

# “DRUNKENNESS AND DREAMS”

## INEBRIATION AND THE DREAM QUEST AMONG NORTH AMERICAN INDIANS

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### SUMÁRIO

Este artigo argumenta que, juntamente com os sonhos, a embriaguez é percebida pelos Índios da América do Norte como um meio de comunicação com o mundo do espírito. Os primeiros missionários cristãos explicavam a paixão dos nativos pela bebida pela sua auto-avaliação exagerada e pelo desejo de poder, pensando que o álcool e os sonhos constituíam os obstáculos principais para a conversão dos Índios ao Cristianismo. Por outro lado, as explicações dos indígenas para este fenómeno são diferentes das dos observadores brancos. Como é sugerido pelos exemplos das tribos de Ojibwa, de Potawatomi, de Ottawa e muitas outras, os Índios explicam a ligação entre embriaguez e sonhos pela ausência temporária da alma que se encontra a viajar no mundo do espírito. É por isso que uma pessoa embriagada pode ser vista como ‘sagrada’. O álcool, por si só, não causa halucinações, mas o sonho profundo que ele provoca pode ser uma maneira de experienciar ‘visões sagradas’.

### ABSTRACT

This paper argues that, along with dreams, drunkenness is perceived by North American Indians as a means of communication with the world of spirit. Early Christian missionaries explained the natives’ passion for drink by their inflated self-esteem and urge for power, regarding alcohol and dreams as the main obstacles on the way to the Indians’ conversion to Christianity. On the other hand, indigenous explanations of drunkenness differ from those of white observers. Drawing on the examples ranging from the Ojibwa, Potawatomi, Ottawa and twentieth-century Montagnais-Naskapi, to the early seventeenth-century Micmacs and contemporary Numa and Tarahumara, the author demonstrates that the Indians account for the connection

between drunkenness and dreams by a temporary absence of the soul that travels in the world of spirit. That is why a drunken person can even be regarded as 'sacred'. Alcohol itself does not cause hallucinations but the sound sleep it induces can be a way of experiencing 'sacred visions'.

The great significance attached to dreams and visions as a means to establish communication with the spirit world is considered the most characteristic feature of North American Indian religions outside the Pueblo area (Benedict, 1923: 43; Hultkranz, 1987: 30). Already some of the early white observers in the New World noticed this, one could even say that they had the realization of the importance of dreams thrust upon them: “They have faith in dreams” wrote the Jesuit Pierre Biard in 1612 of the Micmac Indians, “if they happen to awake from a pleasing and auspicious dream, they rise even in the middle of the night and hail the omen with songs and dances” (Thwaites, 1896-1901, 2: 75). All across the continent Whites appear to have been subjected to similar dream-caused disruptions of their nightly rest. Two centuries later, for example, fur trader Alexander Henry the Younger experienced among the Blackfeet of the northwestern Plains the same sort of annoying disturbance. He reports that he had “frequently been awoke by their speeches and singing in the dead of the night” (Henry, 1988: 543).

Spiritually meaningful dreams often occurred spontaneously but were also evoked intentionally, a cultural practice known as the vision quest. Besides fasting, sleeplessness, or other forms of sensory deprivation, the use of sweat lodges, drumming and self-inflicted torture were among the means employed. In some native societies the vision-producing properties of certain plants, such as tobacco, *Datura*, the mescal bean, and the peyote cactus were made use of. Could it be that Indians drank excessively for the same reason? As is well known, in many cultures around the world alcoholic beverages have a place in religious beliefs and ritual behaviors and are among the time-honoured means used to induce trance states (Lewis, 1975: 39).

And yet the hypothesis that North American Indians might have drunk for spiritual reasons is a hotly debated one. As far as I can see no other view concerning *Indian drinking* is as controversial. A few scholars assert that the connection between drinking and spirituality is well-known ever since the seventeenth-century missionaries of New France denounced the Indians’ “drunkenness and dreams” (Carpenter, 1959; Vachon, 1960; Dailey, 1968: 57). On the other hand, there are authors such as Philip May (1977), who appears to regard this hypothesis as so far-fetched that he doesn’t even mention it in his overview-article *Explanations of Native American Drinking*. Perhaps this is because he is mainly concerned with contemporary drinking. And perhaps he concurs with the Sioux John Fire Lamé Deer in believing that, whereas in the past drinking may have had something to do with spirituality, it would be absurd to blame present-day alcoholism on a desire to have visions (Lamé

Deer and Erdoes, 1972: 77). But ethnohistorians, too, are uneasy with this hypothesis. James Axtell speaks of the “much-cited connection between inebriation and the dream or vision quest” (1992: 335). He underlines however, that the evidence is weak indeed and that “no source provides direct evidence that the natives themselves took to alcohol as a short cut to visions” (ibid.). Finally it must be stressed that an increasing number of authors are of the opinion that the connection between the Indian passion for drinking and the so-called “instant visions” of alcoholic intoxication is quite self-evident (Eccles, 1983: 53; Lurie, 1970: 321; Trigger, 1985: 205; Cleland, 1992: 132; Demos, 1995: 129-30).

Let me start with the view which holds that Catholic missionaries in Canada were well aware of the relation between the Indians’ drinking and dreaming and that they resisted their intoxication because they regarded it as a major obstacle to their work of conversion. Edmund Carpenter, whose name is mentioned first when this view is discussed, writes: “The *Jesuit Relations* are full of accounts of dream recitations and obedience to dream commands, as well as to the Iroquois interpretation of the experience of intoxication as equivalent to the dream experience. It is tempting to quote such cases at length, for they are rich in detail and variation” (1959: 150). Unfortunately, however, Carpenter seems to be able to resist this temptation because he fails to present a single example.

How did these missionaries perceive the causes of Indian drunkenness, what motives did they recognize and what did they believe were the reasons for this “vice” and “sin”? Do the early Jesuits – trained observers known for their rational minds – provide an explanation for the Indian suggestibility to drunkenness? If we should harbour such an expectation, we would certainly be quite disappointed upon reading their annual reports. It strikes the reader that they were mostly content to state merely *that* the Savages were “given to liquor” and “addicted to drunkenness” and that they drank “simply to become intoxicated” (Thwaites, 1896-1901, 48: 61-63; 22: 243). Their interpretation of this “diabolical vice” (ibid., 46: 105) was the same as that applied to explain all human vices: They saw the Adversary at work and regarded drunkenness as yet another obstacle raised up against them by The Prince of Darkness “ever sleepless in guarding his Kingdom” (ibid., 48: 61; 51: 217). Beyond that, they hardly speculated on the reasons the Indians might have had for their love of drink, what their motives for were and what functions drinking might have fulfilled in native societies. Remarks such as that “the Savages” had a “mania for drinking to excess” or that they bought brandy only “to

plunge themselves into the most furious intoxication" (*ibid.*, 67: 177; 48: 61-63; Belmont 1952: 62), are practically their only statements. In particular the favourite present-day explanation is conspicuously absent in their accounts. There is no hint that the missionaries believed the desintegration of native societies had led into excessive drinking as a sort of escapism (Dozier, 1966; Mohatt, 1972). Quite on the contrary, they believed that it was drinking that brought on every manner of negative consequences and that by "provoking very justly the wrath of God" (Thwaites, 1896-1901, 51: 269) liquor even could cause epidemics and famines (Trenk, 1996b). In other words, for them drinking was the cause and not the consequence of these calamities. Nor do we find in their extended publications the opinion that the Indians drank in their "pagan" ceremonies in order to communicate with the spirit world.

Father Paul Le Jeune, one of the eminent Jesuit ethnographers, on one occasion expressed his opinion on the question of why Indians loved drink "with an utterly unrestrained passion" (Thwaites, 1896-1901, 11: 195):

They imagine in their drunkenness that they are listened to with attention, that they are great orators, that they are valiant and formidable, that they are looked up to as Chiefs, hence this folly suits them; there is scarcely a Savage, small or great, even among the girls and women, who do not enjoy this intoxication, and who does not take these beverages when they can be had, purely and simply for the sake of being drunk. (*ibid.*, 11: 195-97; cf. 22: 243)

What is offered here by way of explanation? Above all an inflated self-esteem and fantasies of power lie behind their unrestrained passion for drink. This early seventeenth century explanation approaches that offered by those modern-day researchers who believe that people generally drink in order to experience feelings of power (McClelland, 1972; Boyatzis, 1976). On the other hand, it would be very hard indeed to read into the above explanation the notion that the Jesuits recognized the irresistibility of alcohol for the vision-loving Indians, as has been maintained.

One missionary, though, appears not to have been satisfied with such explanations. Abbé François Vachon de Belmont of the Order of Saint Sulpice names three reasons for Indian drinking: Firstly, alcohol activates "their natural sluggishness" and "dispels their timidity." Then brandy causes them "to undertake with vigor and bravado almost any evil such as anger, vengeance, or impurity." Finally, drunkenness "furnishes them, by

custom, a valid excuse for any evil which they might commit in such a condition" (Belmont, 1952: 45). According to the Abbé Belmont "the Savages" are normally reticent. Especially the women are usually "timid and reserved" and not readily aroused to action. They seldom quarrel, and "excesses and impurity" are frowned upon. In order for them to be driven to unusual behavior, something extraordinary was needed, for example, alcohol (Belmont, 1952: 45).

Abbé Belmont's observations and reflections show that he very well understood an important function of Indian carousing, namely dispensing with social norms, because his account shows that he was not blind to the bacchanalian character of Indian drinking. And this is more than can be said for most other observers. Abbé Belmont saw more clearly than his contemporaries that the Indians valued what he called "a peculiar kind of insobriety" (ibid.). However, there is no convincing proof in his *History of Brandy in Canada* that he believed Indians drank "to stimulate their mystic faculties", as Carpenter (1959: 148) asserts.

It might be objected that the Jesuit Relations are full of condemnation of the demons of "drunkenness and dreams" as being the principal obstacles to the conversion of "the Savages." And yet this oft quoted passage does not prove that a connection between drunkenness and dreams was in fact perceived. It is simply a list which can be shortened, lengthened or changed at will. Thus Pater Nouvel, for instance, said of the Montagnais that they only needed to fight the one demon of drunkenness since experience showed that it could turn a Christian into an apostate. Pater Beschefer, on the other hand, saw in their "arrogance," "ardor for war" and "drunkenness" the greatest obstacles for the conversion of the Iroquois. Pater Raguenau speaks of the "demon of drunkenness" among the Abenaki, then of the "demon who gives us fear of our sorcerers" and finally of the "demon that makes us love polygamy." And while the renown Jesuit scholar Joseph François Lafitau denounces liquor as "almost the sole obstacle to the labors of the missionaries," Pater Fremin says that for the Seneca it is their "dream superstition" which presents "the stumbling-block of Christianity;" he suspects their dreams of being their most important "Divinity" (Thwaites, 1896-1901, 51: 123, 267-69; 38: 35-37; 67: 45; 54: 97-101).

The Jesuits understood perfectly well the importance the Northeastern Indians assigned to their dreams. In their relations they repeat again and again that "the dream is the God of the Savages," "the source of all their errors" and "the soul of their religion" (ibid., 54: 139-43; 57: 273-87; 59: 229-31).

They thus showed that they recognized the important role that dreams played in Indian spiritual life just as capably as anthropologists did later, even though they named and evaluated the observed phenomena differently. And yet, even though the Jesuits combated all these "superstitions" with great determination, and even though they tended to make brandy responsible for all kinds of evil, they apparently never made the connection between the natives' passion for drinking and their quest for dreams and visions. It rather looks as though the "much-cited connection" was simply not apparent to these first missionaries.

But even though neither these missionaries nor most other seventeenth and eighteenth-century observers explicitly made the connection between the high esteem in which Native Americans held dreams and their love of intoxication, yet there is evidence to support the existence of such a link. Firstly there are the Indian traditions about the arrival of the White Man, which also frequently mention the introduction of liquor and its first perception. The best known of these oral traditions is the one the Moravian missionary John Heckewelder (1819: 54-59) heard from the Delaware and Mahican in the late eighteenth century. But it is by no means the only tribal account. Similarly detailed versions are known from the Ojibwa and Menominee. Fragmented versions finally allow the conclusion to be drawn that other Algonquians, among them the Sauk and the Shawnee, were familiar with these traditions, too (Keating, 1959, 1: 228; Howard 1981: 41). According to these legends the first experience of alcoholic intoxication was understood in terms of an out-of-body experience, a state quite well-known to them. While in two versions of the Delaware the first drinker just felt "happy" as he had never felt before and afterwards spoke of the "pleasing effects" of the inebriation (Heckewelder, 1819: 57; Trowbridge, 1972), the Ojibwa version reports that the first intoxicated tribesperson, an old woman, was "in ecstasies" (Warren, 1984: 120), and one Menominee account, finally, emphasizes the "visions seen and delightful sensations experienced" (Keesing, 1987: 55). Another Menominee version, recorded by anthropologist Alanson Skinner, strongly resembles a drug experience: "How is it? How did you feel when you were dead?", the tribe elders were asked upon awakening from their drunken sleep. "Oh no", said the old man in laughter, "it is very nice and good. There are funny feelings and a merry go of the brain and you can know more than you ever knew" (Skinner and Satterlee, 1915: 496).

This is not the place to re-evaluate such native testimonies. But if we agree that indigenous oral traditions "deserve respectful consideration of the

substantive information cloaked in metaphor and myth" (Jennings, 1984: 39) and that they "almost always convey how the native participants *felt* about it at the time, and often what kind of moral they drew out of it" (Axtell, 1992: 79), then we can take these traditions at least as *one* clue to the fact that the "much-cited connection" seems to have been familiar to at least some Indians. It might be worthy of note that this connection was already noticed by Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, the American Indian agent and early anthropologist. In his monumental 6-volume work on American Indians he refers to the Delaware Indian tradition, noting in a somewhat pompous language but essentially correctly that the reason the first alcoholic intoxication must have been so fascinating to them, was that "it led them into hallucinations so consonant to their own mythology, - the Indian Elysium - the land of dreams" (Schoolcraft, 1851-1857, 2: 24).

Second, and more relevant to our purpose, however, are native explanations of drunkenness. Ever since the pioneering work of Canadian historian Alfred Bailey it is widely believed that Indians conceived the state of drunkenness as one of possession by an evil spirit (Vachon, 1960: 23; Jaenen, 1976: 114; Trigger, 1976: 462; Axtell, 1981: 258). According to Bailey, "Brandy was the embodiment, or was the medium through which an evil supernatural agent worked. When an Indian drank brandy he was temporarily inhabited by this agent" (1969: 74). I want to show, that this explanation has little to do with native conceptions of drunkenness. If an Indian did ever explain drunkenness thus, then he was certainly doing it, not so much by looking "into his repertoire of available explanations," as MacAndrew and Edgerton (1969: 148) maintain, but was rather repeating the missionaries' view, whose "evil spirit" was none other than the Christian devil. It seems that there is only one study on the present-day Catholic Passamaquoddy Indians of Maine which supports the above view. According to it, the Passamaquoddy understand liquor in terms of a strictly dualistic universe, divided up between God and the Devil, whereby they identify liquor - any kind of liquor - with the devil. This demonization of spirituous liquors is evidently due to the influence of their Christianity, and yet astoundingly radicalized, to the point that the Passamaquoddy consider even the Holy Communion wine to be a work of the devil (Stevens, 1981)!

Historically it was only with the coming of the nativistic movement around the mid-eighteenth century that the Northeastern Indians began to associate liquor with the devil. But even later on, there is no evidence to suggest that they understood drunkenness in terms of "spirit possessionhip." On the



contrary, there is quite some evidence that they generally explained the state of inebriation as a temporary absence of the soul.

Diamond Jenness writes on the Ojibwa of Parry Island that they believe man to consist of body, soul and shadow. According to these Ojibwas, the body disintegrates after death, whereas the soul is immortal and passes on to the otherworld, and the shadow roams about on earth, near the grave. However, not only in death do body and soul separate. The soul is capable of travelling outside the body. But if it remains separated from the body too long the person becomes mortally ill and dies, or becomes insane. The Ojibwa believe that the soul is located in the heart and is endowed with reason and will. The soul is the intelligent part of man's being. Through the soul man perceives objects, reflects on them, and remembers them. When someone sleeps, their soul is set free. In dreams the soul approaches the spirit-world in order to acquire knowledge and power. However, not only dreaming and fasting can set the soul free, drinking can also produce this effect. Thus, they believe that a drunken person has temporarily lost his soul, consisting only of body and shadow, since his soul is moving at some distance from him. This is the reason why he cannot remember anything that happened during his drunken bout. Since man's reason and intelligence reside in his soul, lacking the latter he is also deprived of the former (Jenness, 1935: 18-19, 48). According to these Ojibwas, a person in a state of drunkenness has temporarily lost his soul and therefore literally lost his mind.

The people Jenness calls the “Ojibwa of Parry Island” are a mixed group of Ojibwa, Potawatomi and Ottawa Indians. In the light of his study the popular notion that inebriation was seen by Indians as a sort of possession by an evil spirit, appears as a kind of – in the words of Marshall Sahlins (1995) – “pidgin anthropology.” But first let's see whether this conception of some Central Algonquians in the year 1929 on the nature of alcoholic inebriation is also valid for these Indians' ancestors and for other tribes in centuries gone by.

The French traveller and historian Marc Lescarbot (1928: 230; 1907-1914, 3: 177) said of the Micmac in the early seventeenth century, that, to denote a drunken person, they used the same word that they used to denote someone who was dizzy from tobacco smoking. The word in question is *escorcken*, which seemed to mean “you are an abandoned one.” Smoking and the drinking of liquor “tends to bring on sleep,” explains Lescarbot. Consequently, if the Micmac called a drunken person “an abandoned one,” it

seems possible that they did this in the belief that both alcohol and tobacco stimulated the soul and prompted it to abandon the body.

Among the neighbouring Naskapi-Montagnais dreaming according to anthropologist Frank Gouldsmith Speck was considered a "religious process" (1935: 187). For them it was the main channel through which to keep in communication with the unseen world. It was in dreams that the soul spoke. The Montagnais called the soul the "Great Man," who was to them a counselor and guardian. The "Great Man" sometimes lusted after alcohol and tobacco, both of which gratified and strengthened him so that he could go out and fulfill his tasks. In alcoholic intoxication and other kinds of narcotic effects the Montagnais saw proof that the heart – and therefore the soul – was affected (ibid.: 43, 92, 187-89, 226-27). The Montagnais-Naskapi too, imagined that intoxication set the soul free thus facilitating communication with the spiritual world.

This notion that the consumption of alcohol and other drugs had the faculty to set the soul free, or, expressed negatively, that they caused a temporary soul-loss, can also be found outside the Northeast. The southern Numa called a person under the influence of Jimsonweed or *Datura mong ai'kunt*, which signifies an abundant man. Eating the seeds of *Datura* produces "a wild delirium" (Fowler and Fowler, 1971: 50), it is a highly valued visionary experience, but not altogether without danger. Significantly these Indians denote people who are under the influence of *datura* with the same word which they use for a "person who is drunk with whisky". It appears that the appellation "lost or abundant man" refers here too, to the idea of temporary soul-loss (ibid.: 50, 147, 242).

Finally among the Tarahumara of northern Mexico we find another similar concept of drunkenness. As the Ojibwa of Parry Island the Tarahumara believe that drinking causes the soul to leave the body. Drunkenness is a state in which the soul has become detached from the body. According to them every person has several souls, which they call *iwigara*, a word having the additional meanings of "life" and "breath." The more a person drinks, the farther away his largest soul drifts. The smoking of tobacco appears to have the same effect. Present-day Tarahumara, having experienced centuries of missionizing and therefore well acquainted with the idea that the devil is never far from their sacred drinking sessions, still explain the state of drunkenness as one of absence of the soul, without bringing the devil into play (Merrill, 1978: 111-12, 114).

In these examples - ranging from the Ojibwa, Potawatomi, Ottawa and twentieth-century Montagnais-Naskapi, to the early seventeenth-century Micmacs and down to the present-day Numa and Tarahumara - we glimpse a native understanding of drunkenness which is both amazingly consistent and far removed from the cliché of "possession by an evil spirit." Among the numerous White commentaries on Indian drinking behavior, one of the most insightful was made by Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, a young French colonial officer, who in the late 1760s achieved world fame as a South Seas explorer. From the observation that the Iroquois would excuse the criminal acts committed by drunken people, Bougainville concluded that these Indians must have regarded a drunken man "as a sacred person" (Hamilton, 1964: 225). This brilliant observation can be explained thus: The reason a drunken person could have been considered so to speak a "sacred person" was that his soul was absent and he was therefore in the same sacred state as a dreamer or a visionary (Trenk, 1996a).

Third and last I wish to show that there exist at least some direct references which indicate that occasionally Indians must have spoken explicitly about the connection between drunkenness and dreams. In the diaries of Reverend John Sergeant (1739) there is an entry stating that a "tattooed Mohican" came to his mission "to learn something about religion after experiencing what he called a vision during an alcohol-induced stupor" (Frazier, 1992: 61). That it must indeed have been a vision is made clear by the explanation the man gave: "In the vision he saw a great number of Indians lying distressed, cold, and naked in the woods, unable to escape from 'nasty water' being pumped over them. A voice warned him to take note of their wretchedness and to avoid imitating their wickedness. Then a blast of wind dispersed the Indians into the air, like so many autumn leaves" (ibid.).

Similarly, in the early twentieth-century a Sauk Indian in a conversation with the linguist Truman Michelson equated the experience of being inebriated with a visionary experience, in this case a peyote-induced one. Peyote, he said, "gives you the same effect as whisky when you are drunk four or five days; only peyote will affect you when you eat it once" (La Barre, 1989: 101-2). This Sauk Indian's comment was meant as criticism: The fact that similar effects resulted from the consumption of these substances was reason enough for him *not* to eat any more peyote. Still, obviously he considered the state of complete intoxication to be as vision-evoking as the eating of the sacred cactus.

In the course of his field work among the Montagnais-Naskapi Frank Speck came across this connection: “Anything that will induce dreaming is a religious advantage: fasting, dancing, singing, drumming, rattling, the sweat bath, seclusion [...] as well as [...] alcoholic drinks and drugs” (Speck, 1935: 188).

More than a 100 years earlier, an observation by fur trader Duncan Cameron, who was well acquainted with the Algonquians of the upper Great Lakes, suggests that their inclination to excessive inebriation had spiritual roots. He writes of the Ojibwa, around the year 1800: “It is not from absolute sensuality, nor for the sole pleasure of drinking that the flavour of liquor creates such an irresistible craving for more; they merely seek in their orgies a state of oblivion, of stupefaction, and a kind of cessation of existence, which constitutes their greatest enjoyment. I have often seen them, when they could get no more liquor, boil tobacco and drink the juice of it to keep themselves in the state of intoxication” (Cameron, 1960: 248). Cameron reports of the Ojibwa a practice known otherwise only among South American Indians (Wilbert, 1990), namely, that besides liquor they knew the use of tobacco brew as means to assist in achieving, and remaining as long as possible in, an ecstatic state.

Outside the Northeast, too, the idea that alcoholic inebriation could evoke visions was by no means unknown. Among the Mohave, who live along the border of Arizona and California, an informant once told psychoanalytically-orientated anthropologist George Devereux (1961: 531) how he had walked drunken through the brush and seen something that looked like a white snake. He was scared out of his wits and almost died from fright. But people later considered his experience as a vision. Devereux mentions at this point that the Mohave commonly regarded alcoholic hallucinations on a par with nonalcoholic dreams and hallucinations. In the eighteenth century Moravian John Heckewelder reports a similar case of a Delaware man, who, inebriated, took “a black-burnt sapling” for a “monstrous snake” and when sober was much troubled and disconcerted by this hallucination. Unfortunately, Heckewelder’s account does not make clear how the Indian himself explained his experience. Their conversation is given by the missionary in the idiom of Christianity, whereby he immediately speculates on the part the devil may have played in the illusion (Heckewelder, 1819: 258-60).

The Papago of the Southwest, who knew intoxicating drinks already in pre-columbian times, appear to have attributed vision-evoking capability to

all alcoholic beverages, both to their traditional sacred cactus wine and to the profane whiskey of the Americans. "The words which mean 'drunken' and 'dizzy' are, in the Papago language sacred and poetic words, for the trance of drunkenness is akin to the trance of vision," writes anthropologist Ruth Underhill (1938: 40). "Men grew crazy when they drank that whiskey," a Papago woman once told her (1979: 74), "and they had visions." However, even though whiskey intoxication had the capacity to evoke visions, it was not accepted by everyone. For, as the Papago woman went on, her husband, a shaman, never drank whiskey. He preferred to induce visions the traditional way, namely, "by suffering." This seemed to him the only appropriate manner to have visionary experiences. This Papago shaman does not appear to have thought much of the "instant visions" induced by the White Man's liquor.

In closing; we have seen that many Indians were well acquainted with the idea of establishing contact with the spirit world with the assistance of alcohol. To the skeptics among you I would like to address the statement anthropologist Alanson Skinner heard from the Menominee: "In former times, before the introduction of ardent spirits, it is said to have been harder for a man to place himself *en rapport* with the mysteries" (Skinner, 1915: 193). The Menominee, he writes, clearly feel that liquor acts "as a go-between between mankind and all powers of good and bad, above and below. After finding this out the Indians cannot do without it" (Skinner and Satterlee, 1915: 496). In a state of drunkenness the soul can roam freely and communicate with the spirits. Many such experiences appear to have been perceived as visions, as for example, in the case of the Mohican who dreamed of a heavenly Judgement. Other dreams, however, where apparently considered as of no further consequence.

Against such an interpretation historian Peter Mancall has raised the objection that "the medical literature on drinking casts doubts on such an interpretation. Since drunkenness does not cause hallucinations - alcoholic hallucinosis is a withdrawal symptom experienced by habitual drinkers when they stop drinking - it is perhaps unwise to presume that Indians drank to induce visions" (Mancall, 1995: 74-75). In my opinion a pseudo-problem is being raised here. Heavy drinking certainly can cause hallucinations. In Germany, for example, people commonly speak of "white mice," while according to anthropologist Mary Douglas (1987: 4) other folks talk about "pink elephants" or "green snakes." Still, even if we assumed heavy drinking did not lead to hallucinations, it is certainly agreed that a drunken

person can sleep soundly and dream intensely. Whether or not some of the dreams then dreamed are interpreted as sacred visions, as was the case of the “tattooed Mohican” is a cultural question and not one that can be answered by modern medicine.

One last point: Complete intoxication is usually given as the object of drinking Indians. A myriad of observers from the early seventeenth-century onward noted that the Indians imbibed only to become thoroughly drunk and that “drinking never ceased till the bottom of the barrel was reached” (Parkman, 1902: 388) and the drinkers finally “passed out” (Denys, 1908: 444; Lawson, 1966: 202; Adair, 1966: 326; Pond, 1986: 74). William Penn, for instance, writes in his famous letter to the “Committee of the Free Society of Traders” (1683) about the people called Delaware: “If they are heated with Liquors, they are restless until they have enough to sleep: that is their cry, Some more, and I will go to sleep” (Myers, 1970: 32). But perhaps this formulation suggests that some early observers did not fail to see the connection between drunkenness and dreams. Perhaps they merely reported it as William Penn does here: *More liquor, and I will go to sleep – and dream.*

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