CHAPTER THREE

BECOMING THE KING OF DRINKS

Imports of gin into West Africa peaked between 1880 and 1914. They subsequently declined, from 84258 hectolitres in 1898 to 2610 hectolitres in 1939, with a brief revival during the 1920s. After World War II, gin imports stabilised at between 5000 and 7000 hectolitres, a mere fraction of the amount imported before World War I.¹ This coincided with a change in the position of imported gin. From being a popular drink which, depending on the context, could be used in a number of different ways, for example for social drinking or as currency, gin became a special drink with restricted circulation, significant as a necessary ingredient of West African traditional culture and as an emblem of traditional leadership. According to the elders, gin had become the only drink that could be used to pray to the gods: ‘whiskey, brandy, etc., when used for the gods, it would mean that you had gone against their taboo.’² “That would mean that you have spoilt them and it can cause harm to you by killing, going mad, etc.”³

When I asked Torgbui Baku and his elders in Denu what it was that made gin so special, they responded as follows:

It was told and believed by our forefathers time immemorial that the white Holland gin was a great Chief in Alcoholic world and had acted violently that at a time, it was decided to be discarded off the scene among the living. The great Chief ‘GIN’ accepted keeping itself away for peace to prevail. Life became meaningless, as the Gin was no longer participating in many events of the living beings. Everything remained motionless at the time. In countries where Gin was heartily accepted into the societies, activities were meaningfully and briskly performed in high spirit. Looking at the low spirit of the people who discarded the Great Chief Holland Gin, meetings of Elders were summoned to reconsider the banishment of the white Gin. Hence Holland Gin was adored to stay

¹ Coen Kramers, De Moutwijnindustrie te Schiedam (Amsterdam:Uitgeverij Lieverlee, c. 1946); Trouw, 16 April 1999; interview with Wendy van Wijk of Bols Royal Distilleries, held at Zoetermeer, 6 May 1999.
² Interview with Hunua Yao Gakpo Dziekpor, Victor Gasu, Jimmy Dziekpor and Agumenu Dziekpor, held at Atiavi, 4 August 2000.
³ Interview with Dakpo Akoto, held at Akatsi, 28 July 2000.
among them for anything the people want to do be it living or spiritual. At one time, a decision was unanimously taken that since the Gin was considered high among them, a white or special Top Cover be used to seal its bottles to differentiate the beverage from other drinks, and also to be used for special purposes more specially for ritual ceremonies and to be the only drink before the Stools of Chiefs in addition to Liha.4

The crucial element in this narrative is the recognition of the importance of ‘Chief Gin’ through the experience of his absence. Therefore, my first interpretation of the story was that the period of absence referred to a specific, relatively recent, historical event: either to the prohibition by Britain of Dutch gin imports into West Africa between 1919 and 1923, or to the Gold Coast government’s attempt to ban Dutch gin around 1930. However, when I put my interpretation of their story to Torgbui Baku and his elders, they denied any relation to recent historical events: ‘Oh! No! We were referring to time immemorial from our great, great grandfathers. They told this story to other great grandfathers of ours before it got to us.’5 The story nevertheless refers to a number of relevant aspects that may help to explain how gin became the King of Drinks. The narrative mentions the use of gin for ceremonies and stool rituals, which points towards a change in the uses to which gin was put, and to differences between the uses of gin compared to that of other alcohols. In this context the reference to gin as a ‘white’ drink may be relevant. Emmanuel Akyeampong discussed the importance of colour for explaining the different uses of rum and gin when he examined the use of alcoholic drinks among the Akan: rum and brandy, being red, are ‘hot’ drinks, connected to war gods and violence, while gin as a colourless drink shares in the ritual power of white objects.6 Maybe we should understand the elders’ reference to gin as ‘white’ and special in this context? The narrative also refers to explicit local debates about the status of gin, and an eventual decision by the elders to embrace gin for ritual ceremonies. Furthermore, the emphasis on the importance of a special white top cover, leads us to ask questions about product recognition, branding and brand consciousness. Finally, even though this narrative is said not to refer to any

4 Torgbui Baku and his Elders of Denu, personal communication, 4 August 2000; Liha refers to maize beer.
5 Interview with Torgbui Baku and twenty other chiefs, elders and queen mothers, held at Denu, 5 August 2000.