



# Cultural Aspects of the Social Attitudes Toward Alcohol in Russia:

## The Mythology and Cult of Alcohol

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Alcohol-related myths in Russia are so ingrained and pervasive that they are an integral part of everyday Russian life. Possibly, because of their familiarity they are usually treated as something trivial and do not attract much attention from scientists or practitioners working in the area of substance abuse. My observations during many years of clinical practice have led me to the conclusion that a culture's alcohol-related mythology underlies a society's view of alcohol use, abuse, and how it determines options for prevention and treatment.

Over-permissiveness toward alcohol is common in countries undergoing rapid social change.<sup>1</sup> Currently, hardships associated with the transitional period combined with traditional attitudes have made permissiveness—and even over-permissiveness—toward alcohol an important phenomenon of modern culture in Russia, and, with some cultural and social differences, in the other New Independent States (NIS).

The nature of this phenomenon is not yet understood, but it may be argued that rational social attitudes toward alcohol and drug abuse, a clear understanding of the negative consequences of alcoholism, and efforts to prevent alcohol abuse are opposed by a system of myths, which constitute, represent, and support permissiveness. Understanding this mythology is critical because the related irrational attitudes it inspires is currently pervasive in Russia. This article considers some of the alcohol-related myths of Russia from this point of view to demonstrate their importance and power.

With regard to attitudes toward alcohol and drugs, American medical literature on substance abuse pays a great deal of attention to cultural beliefs. Respect for and appreciation of cultural beliefs, norms, and values are critically important for the effective delivery of substance abuse services. Such understanding is directly related to the way in which alcohol and drug problems are defined in a particular cultural or ethnic group. For example, what is perceived to be an appropriate way to prevent

these problems from occurring or what is considered to be a positive outcome differs from one cultural group to another. Cultural beliefs, in fact, affect every aspect of the prevention and therapeutic processes, as well as the ways in which different ethnic groups:

- label and communicate pain and problems;
- label symptoms or indicators;
- determine the causes of substance abuse problems;
- perceive healthcare providers;
- respond to or utilize treatment or assistance; and
- influence personal involvement and responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

It appears that the phenomenon of cultural beliefs can be better understood in the broader context of the parallel concept of mythology. Like myths about mental disorders,<sup>2-4</sup> myths about alcohol exist in people's minds and inform the attitudes, convictions, beliefs, preconceptions, and prejudices that are shared by groups, subpopulations, and sometimes the majority of a society. Such myths are represented in legends, fairy tales, proverbs, sayings, anecdotes, and jokes, as well as in fiction and entertainment.

Proverbs, sayings, jokes, and the like are very important representations of this mythology. In their native language they are brief, sharp, well-shaped, and, importantly, have a rhythmic, or even melodic, quality. Translating them is an extremely complex—often unmanageable—task because it is very difficult to transfer an entire array of meanings and associations from one language or culture to another. To recreate concurrently the phonetic and rhythmic compositions of these messages is nearly impossible.

Like myths in general, social myths are usually reality-based, but the reality is subjected to hyperbole, represented in a grotesque way or distorted beyond recognition. Social myths appeal to the imagination rather than to rational thinking; they are usually fragmented or incomplete. While traveling from person to person, they easily and frequently change their shape, but in their entirety and their structure they are surprisingly stable and persist in the society for ages. Social myths ignore evidence-based information, rather reflecting rumors, notions, and suppositions, which both reinforce the mythology and are themselves nourished by it. Most importantly, these myths profoundly affect personal and group behavior.

The Russian Federation, like most NIS countries, is a multi-ethnic, multi-racial nation and each country has its own, overlapping mythology. The specifics, as well as the common denominators, for all of these systems require further study

before culturally relevant prevention and therapeutic services may be implemented.

## Alcohol

The prevalent set of irrational social attitudes towards alcohol shares, in a distinctly literal sense, some features normally associated with a cult. Some cults are relatively benign, such as those of the body or of rock stars; others are malicious, for example the cult of a dictator. In any case, the relevant group or population actively follows the major objective and priority of the cult, usually worshiping the same idol.

The secular features of the Russian alcohol idol—or even his identity—defy easy description and exist as inherently confused and unclear images. Unlike the Greek's Bacchus or the Roman's Dionysus, he does not have any specific appearance or a biography attached to him, but is understood universally within the society as “the Green Snake”—an image apparently associated with experiences of alcohol delirium. While sometimes the idol appears in more concrete forms, such as the personification of vodka or wine, often its presence is only conjecture. It appears that the vagueness of the myths surrounding, constituting, and representing this cult give it flexibility, persistence, and resilience. In spite of this vagueness, the idol is attributed a distinct set of powers. Alcohol “warms the soul,” provides strength, eliminates fatigue, is a remedy to cure all disorders (“we do not drink, but only cure ourselves”) and has many other benign properties. Mythological thinking readily ignores the inconvenient and easily reconciles the incompatible.<sup>5</sup> Thus, alcohol is seen as “the bitterness” (*gor'kaja*), “the poison” (*otrava*) and “the cruel enemy” (*zlodejka*); it alone is responsible for a whole range of personal problems and is the destroyer of family, health, and strength. At the same time, it is the only salvation; the only reliable shelter (“the sorrow and the rescue”); and can release a person from any concern or worry (“drink wine and everything will be okay”). That alcohol can also eliminate all taboos or moral obligations is witnessed in the universal excuse and moral acquittal: “It's not his fault; he was drunk.” It is an inevitable, unavoidable, irresistible force; it is fate or a spiritual entity with the power to reward and punish. This idol is a jerk. It can punish severely, but it can just as readily mete out cruel pranks and jokes. People praise the idol and blame it; they create poems, sing songs, tell terrifying stories about, and worship it.

## Consumption

The process of consuming alcohol has all the features of cult

worship. Traditionally, the drinking of alcohol is associated with important social events that are accompanied by symbolic words, gestures, and specific rituals. The process of drinking, for example, is associated with fulfilling resolutions, accomplishing goals, expressing desires, keeping one's health, preventing unhappiness, and celebrating peace or victory.

The ritual of toasting shared by most cultures takes on exaggerated dimensions within the Russian frame of reference, addressing a whole spectrum of positive values and desires. A toast can be brief and simple—such as “to your happiness,” “to health,” “to success,” “to friendship”—or it can be a long and capriciously ornamented speech individually crafted for a particular occasion.

In the framework of rational thinking, it is difficult to comprehend how drinking alcohol can bring about victory or the health of a child, but if the process of drinking is considered a ritual—the acceptance of the body of the idol and the joining of its spirit—everything becomes reasonable and explicable. Of course, for the followers and ministers of this cult, no reasons or explanations are needed as it is simply a tradition.

Another important aspect of the process of drinking alcohol and all its accompanying rituals is as a symbol of unity. Depriving someone of the opportunity to drink with others is interpreted as an insult; an expression of scorn and alienation: Russian tradition requires that even an enemy sometimes be offered a drink. But more commonly sharing a drink symbolizes forgiveness, reconciliation, forgetting past hostility. Conversely, the refusal to drink alcohol with others is an act of disrespect. Such a person separates himself or herself from the group, is perceived as arrogant, is “too proud,” or is not “one of us.” This threat of alienation constitutes one of the most powerful mechanisms of peer pressure for the recruitment of new cult members.

In NIS, there is a broad spectrum of cultural patterns, some of which are substantially different from Russia's, ranging from a refined culture of consuming alcohol, for example, in Georgia, to the traditional prohibition of alcohol in the NIS nations with predominantly Islamic populations. It is also true that there is a substantial degeneration of these traditions; alcoholism is currently a problem for historically Islamic NIS, too. At the same time, in Russia, and other NIS countries with a long standing tradition of consuming alcohol, there is a trend towards the development of other, more simplified, but still ritualized patterns of consuming alcohol, such as “for three of us” when three men share a bottle of vodka anywhere—on the street, in a building's vestibule, at the railway station, for example. Analysis of these cultural patterns and trends is beyond the scope of this article.



## The Drunk

According to popular mythology, “everyone drinks alcohol” as evidenced by sayings like “even the hen drinks,” which are customarily used to brush aside all words of caution. Moreover, drinking is seen as a sign of maturity and masculinity; the ability to drink large amounts of alcohol is even a matter of pride. While traditionally men are seen as the drinkers, the percentage of Russian women consuming comparable amounts of alcohol is quickly rising to become disproportionately high by international standards. Americans and Russians mean objectively different things when they talk about heavy drinking. A mention of American drinks containing 10 milliliters of alcohol is sure to raise a condescending smile.

Attitudes toward drunks are controversial in Russian society. Certainly, there are many people who consider a public display of drunkenness reprehensible; nevertheless the sight of drunks on Russian streets and in public buildings is very common—to the point of being typical and expected. While many people consider a drunk’s behavior unacceptable, in virtually any group of Russian pedestrians, passers-by, or passengers on a bus or subway annoyed or offended by a drunk, you will find those who are immediately ready to stand up for him and defend him from his sober accusers—and even from the police, at least verbally—whatever his asocial behavior. “Don’t you see that the man has had a little to drink?” and “What! Can’t a man drink?” are common rejoinders. Possibly, he was worshiping our idol a little bit too hard, but who can condemn him for it?

Similarly, there are many phrases to explain that being extremely intoxicated is nothing to be ashamed of—“the man has relaxed” or “he has simply indulged; it’s no big deal”—as well as a wide repertoire of apologetic sayings and proverbs such as “he may be drunk, but he’s clever” and “the drunk will wake up lucid, but the fool never will.” Furthermore, it is assumed that an intoxicated person is able to do anything—believable or unbelievable—and is scared of nothing: “the depth of the sea only comes up to the drunk’s knee.”

A favorite pastime for many men during their numerous smoke breaks is telling and listening to unbelievable stories that fall into a folk genre that may be termed “yesterday night” fables. These stories, which may contain some true underlying facts, are about drinking huge amounts of alcohol and the adventures and destructive accomplishments that ensue. These stories always have a well-disposed audience, but the adventures are usually perceived with mixed feelings. At the same time that there is an air of condemnation for all the destructive and unethical actions,

alcohol takes the blame and thereby absolves the individual. The speaker, who usually is the main character of the story, is showered with sarcasm, but also with sympathy and even admiration.

Transforming serious alcohol-related problems into sarcastic jokes is a characteristic and powerful maneuver used in these stories as well as in discussing alcohol problems at any level of the social hierarchy. Indeed, it is one of the most powerful defense mechanisms, supporting the alcohol cult.

## Alcoholism as a Disease

To be sure, mythological thinking in most cultures fails to distinguish clearly between social drinking and alcoholism. In Russia, drinking is usually thought of as a disease where in the drinker “got drunk up to small devils”—meaning he’s in a state of alcohol delirium—or “is all shaking”—meaning he has a persistent and debilitating tremor. The affected individuals are often viewed with a mixture of sympathy, scorn, and irony. Delusion, shaking, and other negative consequences of alcohol abuse are thought to be peculiar to specific individuals—to those who “have lost control,” “cannot resist the desire to drink,” “drink too much,” “cannot drink properly,” “get drunk too soon,” “drink any trash,” “do not know their own limits,” or “drink alone.” In other words, symptoms of the disease are interpreted as its cause, and consequences are traded for reasons.

According to the mythology, the negative consequences of alcohol abuse are the result of an inability to resist temptation. Here both terms are equally important: the inability is a characterization of the person, but this person is giving up to a force whose origin is unknown; the temptation exists as a given. The responsibility for this failure is usually attributed to circumstances connected with a hard life, friends who are drinking, family problems, or an unhappy love life. Sometimes heredity is likewise implicated. The chief responsibility, however, belongs to the alcohol itself. “He” (the Snake) is tempting and teasing; he paralyzes the will. “This is all because of her, damned vodka.”

In other words, the concept of alcoholism as a disease is vague within the mythology. Whatever twisted paths the mythological thinking takes to explain the phenomenon and its causes, it finally comes around to the explanation of alcoholism as a possession or domination by the personified-deified entity of alcohol, with the idol itself—rather than the individual or the world in general—as the major subject of blame.

## Treatment

In this mythological context, it is natural that any power that can

resist this idol's power must be just as strong and of the same kind and range as the alcohol. In this case, the opposing power must be as strange, incomprehensible, and irrational as the pathogenic power so that the worship of one idol is replaced by another. It is hard even to imagine that such ordinary, trivial things as pills, injections, or a person's advice are capable of eliminating such a powerful, irrational force. Furthermore, pills and especially injections may be seen as harmful. In Russia, we are told repeatedly, and with total conviction, that they destroy the brain and the liver, affect memory, and "only drive the illness inward."

Some credence is given to remedies with highly unusual properties such as bitterness, a bad stench, or ugly appearance, but remedies of this kind can only be provided by healers on the metaphysical level of the idol, who have an unusual status and are placed somewhere outside of society, for example a "babka," a wizard, or an anchorite. These outsiders may also provide other kinds of services, including exorcisms and "whispering on water," as well as a number of other similarly evidence-based treatments.

### Doctors and Therapists

In the Russian mythological context, the popularity of "miraculous" healers—those who heal in some mysterious way, such as by spreading energy through a television, by "coding," or by freezing the perineum—is very natural. Miracle healers, often consciously, promote the growth of a myth, thereby becoming idols themselves and achieving extraordinary popularity. Rumors of their fantastic powers make many people give up conventional medical treatments and seek their help. Owing to well-known suggestive effects, some people really do feel improvement. These successes are then propagated by media, which, naturally, do not report the majority of non-responder cases.

The "doctor with a particular look" is the next in popularity. He sees through you, reads your thoughts and, of course, performs hypnosis to treat his patients. The popularity of hypnosis, which has some features associated in peoples' minds with magic, does not come as a surprise in this context.

In terms of positive images of traditional doctors, the mythology does allow for those who belong to the romantic category of "people in white coats" who are full of compassion and strive to aid patients. In the imagination of those who profess this myth, this doctor has no rights or problems of his own and is only concerned with others.

Negative images of doctors are more common in this mythology, including one that is the antithesis of the "people in white coats." This doctor is a selfish, unprincipled, and inhuman

person with mercenary motives. Patients are of interest to him only in terms of profits and self-interests. Another mythical prototype in this category is the "screwball" who is often found in satirical and humorous fiction, film, and folklore, and is portrayed as a strange, curious, narrow-minded doctor who cannot understand human suffering or normal human drives. This doctor puts forth senseless questions and swings his neurological hammer, hitting the patient at the most inappropriate moments. Of course, the patient is more intelligent, humanistic, and attractive than this doctor. The sixth and final image of a healer specific to alcohol-related mythology is the doctor who is "drunker than his patient." This characterization represents the ultimate argument for discrediting any effort to fight alcohol.

A knowledgeable, conscientious doctor doing a good job is completely absent from the mythology of alcohol. But the prototypical healers associated with the myths create expectations in the minds of actual and potential clients of alcohol and substance abuse services. They also reflect people's attitudes towards doctors and the services they provide. Consequently, those who subscribe to this mythology are caught in a Catch-22: they do not want to go to the "mercenary," "screwball," or "drunk," who they see as dangerous, but since "miracle makers," doctors "with a particular look," or "persons in white coats" do not exist, no doctor can live up to their high expectations. This often keeps them from seeking any real help, as what they are looking for exists only in the mythology and not in reality.

### Understanding Myths as a Way to Approach Treatment

Alcohol-related mythology has a long history and in every nation where alcohol is consumed corresponding myths have been developed to a greater or lesser degree. While the content and form of these myths may or may not be similar to those of Russian myths, the rudiments of an alcohol cult may be found in many cultures. What is distinctive about the Russian mythology—beyond the culturally specific content and form of its myths—is the remarkable abundance and diversity of its forms and fables, its vigorous recruitment of new members, and its ability to bring its frenzied worship to an extremely broad and ever-increasing portion of the population.

It would be naive to think that only those who drink are permissive in their attitudes toward alcohol. The paradox of mythological thinking is that in both the collective and individual mind, reasoning based on myths can comfortably co-exist with modern rational thinking. Often, those who abstain from alcohol or use it very infrequently *Continued on page 32*

*continued from page 17*

are still permissive toward the drinking of others, while many who clearly understand the destructive consequences of alcoholism enthusiastically raise toasts for its complete eradication.

This article is simply a brief synopsis of the most marked myths. The described cult and associated mythology are not the only factors—albeit still very powerful factors—in forming and supporting social attitudes toward alcohol use in Russia. Based on historic evidence, attacking a cult by using exclusively rational arguments and remedies is not a successful strategy. An extreme expression of this rational attitude was the ill-fated Perestroika-era attempt to impose a 1920s-style prohibition on what was then the Soviet Union. The task is to face this reality, to recognize the real power of this cultural and psychological phenomenon—the power of the collective unconscious<sup>6</sup>—beneath the mask of innocent jokes, irony, funny stories, and stupid anecdotes, and to find ways of interacting with this reality in order to reduce or defer the devastating effects of alcohol.

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