her husband, noting that all of her children are in school.

Brewers also highlighted how the income from their family alcohol business had supported them as children. One brewer mentioned that the extra income allowed her family to purchase school uniforms and pay school fees. Another mentioned that her father had passed away when she was very little and that their mother had taken care of the whole family through brewing alcohol. Another brewer whose mother had died when she was only two weeks old said that her grandmother was able to support her through brewing beer. Another brewer simply put, 'my life was only sustained by brewing beer when I was growing up.'

Role of Brewers in Community

Brewers reported different perspectives on the role they play in their communities. An important finding was that many of the brewers were also moneylenders in their community. More than half (0.65) of brewers mentioned that they had lent or were currently lending money to people in their communities. One woman mentioned that she lends money to local chiefs who come asking her for money. Another said that parents take their children to the hospital with her money. One of the brewers who was not currently lending money remarked that she had stopped lending because, 'people didn't pay me back because I am a woman.' Not all of these lenders were lending for the income made off of interest. Two of the moneylending brewers mentioned that they loan out money without interest, as one said, 'if they get 5, they give back 5.'

In addition to lending money, brewers explained other economic impacts that their businesses have on the community. Two different brewers mentioned that their businesses create an economy because it provides the community with opportunities to sell fruits and other ingredients to each other. One couple reported that people use their

house as a meeting place to sell goods because people already come to sell firewood and maize bran to them for the alcohol brewing.

Role of Alcohol in Community

The brewers had mixed responses to the question, ‘What role does alcohol play in your community?’ Almost half of the brewers (0.45) responded to this question by either saying they don’t know or they don’t really care about the role of alcohol in their community. One woman said that, ‘I don’t know (alcohol’s) effect, I just know what goes into my pocket.’ This was similar to other respondents who said that they just focused on selling the alcohol and their business and not on the effects of alcohol on the community. Some brewers, however, did recognize negative effects of alcohol within their communities. One brewer mentioned that, ‘Alcohol is not helping. When they are drunk there is nothing they do. When someone is drunk there is nothing good they can do.’

Another key theme was a common brewer belief that alcohol functioned as a motivating factor for the local people to work hard. One woman said, ‘(Alcohol) is one way to give them a motivational start. If they want to drink, they realize they have to work or do piecework in order to drink.’ Another said, ‘Beer is helping them (the community) because they try their best so they can find extra money to drink. They find pieceworks so they have money to drink.’ Lastly, another brewer, commenting on the social opportunities provided by her business, explained that alcohol gives people time to chat and relax.

Alcohol-Related Violence

When asked if they hear about their patrons becoming violent or sexually abusive when they are drunk, only two brewers stated that they had never heard of violence or

sexual abuse among their clients. The vast majority (0.61) mentioned that this had only happened a few times or rarely. Another quarter of brewers said that they had heard of their patrons becoming violent or sexually abusive either sometimes, most of the time, or all the time.

Many of the brewers expanded on what they do to mitigate or limit violence among their patrons. Considering how all of the brewers sold their alcohol at their homes and not at a community center, preventing violence was personally important to these brewers. Many of these brewers mentioned that they had personal rules governing fighting at their businesses. Most of them have no fighting rules and others have policies where they will report people who continue to fight to the chief if they will not stop fighting. Two brewers mentioned that they have a rule that those who initiate violence at their homes will not be welcome back. Another said that her husband controls the fights and quarrels. Two other brewers mentioned that they have licenses from the police so that they can report people who have initiated violence, although the existence of such a license was not verified by the research personnel. Other brewers, however, seemed to be more complacent or burnt-out with their approach to limiting violence among their clients. One man said that violence does happen and ‘you have to be patient and calm them down...I handle my customers well.’ One woman said that ‘violence happens but I am a woman and I don’t throw them away because they won’t come back.’

When asked whether or not they thought that alcohol makes people more likely to be violent or abusive to others all but three brewers said that they did not think so. Two of the brewers who did think alcohol made people more likely to be violent mentioned that it depended on the type of alcohol. The other brewer who thought alcohol made

people more likely to be violent said that, ‘alcohol is used as a shield,’ and that those who commit violence will just say, ‘Oh, I was drunk’ to shirk responsibility for their actions. This was also a recurrent theme among those who didn’t think that alcohol made people more likely to be violent. Many brewers (0.30) mentioned that alcohol was a shield or that violence is planned beforehand and then perpetrators outsource the blame to the alcohol. Another prominent theme among those who disagreed was that violence is something that people are born with and that alcohol doesn’t affect that inborn tendency to be violent or not be violent, with 35 percent of brewers saying that violence was an inborn quality.

Regulation

When asked about what types of regulation are in place over their businesses, many brewers mentioned a chieftain-initiated curfew requiring them to finish selling alcohol and close up their shops by a certain time, typically 6pm or 8pm. One of the brewers mentioned that this policy was to prevent the drunks themselves from being robbed at night and to protect the livestock in the community. This brewer reported that there were people in his community who would say they were going to drink but would then steal animals and come back as if they had been to the brewers. In order to prevent this from happening, his community instituted curfews and a rule that anybody found drunk outside after 9pm will be reported to the police.

Many of the brewers also had personal, and in some cases, community policies where they were required to feed anybody who shows up to their business who hadn’t already eaten—especially if they were selling the strong spirit *kachasu*. This was to

prevent the perceived negative health effects – e.g., fatal alcohol poisoning, excess drunkenness, etc. – from drinking on an empty stomach.

There was a mixed response when the brewers were asked about whether or not the government should become involved in regulating their businesses. One brewer thought that the regulation should be left to the chief as they are the ones naturally in charge of the village. She was concerned that if the government got involved, they would impose fees that would make her business less profitable. However, other brewers seemed welcoming of government regulation. One brewer mentioned regulation would help with the security at her business by making it possible for her to show an official certificate and go through the proper procedures to deal with violence. Another brewer thought that government regulation would allow her to access government loans because a vetting process would allow her to show that she is serious about her business.

Discussion:

Local brewers are deeply engrained in local culture and play key roles in their communities. They stimulate small economies as they give many people a market to sell their products, an important function in these isolated rural communities. Brewers often function as moneylenders, giving local people access to capital to start businesses or pay for emergency health costs or funerals. Additionally, the brewing businesses are incredibly important for the brewers themselves and their families, and many of their families have achieved significant economic mobility and progress through the family business. These families rely heavily on the income generated through alcohol brewing and without this extra income many would be in dire circumstances.

From a gender perspective, brewing alcohol was one of the only business options available to women in these rural communities, and it granted them disposable income that oftentimes was their own. Their brewing businesses function as an empowering institution where they can make their own money and have autonomy over financial decisions. Oftentimes, these female brewers had chosen to use their profit to invest in their children's education. However, it would be a mistake to assume that this is an ideal option for these women. They are occasionally subject to harassment and violence at their own homes and, despite their business success, sometimes feel they do not receive full repayment from borrowers due to their gender.

Policymakers seeking to regulate informal alcohol production and consumption should be aware of the inherent complexities of this issue and make sure to consider the important role of alcohol in these people's livelihoods. While many of the brewers did seem open to regulation, they were primarily looking for information on how to ensure more clean brewing procedures and to create higher quality product. In terms of key areas for policy development to limit the harmful use of alcohol, focusing on sanitation and cleanliness issues are potentially effective interventions. Additionally, limits on operating hours and closures during critical periods (such as harvest and other community events), can limit the potential negative effects of alcohol on community economic productivity. Providing brewers some sort of legal authority to prevent or report violence at their establishments could help limit instances of violence and sexual assault.

Considering the remote location and the deep cultural significance of these brewers within their communities, chieftains are likely the best option for development and enforcement of policies to reduce the harmful use of alcohol in rural Malawi.

Chieftains are deeply respected and many of them have already taken measures to limit alcohol use during critical times such as during harvest. Furthermore, utilizing chieftains will likely be more successful than government regulation as these areas are very remote and the people feel distant from a centralized government in urban centers. Establishing or utilizing preexisting networks of chieftains to share their experiences on what is working in their communities to limit the harmful use of alcohol and allowing for peer-to-peer influence could lead to faster adoption of recommendations than a top-down approach.

This study provides the most comprehensive look into the community roles of traditional brewers of alcohol and the complex social norms and institutions that govern alcohol consumption at a local level in Malawi. While providing a potential framework for research on similar topics outside of our research area, our findings are not generalizable to other populations as alcohol production and consumption is deeply integrated into local custom and culture. Further research on these topics in other populations is necessary to gain a more complete understanding of informal alcohol production and consumption in Malawi and Sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, continued research on these topics, especially opportunities for informal regulation through traditional authority, will help to inform policymakers on the most viable policy alternatives for mitigating the harmful use of alcohol in this area of Malawi

Conclusion:

Local brewers of alcohol play important societal roles in their communities in this rural part of Dowa District, Malawi. They form a key part of local economies and offer

access to credit to isolated communities. Many of them are aware of the harm that alcohol has in their community and are open to regulation on sanitation and health issues in addition to efforts to limit violence at their establishments. These brewers are often already regulated by traditional authority and utilizing chieftains to develop and implement policies to mitigate the harmful use of alcohol could potentially be more effective than government interventions. Understanding these micro-level interactions is critical to developing effective policy to limit the harmful use of alcohol.

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