

Abstract

The production and consumption of informal sector alcohol continues to excite much popular debate in Kenya. This paper, based on limited survey work and extensive observation, explores two of the facets of this phenomenon: palm wine in Mombasa and *chang'aa* - illicitly distilled spirits - in Naivasha. It discusses the patterns of sociability associated with these beverages, and suggests that these may distinguish them from one another, and from formal-sector beverages. An effective decriminalization has allowed the trade in palm wine to grow in size, but seems not to have led to any significant developments in scale or technology, and most of those involved in the trade derive very limited income from it. While the production and sale of *chang'aa* remains illegal, so that both traders and drinkers are vulnerable to police action and fines or demands for bribes, some of those involved in this trade seem to have accumulated a modest degree of wealth. The study provided no definitive evidence on consumption levels, though it would seem that palm wine consumption has probably increased in recent years on the coast, and that in Naivasha "new generation" drinks (mostly, flavoured spirit-based beverages marketed in the formal sector) now account for a very significant part of overall alcohol consumption. While there have been some public calls for the "legalization" (in itself a problematic term) of informal sector beverages, the paper suggests that while there are arguments for this, it is not in itself likely to solve the problems which may be associated with alcohol consumption.