Ajon: A Beer Business

photography by Paige A. Ricks
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About project

Introduction to beer brewing:
In the 1970s, in northern Uganda, armed raids, lead by people of southern Sudan, led to devastating cattle losses, high male mortality and women and children moving to heavily populated areas, where infectious diseases and malnutrition rates were widespread. Twenty years later, fieldwork showed the damaging affects the war had on child development and growth.1

While settling into their new community, the Karamojong women maintained their traditional household roles, but there was also one major change: The introduction of sorghum beer as an economic tool. The history of the Karamojong people shows the intelligence of women to adopt new strategies under such damaging circumstances. Beer as a commercial enterprise had come to play a strong social role in the community, as well as supplying income to households.1

Although the history of beer commercialization did not begin with the Karamojong, the brewing and selling of beer by women is unique. Beer brewing in Uganda dates back to 1000 A.D., and has survived the modernization of new Uganda.2 The young and old drink it alike. The beer, which Ugandans call ajon, is brewed differently in other communities (like using maize or millet grains instead of sorghum), but people still uphold the cultural importance of the beverage.

But, what is the same in every community across Eastern and Southern Africa is the role of women as brewers. Although brewing is considered "women's work," it allows them to be in charge of their own businesses. Studies support that beer brewing is the most significant economic business for rural, working-class women in Africa and grants income higher than any other business or employment.3

With great curiosity, I traveled to three rural villages in southern Uganda to photograph the women who brew ajon, the men who drink it, and to understand the economic and cultural importance behind this lucrative beer business.

The Women:
Ajon brewers in the countryside of southern Uganda work in cooperative groups of at least 20, yet only one woman sells the beverage per day and keeps the earnings for that day. The following day a new "waitress" is on call.

Sales can be as high as 80 drinks per day, costing each customer 2,000 shillings (less than $1) to purchase one liter of ajon. For one woman working on a given day, she can make $70 per day, on average, until her shift the following month - which is double the average Ugandan income per month, according to Unite for Children (UNICEF).4

Because women view brewing solely as a business, very few women actually drink the beverage; men mainly purchase and consume it. Brewers Susan Arionget, 33, and Cecilla Ademere, 54, have been brewing for decades. Although, they are both HIV positive and do not drink the beer. Studies show the initial capital needed for beer brewing is less than many other economic activities because the beer must be drank within two days after fermentation before it sours, which yields rapid returns.
The women of the Asekenye family, who live in the Ngora Village, harvest sorghum, brew and sell jars of ajon in the marketplace every Thursday. For them, selling ajon is an economically viable business.

Sorghum, which the family harvests with maize, takes three months to grow. Breakdown: 2.3 kg of sorghum makes one liter of ajon and it costs 20,000 shillings ($8.77) to produce ajon; water taking up most of their costs. After selling the beer, the family produces a profit of 15,000 shillings ($6.58) per month.

In the Mutungo village, which is a slum in Uganda’s capital, Kampala, ajon cost 3,000 shillings ($1.32). Brewer Betty Anyait, 34, said the production costs of ajon near the capital are higher than in the countryside.

The Process:
1. Usually, 1-2 parts of sorghum is ground into manageable grains.
2. Parts of the sorghum grains are malted, which increases the enzyme content and accelerates the conversion of the starch to sugars.
3. Then, the mix is poured into boiling water and allowed to sit for 1-2 days in a warm place to ferment. During this fermentation phase, the mixture turns sour. In some communities the mix is left to sit longer, sometimes up to 6-10 days, because the longer the mix ferments, the higher the alcohol content.
4. The sour mixture is then boiled in water for two hours or roasted over a fire pit. This phase turns some of the starch into a gelatin (where remnants form) and sterilizes the brew.
5. After cooling the mixture, the malted sorghum is added, which gives the mixture a sweet taste. The malted sorghum also adds yeast, which causes the mixture to look like oatmeal or porridge.
6. After another 1-2 days of cooling it is ready to consume, but in other villages, the mixture is ready to drink after step five.

*NOTE: The alcohol content can be as high as 10-16%. Although most of the women fermented the mixture for about 6-10 days, the sour beverage is also fermenting while being consumed.

The Men
A group of men in the village of Modi - who call themselves the “morning crew” - had been sitting under a hut drinking, some out liter pots, others out of calabash bowls, since 7 a.m. It was now 9:30 a.m. and the men rarely pulled their mouths away from their drinking straws. They called drinking ajon a “ritual”: They drink from 7-11 a.m., have lunch, come back to drink from 1-5 p.m. and then leave for dinner. There is another group of men who drink mostly in the evenings after work - the “evening crew.” The men regard drinking as their “daily business” to consume ajon everyday.

The men’s occupations ranged from students to labor workers to unemployed. Studies of ajon consumers have shown that the status of individuals in a community sometimes relies on being able to afford beer
and other staple foods. Because ajon is high in protein and men drink for hours, it can keep a person full for two to three days. The people of the Ngora village considered ajon a “meal.” A 2010 study of iron consumption in maize and sorghum beer showed, on average, each crop contains 40 mg of iron, which is a major source of the nutrient.

“When you’re drinking this you don’t feel hungry. It keeps the stomach [full],” a large man with blood shot red eyes said.

Men believe because of the high levels of yeast, ajon is also a medicine that cures malaria and other parasite infections, as well as stress and fatigue.

Culturally, drinking ajon is a community ritual, rather than spiritual: Men gather around one drinking pot, share drinking straws made of sapling branches with tea bags tied to the ends (to catch the yeast and other remnants), and converse, gossip, and laugh.

“It relaxes us - as if we feel free!” the large man added.

Despite its cultural and social value to the community, as well as being thought of as a “meal,” the addiction to the drink, like any alcohol, is often overlooked. According to the World’s Health Organization’s 2004 Global Status Report on Alcohol, Uganda had the highest per capita alcohol consumption worldwide, mostly due to these indigenous beers.

Books, which discuss African women labor and development, do not mention the significance of brewing. Because of the lack of attention, the industry goes completely unsupported. But supporting this industry, which could develop with new technologies, credit programs and business training, would mean the support of alcohol and alcoholism, which women groups on other continents have campaigned against. But, for the women who brew in Uganda, alcoholism is not a worry - only making money.

Footnotes:
Betty Anyait, 34
Mutungo Village - Kampala, Uganda
Susan Arionget, 33
Modi Village - Kumi, Uganda
GENTLEMEN

1500 SH.

LADIES 1000 SH.

K1 + H AT KG 400 PM
Cecilla Ademere, 54
Modi Village – Kumi, Uganda
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