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Alcohol and Slavery

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The "Peculiar Institution"

The American colonies needed labor. At first that labor was provided by indentured servants, whose work was pledged to another for a certain defined period of time, until the debt was satisfied. When this debt of time or money was paid, the servant was free. The first indentured servants were European, Native American, and African.

The first 20 Africans in America were brought and sold into indentured servitude in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. They were purchased for work in the tobacco plantations of John Rolfe and his friends. Africans were prized in the labor trade because they often brought native knowledge and skills in growing crops, raising animals, mining, and construction. Though the earliest Blacks to arrive were referred to as servants rather than as slaves, their status was different from that of the White servants and the other servants of color. These differences in status would eventually be clearly defined in the institution of slavery.

Slavery was different from all other types of servitude. While the labor of the indentured servant was owned for a set period of time, the very person of the slave was owned, with little or no way to alter this status. People often entered into indentured servitude voluntarily; slaves were taken by force. Unlike people in all other categories of servitude, slaves knew that their children would be born into the same fate.

The shift in labor supply from White indentured servants to African slaves took place in the 1660s. In that decade laws were passed declaring that all Blacks entering the colonies would be slaves for life, and that all children born of mothers who were slaves would also become slaves (Larkins, 1965). By the end of the 17th century, the majority of American slaves were African. Slave status and skin color became bound together, with no hope of separation. In the 18th century this "peculiar institution," as it was called by some, expanded to fill the colonial need for labor in the tobacco and rice fields of the South.

Of every 1,000 African slaves brought to the Americas, only 45 arrived in one of the thirteen American colonies. Most were taken to Brazil or to the West Indian Islands of Barbados, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Cuba, or Jamaica. Many of the African slaves who arrived in the colonies had first spent time in the West Indies (Conniff and Davis, 1994).

Between 1630 and 1660, a growing number of Blacks achieved their freedom from slavery. They reached this status by buying their own release, or by being bought and freed by others (usually family members). Some were set free by being released by their owners (usually for good service) or by being born to a free woman. By 1790, there were almost 60,000 free Blacks in the United States. Virginia had more than 12,800; Maryland, North Carolina, and Massachusetts all had more than 5,000; and Pennsylvania, which had only 3,707 slaves, had

6,531 free Blacks in 1790 (Conniff and Davis, 1994). Between 1777 and the early 1800s, slavery was virtually abolished in the North and prohibited in much of the new territory being added to the United States.

The Role of Alcohol in the Slave Trade

Historians have long believed that alcohol played a central role in the 18th century's "triangle slave trade." Ships loaded with American rum traveled to the Gulf Coast of Africa, then left with a human cargo bound for the West Indies. There, slaves were traded for the sugar and molasses that would return to New England for the production of more rum and preparation for the next trip to Africa. In 1773, traders could buy a slave in Africa for 140-160 gallons of rum (Taussig, 1928). Some modern historians have begun to question the extent of this trading pattern.

Alcohol sometimes played another role in securing slaves for the colonies. In general, slaves brought to the Americas were either captured or purchased in the extensive slave trade that existed within Africa. Africans became slaves in their own countries because of their debts, because they were captured in war, or as punishment for breaking laws. In their search for slaves to take back to the Americas, many unscrupulous traders would use liquor to lower the defenses of the Africans whose slaves they wanted to buy. Taussig reports the story of a Captain Hildebrand, who bought one of the wives of a man he had made drunk, then refused to sell her back when the man sobered up and plead for her return. She was among the slaves who made the trip to America (Taussig, 1928). Alcohol was also used as currency in the African slave trade. In his history of African Americans, Bennett notes that the traders could buy a woman in Africa for as little as a gallon of brandy and six beads (Bennet, 1969).

Alcohol in African Culture

Most African people brought to America as slaves came from West African cultures, in which alcohol had been available and used since antiquity. Alcoholic beverages beer and wines were blended into the economic, social, and religious customs of the non-Islamic African cultures. Highly defined rituals and traditions served to minimize problems. In these cultures, drinking in moderation was encouraged, while drunkenness and other socially disruptive behavior was strongly tabooed.

In spite of the fact that they had been torn from their cultural roots, African slaves brought to the new land many of their attitudes and rituals concerning alcohol. In the early years of their arrival, Blacks were so moderate in their drinking habits that they were thought to be immune to the influence of alcohol (Herd, 1985b).

Alcohol and Other Drug Use by Slaves

The slaves had only limited contact with other psychoactive drugs. They chewed, sniffed, and smoked tobacco. There is little evidence that they took advantage of the psychoactive properties of the hemp (marihuana) that was grown commercially. Slaves had little access to medicines of the day, clearly not enough access for regular mood alteration. The slaves' illnesses and injuries were often ignored by their owners or treated with patent medicines. There were patent medicines specifically marketed to slave owners for the ills experienced by

their slaves. It is likely that these remedies gave the slave only occasional contact with alcohol and the other drugs of the day (Young, 1961).

Drunkenness was linked to the whip in two ways. First, a slave's intoxication without the approval of his or her master was one of the acts along with impudence (asking to be sold), breaking household articles, and giving sexual favors to people other than the master that were punished with flogging. Second, drunken masters were more subject to fits of anger and to impulsive and excessive punishment (Blassingame, 1972).

Alcohol and the Slave Codes

States, counties, and municipalities, particularly those in the South, showed great concern about slaves and alcohol. This concern over the relationship between slavery and drinking involved two issues. First, the authorities were worried about the damage or loss of property that the owner would suffer if a slave were injured or killed while drinking and that poor Whites would use alcohol to entice slaves to steal the valuables of their masters (Aaron and Musto, 1981). Laws were thus passed that kept slaves from owning or operating stills and that made anyone selling alcohol to a slave financially liable if the slave were injured or killed while intoxicated (Larkins, 1965; Davis, 1974).

A second and more dominant concern was the slave owner's fear of insurrection--a concern that grew more and more intense after the bloody Stono Rebellion of 1739 in South Carolina and the later slave revolts led by Gabriel Prosser in Virginia (1800), Denmark Vesey in South Carolina (1822), and Nat Turner in Virginia (1831). Some 250 slave plots and revolts fueled Whites' fears of Black insurrection (Katz, 1990). White fears rose as the slave population grew from 700,000 in 1790 to 4 million in 1860 (Schlesinger, 1993).

Beginning in the 1670s, governing bodies in the slave-holding states responded to these fears with creation of slave codes. These codes defined what slaves (and sometimes servants and apprentices) could or could not do, where they could or could not go, and what they could or could not say. Maryland, for example, passed a law prohibiting Blacks from forming "lyceums, lodges, fire companies, or literary, dramatic, social, moral, or charitable societies" (Coniff and Davis, 1994). Slaves could not live by themselves, gather by themselves in groups larger than five, travel without a pass, own weapons, hire themselves out, practice medicine, or preach to any but the master's own slaves and then only if a White person was present. They also could not buy or drink alcohol, except under conditions defined by their master (Stamp, 1969).

Nearly all of the slave codes addressed the issue of buying and drinking alcohol. In areas where the fear of slave insurrection was greatest, the sale of alcohol to slaves was completely against the law. Other areas allowed the sale of alcohol to slaves, but only with their master's permission. Laws against the sale of alcohol to slaves were very difficult to enforce, ironically, because of laws that banned slaves testifying against Whites. Some colonies, such as South Carolina, provided organized patrols that visited plantations and "tippling houses" to make sure no slaves were drinking. Denise Herd describes the codes regulating the slaves' access to alcohol as part of the overall "machinery of control" that was part of the institution of slavery (Herd, 1985).

The slave codes were part of broader body of law that defined expected and illegal behavior according to social class. The slaves were not the only class of people targeted for such legislation. Under a general fear of uprising, laws were passed to keep alcohol away from Indians and White indentured servants as well. The regulations in the slave codes, particularly

those that dealt with alcohol consumption, were often extended to free Blacks, who were suspected of encouraging rebellion among the slaves. Laws aimed at preventing the sale of alcohol to Blacks painted ominous pictures of places "where mobs and caucuses of our Slaves nightly assemble at their orgies, to inflame the brains with copious libations, and preach rebellion against their white masters" (Cited in Herd, 1991, p. 356).

In spite of the legal restrictions on Black access to alcohol, a regular commerce in alcohol sprang up between poor Whites and slaves, in which the Whites would trade alcohol for vegetables. Poor Whites, who owned no slaves, also hired slaves and paid them with liquor.

The wealthy planters' periodic efforts to stop this commerce often sprang more from concern about the social implications of contact between poor Whites and slaves than from any concern about the slaves' drinking activities. The wealthy classes were afraid that friendly contact between poor Whites and slaves would lead the former to shelter runaway slaves and to encourage rebellion (Genovese, 1976). Based on that concern, they made every effort to isolate the two groups from one another, and to cultivate hatred between poor Whites and slaves. Alcohol was a concern, in part, because it represented a point of interracial commerce and social contact. Alcohol was seen as a lubricant for social interaction between equals. Since equality between the races was denied, both social etiquette and law discouraged shared drinking between White and Black (Larkins, 1965).

Alcohol as a Tool of Oppression

Alcohol was sometimes used by slave owners, consciously and deliberately, as a tool of control and manipulation. It was a regular part of seasonal celebrations. Masters often rewarded slaves in whiskey, to motivate them to work harder during harvest time. The harvest-time ritual represented a blending of African and European cultures, but it also served as a means of control. This use of alcohol as a tool of manipulation had been carried to the colonies from the West Indies. Thomas Tenison, an English clergymen, wrote of this practice in Barbados:

I am loath to be particular with you Sir, in respect to Negro Men, and your plying them with this destructive liquor and tho your intention herein be to perpetuate their servitude, the very methods you take to do it, by indulging them in excess of drinking, proves very frequently your disappointment, and their death (Taussig, 1928, , p. 20).

American slaves took part in house and church raisings, and in other social festivities in which alcohol was served. Slaves were often allowed not to work on the days between Christmas and New Year's as well as other occasional holidays. Drunkenness was common during those times. It was openly encouraged by masters and overseers who provided alcohol in its cheapest and most concentrated forms. Frederick Douglass described the holiday drinking custom that had been encouraged under slavery.

Not to be drunk during the holidays, was disgraceful; and he was esteemed a lazy and improvident man, who could not afford to drink whiskey during Christmas (Douglass, 1855, p. 252).

In some areas the masters extended the same encouragement to the weekends, when slave duties were lessened. Some historians see in this practice the roots of weekend binge drinking and the achievement of status through high tolerance for alcohol.

One way in which the planters and overseers encouraged drunkenness was their sponsorship of drinking contests among the slaves. In his autobiography, Frederick Douglass described the role that these holiday drinking rituals played in the institution of slavery.

These holidays serve as conductors, or safety valves, to carry off the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity . . . this mode of treatment [promoting episodic drunkenness] is a part of the whole system of fraud and inhumanity of slavery. (Douglass, 1855, p. 256)

Douglass believed that holiday rituals designed to degrade the slave were not meant as positive alternatives to the daily drudgery of slavery.

We felt, and very properly too, that we had almost as well be slaves to man as to rum. So, when the holidays ended, we staggered up from the filth of our wallowing, took a long breath, and marched to the field--feeling upon the whole, glad to go, from what our master had deceived us into a belief was freedom, back into the arms of slavery. (Douglass, 1855, p. 256.)

Douglass went on to note how the slave master=s control of the slave's drunkenness reduced the risk of rebellion.

When a slave was drunk, the slave holder had no fear that he would plan an insurrection; no fear that he would escape to the north. It was the sober, thinking slave who was dangerous, and needed the vigilance of his master to keep him a slave. (Douglass, 1855, p. 256)

The prohibition of drinking, control of drinking, and promotion of drunkenness are all manipulative tools that the slave holder used to exercise his social superiority and his control of the slave. What they show more than anything else, however, is his fear of the slave.

There is little evidence that slaves experienced alcohol problems. In the folk literature of slavery and of the post-Civil-War South, gambling is mentioned more often as a vice among Blacks than is the use of alcohol or other drugs.

After the Revolutionary War, slavery was prohibited in most Northern states. In some areas the newly freed Blacks faced fewer restrictions on access to alcohol, while other areas made no distinction between slave and free in their restrictions on alcohol consumption. Freed blacks often chose not to use alcohol, seeing sobriety as necessary for their safety and their potential citizenship. The primary alcohol problem for Blacks, in the North and the South, both slave and free, was the risk of what could happen to them when White men and women became intoxicated.

Davis and Franklin note that there was a rise in Black drinking during the period of Reconstruction. Possessing alcohol, and drinking whenever they chose, were symbols of something that had been denied to Blacks under slavery, yet alcohol continued to serve as a tool of social control during Reconstruction. Alcohol, which had been used to manipulate slaves who couldn't vote, was later used to manipulate the votes of emancipated Blacks (Davis, 1974, Franklin, 1974).

If slavery has left a legacy affecting African American drinking patterns, it is the association of drinking with celebration, and the pattern of episodic use in which drinking and drunkenness were considered one and the same.

A Brief Reflection

Some writers assert that slavery inflicted psychological and cultural wounds that have been transmitted from generation to generation in the American culture. According to these writers, understanding the nature and legacy of slavery might provide clues to the roots of alcohol and other drug use patterns in the African-American community today. Excessive alcohol and other drug use may itself be seen as a failed strategy of healing personal and cultural wounds (Bell, 1992; Green, 1995).

The history we are reviewing can give us clues to a number of hidden dynamics in our current service relationships. When a White counselor and an African-American client sit in a room together, the ghosts of slave and slave master shimmer in the air until that history is buried in each developmental stage of the helping relationship. When an African-American counselor first meets an African-American client, the ghosts of the house slave and field slave are there with them until an authentic, present-oriented relationship is developed.

The emotional memory of this history lives even where the detailed knowledge of the history is unknown to both client and counselor. Hidden within our shared history are demons of rage, fear, and guilt that must be recognized and exorcized if we are to avoid repeating the worst of this history in our service relationships. This historical transference and counter-transference is played out in all the ways in which race, ethnicity, age, gender, religion, sexual orientation operate as unrecognized dynamics within our helping relationships.

The history we are reviewing reminds us that some aspects of what we now call psychopathology might also be seen as forms of social pathology that have been recycled for generations. This same history might help us recognize styles of cultural resistance and survival that we can enlist as allies in the addiction recovery process. As you proceed with this story, I encourage you to question how historical events such as slavery created enduring legacies that continue to influence the circumstances surrounding addiction, treatment, and recovery in America today.

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