First taste

How Indigenous Australians Learned about Grog

Book 1

Aims and ideas

A set of resources in six parts by

Maggie Brady
‘Misconceptions abound in relation to Australian people, and the history of alcohol.’

Dr Kaye Price, Aboriginal Educationalist

‘History is important. ... When we have factual knowledge and understanding of our past we can start developing effective ways of working in managing the grog problems we see today in our communities.’

Wendy Casey, Manager, Aboriginal Alcohol & Other Drug Programs Western Australia
A few years ago I was talking with an Aboriginal man from Timber Creek, west of Katherine in the Northern Territory. He had given away the grog and was talking about the different ways that Aboriginal people, and non-Aboriginal people, drank. What he said really stuck in my mind. This is what he said:

‘I bin watching this film...and I watch them cowboy, how they go in ...they have one little glass. Just have a glass and they walk out. And I thought “I wish people could do that”, you know? ... But especially Aboriginal...They can’t take a glass, they want a—! ...Aboriginals, soon as they go in, they start swearing when they’re drunk, and start arguing, start pushing each other. That’s not really sensible way. I seen whitefella when they drink they get a glass, they sit down and then they go out. I reckon that’s the way we should drink alcohol. The proper way, not going to send them mad, because when they go mad, they end up in all sort of problems.’ — Duncan Bero in Brady 1995:94

And here is another man, from the Fitzroy River region in Western Australia. What he said was similar:

‘When our people start drinking they go silly. That’s the way I look at it nowadays, good people going to waste. They don’t even know why they’re drinking...They don’t drink slowly like a whiteman; they open up the can and drink it down really fast. Gulp it down like you would with water. Then they start on the next can. That’s the way this mob drink beer. You know, the quicker they drink it the quicker they get drunk. That’s what they’re after — getting drunk’, Jock Shandley in Marshall 1988

I started thinking about how this all happened. How did people learn to drink like this and why? When did alcohol first arrive in this country, and did Aboriginal people or Torres Strait Islander
‘No-one ever taught Aboriginal people... what alcohol could do to our people. We just got in, just like cattle in a trough, and we just go straight into the trough, and have as much as we can drink.’ Roy Harrington

people have their own, traditional alcohol before? How did those old Aboriginal people in the early days get to know how to drink? Some say that they copied the rough white men who were working out bush in the early days, men who drank up their cheques and drank to get drunk. But these stories from Duncan Bero and Jock Shandley show that some white Australian men, in the 1950s and 1960s at least, were drinking ‘sensible way’, taking that one little glass, having a yarn. They are saying that Aboriginal people drink in a different way. So how is it that grog is still such a big problem for so many people? Another Aboriginal man, Roy Harrington, suggested that

‘No-one ever taught Aboriginal people... what alcohol could do to our people. We just got in, just like cattle in a trough, and we just go straight into the trough, and have as much as we can drink’. Brady 1995:97

Maybe this is the reason. But would ‘teaching’ people have made a difference? These books try to answer some of these questions about grog. We know that the history of contact between outsiders and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has changed everything, affected everything. The questions about learning to drink alcohol are important because what we think we know is sometimes wrong.

Maggie Brady
Canberra 2008
The aim of these books

Moving on from despair and blaming

First Taste gives a social and cultural analysis, rather than search for causes of dysfunction. These resources do not look at all the possible underlying causes of Indigenous alcohol abuse such as poverty and dispossession, low self esteem, ongoing intergenerational trauma and discrimination. They do not examine the physical, biological or psychological causes of addiction or ‘alcoholism’ either.

The books take episodes from history in order to understand more about how Aboriginal people learned to drink. They look at how social and historical events have influenced Indigenous attitudes to, and expectations of, alcohol. By exploring historical records and oral histories, each book examines and deals with misunderstandings that have become embedded in peoples’ minds. Today these mistaken beliefs continue to create fatalism, despair and blaming. They do not help to solve the problem or empower people.

By looking at history more carefully, these books are designed to educate and empower Indigenous people on alcohol issues, and contribute to greater understanding and reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.
Misunderstandings about alcohol use and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples affect the way in which Indigenous people feel about themselves, and the ways in which they look for solutions to drinking problems. Stereotypes about drinking also affect perceptions of Indigenous Australians by people in the general population. These ideas have been around for a long time, and many of them relate to the history of what happened when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples first came up against alcohol. The ideas that need to be challenged include:

- The idea that Aboriginal people traditionally had no alcohol
- The idea that alcohol use among Aboriginal Australians started in 1788 at Botany Bay with the First Fleet
- The idea that outsiders always used alcohol to exploit Aboriginal people
- The idea that Aboriginal people were the passive recipients of colonial goods including alcohol
- The idea that alcohol abuse and intoxicated behaviour among Indigenous people is determined more by biological than by cultural and social factors.
Idea 1
Aboriginal people traditionally had no alcohol?

It is surprising to many people to discover that Aboriginal people made fermented drinks before contact with outsiders. There are only three documented instances of these mildly intoxicating drinks, and they are described in Book 2 First taste of alcohol. Their existence counters the usual assumptions: that Aboriginal people had not previously experienced the pleasures and mood-changes of drinking.

Idea 2
Alcohol use started in 1788 at Botany Bay with the First Fleet?

Alcoholic drinks from foreign sources entered the lives of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders by many different routes. Early maritime explorers and adventurers landed on Australian coasts long before the First Fleet. All these early ships carried alcohol. The first documented account of Europeans offering liquor was in 1756 on Cape York. The first regular supplies of alcohol entered Australia in the north (not the south) of the country, when Southeast Asians from Makassar brought supplies on an annual basis from around 1720. This historical fact once again undermines the belief that the English were the first importers of alcohol. The Makassans were also the first 'models' of drinking and drunkenness for northern coastal Aborigines, and it seems that they were not moderate drinkers. Their story is told in Book 3 Strong spirits from Southeast Asia.

Idea 3
Outsiders always used alcohol to exploit Aboriginal people?

What can be learned from interactions with the Makassans, is that alcohol was offered along with other goods as a tribute or payment to Aboriginal people. It was in exchange for a resource that they neither needed nor used themselves: trepang. This was an instance in which alcohol was not used to exploit or to colonise the traditional owners, but was shared and consumed in a largely positive way. Aboriginal people were not passive, but were actively involved in these exchanges. They even incorporated the Makassan alcohol into their ceremonial performances and their languages.

Similarly, when Filipinos living in the Torres Strait shared their knowledge of how to make fermented and distilled *tuba*, the Islanders also learned to make these drinks of their own free will. They were active participants in the process and used these drinks in what seems to be a sociable and controlled way. These stories are told in Book 3 Strong spirits from Southeast Asia.
Port Jackson Painter, *A native going to fish*, 1788–89. Watling Collection, Natural History Museum, London
Idea 4
Aboriginal people were the passive recipients of alcohol?

Indigenous Australians were not just passive recipients of alcohol brought by outsiders. In Tasmania, Book 4 *The story of the bottle* tells how Aboriginal people actively sought out glass alcohol bottles from French visitors. They wanted the glass for their own uses, which were not the same as European uses of bottles. Bennelong, Bungaree and others in the early colony of Sydney also actively related to the outsiders. They obtained the resources they desired (such as alcohol and cash) by learning the behaviours taught by the English. Bennelong learned to drink sociably using the toast, and he enjoyed wine. Bungaree imitated the fancy behaviour of the gentleman in order to humbug visitors for things he wanted. How Aboriginal people made use of colonial goods in their own way is described in Book 5 *Learning from the English*.

Aboriginal people were very observant, and they mimicked and played the role of the drunk, both when they were intoxicated and when they were not! At a time when things were desperate for the Eora in the Sydney region, acting or exaggerating drunkenness was a way of obtaining cash and favours. Once more, people were not all passive victims of alcohol.

An American researcher once called Native American drinking ‘the world’s oldest on-going protest demonstration’ (Lurie 1979). This was because she disagreed with the idea that Native Americans drank because of an identity crisis, or low self esteem, or the effects of prejudice and poverty. She saw heavy drinking as a way of being an Indian rather than a white. Her ideas are interesting because she agreed that the behaviour of drunken white frontier workers and traders was emulated by Indians. But then, she said, they made it their own style of drinking, for their own cultural reasons. Indigenous Australians did this too.
Eora people of Botany Bay and Broken Bay in the 1830s.

Charles Rodius, Lithograph
National Library of Australia

Gooseberry’s rum mug.
State Library of New South Wales
Idea 5
Alcohol abuse is determined more by biology than by the social and cultural environment?

The most entrenched idea about Indigenous people and grog is that heavy drinking—and the intoxicated behaviours that go with it—are somehow biologically or physically determined. This idea underestimates the power of the social and cultural aspects of drinking (Rowley 1973). After all, drinking makes action happen. Being intoxicated allows people to be more up-front, more forward, but without being held responsible for their words or actions. People confront others with things they want to say, but normally cannot. Drinking helps people to lose shame. Drinking drowns sorrows. It releases stress and tensions. Drinking means showing your generosity to relations. It also means you can deny relationships by failing in family obligations. Sometimes people drink in order to have an argument: this shows that drinking to become intoxicated is not accidental. Aboriginal people learned that these were the things that being intoxicated could do for you in an Aboriginal way.

There is some truth in the idea that binge drinking and drinking to unconsciousness was once learned by Aboriginal people from frontier Europeans. This is discussed in Book 5 Learning to drink from the English. But this explanation alone makes it seem as though Indigenous societies have been static since the 19th century; that they have not changed in all that time (Saggers and Gray 1998:79). What happened after this frontier period, was that prohibition came in. Indigenous people were banned from hotels where they could drink alongside white Australians. Segregation meant that drinking was separate, unmonitored, and away from the normal social controls that exist (or should exist!) in licensed premises. During this time Aboriginal people only drank with each other. Aboriginal beliefs and attitudes about what alcohol could do took over (cf Stead 1980). Patrick Dodson once called this environmental alcoholism (Leary et al 1975). And when licensed community clubs were introduced in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this simply reinforced the type of drinking behaviour that could only flourish in segregated situations. The impact of these 20th century developments is discussed in Book 6 Struggles over drinking rights. We cannot ignore biology—our genes affect us all—but there is no evidence that Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people are different in this respect. Drunking to intoxication and violence are behaviours shaped by a person's history and experience—learned from others in the social environment.
‘The drinkers think about bringing grog here. They like to catch up with someone who’s had an argument, get stronger to fight or talk. So they bring it back. Before, we used to have a fight and forget about. Now they wait for when they get a grog. Some blokes, you can’t get a word out of them, but when they drink, you can’t stop them.’

Mr D R, of Warburton, Interview 1990

Tjunmutja Myra Watson speaks out at the launch of an alcohol report in Alice Springs, 13 July 1995, with other members and executive of the NPY Women’s Council. The organisation has rallied women over several years, who show their concern and anger about alcohol sales and alcohol abuse.

Photo Courtesy NPY Women’s Council
One of the stereotypes about the introduction of alcohol to Indigenous Australians is that their responses to it were the same across the country. Language tells another story.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had to find ways of describing strong-tasting alcohols, and by naming them, alcohol became part of peoples' linguistic world. In Indigenous languages, speakers 'stretch' the meaning of existing words to refer to alcoholic drinks. For example in some areas, people expand the term for 'water' to refer to alcohol, sometimes adding 'bad' or 'burning'. In Pitjantjatjara this is *kapi* or *kapi kura*. In the Torres Strait, in Mer and Meriam, people say *koamal nguki* or *uweri ni*: 'hot water'. In this way, language terms provide clues as to what people thought of alcohol and what their experiences of it were.

Some found it pleasurable like a delicacy, and named alcohol after highly-valued and sweet tasting liquids. These sweet words for alcohol can be found mostly in the desert regions, such as *wama* (Pintupi, Pitjantjatjara) and *pama* (Warlpiri). Other language groups (often on the coast) use terms meaning salty or bitter to refer to alcohol. Saltiness is a strong taste with a 'sting' to it, like some alcoholic drinks. On the Tiwi Islands, *mirripaka* means sea water and beer (perhaps because of the foam on beer like sea-foam) (Nash 1997).

Other groups believed the drinks to be as powerful and dangerous as venomous snakes, and referred to them by these terms. In the Kakadu region, the Kuninjku refer to alcohol as *kun-bang*. It means 'dangerous, poisonous, sleek, deadly one'. These words are like a warning, for alcohol is a form of poison. Drinking too much of it will poison the body and the mind.

Looking at language is a reminder that people across the country responded variously to alcohol. Perhaps these terms show that people in different regions had contact with different alcoholic drinks at different times in history. Above all, they remind us that there was no single 'Aboriginal response' to alcohol.
The poison of alcohol

I know this thing, I have tasted it, I have drunk it. I know this thing that you drink, it is really bad, it takes you away and speaks to you and you cannot stop, you have to listen. It is bad that water, it is bitter, it is poison, it is like the water that you find trapped in the layers of paperbark, it is bitter. You see I have tasted that water and I have tasted beer; that is what beer tastes like, it tastes bitter like hot water. You are completely bad because you give this thing to children, you are giving them the knowledge of this alcohol and then they drink. Do not give it to them because they are then learning to drink alone, and then they will drink for good.

That is all, I have finished, this is all I have to tell.

A public declaration by Charlie Miller Marnarra. Translated from Yanyuwa by John Bradley, 1980
How about learning to drink in a different way?

Ways of drinking and attitudes to it can and do change, even though these are part of a society’s ‘culture’. We know that the riotous drunken behaviour of Australians in the early colonial days has now mostly gone. Choices of drink also change over time. Port, for example, is no longer the popular drink it once was for the general Australian population: a change that has taken 40 years. Port is still the drink chosen by many Aboriginal people however. Aboriginal people disliked the taste of alcohol at first. Most people do. Now however, around 62% of Indigenous Australians drink alcohol and more Indigenous than non-Indigenous drinkers drink enough to cause great harm—to themselves, and to other people.

Reactions to drinking behaviour change over time. Australians now worry about teenage binge drinking. Aboriginal women are more openly critical of alcohol abuse than they once were and in recent years have become less tolerant of it. This puts social pressure on the drinkers to change their ways. This new intolerance alone is evidence that the culture is changing. Hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people manage to ‘give away the grog’ by themselves and this fact, together with a greater willingness to speak out about grog, show the power of social and cultural influences on drinking. These examples weaken the argument that biology is as important as many people think. Children follow in their parents’ footsteps, mostly because of role modelling and the social environment, not because of genetics.
Brady, Maggie, *Giving Away The Grog*. Canberra, Dept of Health and Ageing


Nash, David (1997) List compiled from ASEDA language catalogue, Canberra, AIATSIS


All societies have it in their power to change the way they drink.

Being less tolerant of alcohol abuse is one way of bringing change.
Thanks to these people

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What is in these six books?

Each of these resource books tells part of the historical story of how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people learned about alcohol, and about drinking. They are designed for people who are trying to learn more about Indigenous alcohol problems—students, health workers and those working in alcohol programs.

The books are roughly in historical order. Each one is designed as a story in itself, with its own list of references showing where the information came from, so that if you want to do more research you can look them up yourself in a library or on the web. Each book has some discussion topics for use in workshops or teaching. At the back of Book 1 there is an index to guide you through all of them.

Book 1 Aims and ideas introduces the series and lists its aims. It sets out and challenges the common ideas and misunderstandings about alcohol and Indigenous people that are discussed in books 2 to 6.

Book 2 First taste of alcohol tells the story of traditional Aboriginal alcoholic drinks and describes how Aboriginal people in southern Australia responded to the first taste of European alcohol—they rejected it.

Book 3 Strong spirits from Southeast Asia tells how strong liquor first arrived in the north, not the south of Australia. The Makassans from Sulawesi brought arrack, and the Filipinos brought tuba to the Torres Strait Islands.

Book 4 The story of the bottle tells how important bottle glass was to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as the raw material for making spear points and cutting tools. Today modern Aboriginal artists use bottles in different ways to make statements about drinking.

Book 5 Learning to drink from the English is about the early settlers and how they drank. Aboriginal men such as Bennelong were taught English drinking customs; others witnessed and mimicked drunkenness.

Book 6 Struggles over drinking rights is about the effects of prohibition laws on the process of ‘learning’ to drink and on all-or-nothing patterns of consumption. Aboriginal Christians and civil rights campaigners had different views on lifting the drink bans.