

The Anthropology of Alcohol in Japan

Chair: Nathaniel Smith, Yale University, Ph.D. Candidate

This is a panel about the consumption of alcohol in Japan and how observations of this behavior can be translated into ethnographically rich moments. From a phenomenological position we look at drinking as something an anthropologist can use to illustrate, understand, and relate experience. Using fieldwork experiences these papers explore how deeper understanding, and as a result richer ethnography, are possible through observations of alcohol consumption and how this consumption is talked about in the field. We are interested in examining how understand, insight, and ethnography are possible in an often alcohol saturated setting.

Real Men Don't Hold Their Liquor: The Performance of Drunkenness in Japan.

Paul Christensen, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Ph.D. Candidate

This paper looks at the performance of drunkenness among male patrons at a bar in an upscale Tokyo neighborhood. I will explore how my experience working as a bartender and observing the drunken and sometimes performative behavior of customers initially clashed with my preconceptions of gender norms surrounding alcohol consumption. Specifically that to properly perform as a male drinker, one must be able to “hold their liquor” and drink heavily but not become excessively intoxicated. Instead, my fieldwork shows a different framework, in which men adopt myriad strategies to appear intoxicated in order to publicize their masculinity.

Ah-ha! Wine, Experience and Phenomenology.

Nicolas Sternsdorff, Harvard University, Ph.D. Candidate

This paper uses Gadamer's concept of the fusion of horizons to show through ethnographic moments how an ethnographer and his/her informants can arrive in place where understanding can take place. Based on research in Boston and Tokyo at various wine events, I argue that wine aficionados often have “ah-ha!” moments, in which their understanding of wine realigns, and that expands the horizon of common experience they share with other wine enthusiasts. Working through these examples, I probe further the moments in which an ethnographer's understanding realigns and can better understand the experience of his/her informants.

Maintaining Social Order Through Liminality.

Esra Gokce Sahin, Harvard University, Ph.D. Candidate

Socializing through alcohol is a very common practice. Although such a practice connotes a way of social interaction of ease and relaxation, there are also types of social gatherings which require the liminal state of consciousness provided by drunkenness as a means of social control. Even though there is no such written rule, participation to drinking parties in Japan is considered obligatory among the members of certain social groups and institutions. Such parties take place in a carnivalesque manner, and the participants stress that “whatever is said and done under the

influence of alcohol is forgiven and forgotten,” however, it is questionable to what extent that statement is valid. Then what kind of a social control assessed by means of the liminal space of drunkenness?

Drinking With State.

Fumitaka Wakamatsu, Harvard University, Ph.D. Candidate

Based on a fieldwork at a Japanese corporation that heavily relies on a client-patron relationship with the state, my research explores how drinking serves as an indispensable social realm to solidify connections between politicians, bureaucrats and corporate members. My research draws on the idea of “community of practices,” closely examining artisanal mastery of skills and performances to “serve the boss”, which corporate members acquire by participating in a series of opportunities to drink with state officials. Therefore, it aims at not only illustrating productivities in informal gatherings as opposed to formal lobbying, but also at detailed processes of acquiring social capital for corporate members to better communicate with state officials.

Discussant: Nathaniel Smith, Yale University, Ph.D. Candidate (Theodore C. Bestor, Harvard University)