CHAPTER FIVE

POISON OR MEDICINE?
CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF DUTCH GIN

The importation of Dutch gin into West Africa was the subject of intense debates throughout the colonial period. Most vocal were the anti-liquor trade campaigners, whose claims I have introduced in earlier chapters. Their campaign was linked to churches in Britain, and Christian missions in Africa, and received much information about the impact of Dutch gin from missionaries who sent alarming reports of alleged social degradation and health problems caused by the unlimited consumption of imported liquors. From the 1880s until the 1930s, the anti-liquor trade campaigners consistently claimed that the gins that were imported into West Africa were of poor quality: poisons that damaged the health of Africans. They also argued that African consumers were not yet civilised enough to consume spirits in moderation. Africans, being ‘primitive people’,1 were easily corruptible and lacked the basic skills of consumption, which would have helped them to realise that they should aim to acquire commodities that were healthier and more productive than liquor. To the anti-liquor trade campaigners, it was this combination of poisonous imports and the assumed primitiveness of African consumption, that justified their speaking and acting on behalf of Africans.

In this chapter I explore the differing and frequently changing opinions of West Africans concerning the importation and uses of Dutch gin. These developments have been discussed in some detail in the existing literature, and this chapter draws on the interpretations put forward by Emmanuel Akyeampong for Ghana, and Chima Korieh for Nigeria.2 I include a detailed discussion of the contemporary West African debates here, because they had a great influence on the development of the marketing of imported gin which I discuss in chapters

1 Bishop Melville-Jones, letter to the Editor of West Africa, 3 November 1928.
six and seven. In my re-examination of newspaper discussions and of exchanges between African leaders and colonial administrations I attempt to read between the lines of what are often essentially political debates, to find clues about African consumer perspectives and uses of Dutch gin. The chapter starts with a brief examination of African temperance in the decades leading up to World War I. During this period, African advocates of temperance were mostly motivated by the desire to fashion modern, respectable identities, or by the opportunity to challenge local African leadership, and less by the allegedly pernicious nature of distilled liquor.

Following this, I discuss the debates surrounding the development of legislation to effectuate a ban on Dutch gin imports in Ghana during the late 1920s. After decades of unsuccessful attempts by anti-liquor campaigners to mobilise African leaders against gin imports, quite suddenly a consensus emerged among Gold Coast chiefs and the African Members of the Gold Coast Legislative Council in favour of the prohibition of Dutch gin. The rhetoric of the anti-liquor trade campaign is clearly present in the chiefs’ claims that ‘Geneva gin is deleterious to health’ and ‘full of turpentine’. However, this new stance against gin imports also reflected concerns about economic exploitation, as can be seen in Paramount Chief Sir Nana Ofori Atta’s rhetorical question whether the Gold Coast people were ‘being robbed of the fruits of their labour by the sale to them of cheap liquor at exorbitant prices?’ Indeed, Akyeampong has interpreted this call for the prohibition of gin as part of the anti-colonial agenda of chiefs and educated elites, reflecting their anger over the exploitation of Africans by non-Africans.

By 1930 it had become a pattern for West Africans to adopt the discourse of temperance to achieve their own social or political goals, and in this respect the emergence of an anti-gin consensus in a very short time fits an existing pattern. I will contrast the developments in the Gold Coast with African opinion in Nigeria, where no such ban was proposed, and explore why the debates in these two territories took such different directions.

---

3 PRAAD/A CSO 21/18/18 Chiefs and Elders of Gbese, Comments on Liquor Policy of Government; CSO 21/18/18 Answers by the Chiefs and Elders of Akim Abuakwa, 12 October 1933.
4 Ofori Atta, quoted in *West Africa*, 3 November 1928.
5 Akyeampong, *Drink, Power, and Cultural Change*, 91.