

Africa's oldest brew and a companion of many celebrations

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Beer is said to be the oldest drink humans have produced. In the African continent, beer has been in existence for more than 5,000 years. Before Europeans stepped foot on the African continent in the 15th and 16th centuries, the [women of Africa](#) were brewing beer using sorghum, maize, cassava root and hibiscus.



Millicent Maroga

Every region in Africa has its own recipe and traditions for brewing beer, which goes by many different names depending on the location. Southern Africa has *chibuku*, *umqombothi*, *utshwala*, *joala*, and *doro*, and western Africa has *shakparo*. Kenya has *chang'aa*; Botswana has *khadi*; and Ethiopia *araque*, *katila*, and *talla*. Uganda has *tonto*, *mwenge*, *murumba*, *marwa*, *kweete* and *musooli*. While Ghana has *pito*, *burukutu*, and *akpeteshie*. The art of brewing traditional beer is a skill passed down from generation to generation, with great care taken to maintain the integrity of the brewing method to ensure a tasty brew.

Across different countries and cultural groups in the continent, traditional beer is a prominent feature of social gatherings and celebratory moments such as lobola celebrations, weddings, welcoming a new bride into the family and honouring of initiates who have gone through the passage of manhood. It is also a special brew for honouring of ancestors and in initiation ceremonies of traditional healers. Traditional beer is also used in sacred ceremonies to bless the soil at the start of planting season and to celebrate a good harvest.

In Limpopo, South Africa, the tribe of *Balobedu ba ga Modjadji* brew beer for the rain making ceremony which is performed yearly in November to ask ancestors for rain. The beer is poured from calabashes onto the earth to ask the ancestors for blessings of rain.

Traditional beer also features in burial rituals and tombstone unveilings especially for a head of family and traditional leaders (chiefs and kings), and in the modern occasion of after tears.

Traditional beer is often consumed in these occasions to honour the significance of the celebrations and give thanks to ancestors, and then followed by consumption of modern beer. So, the consumption of both – traditional and modern beer, co-exist in almost all consumption occasions. Both brews have a rich heritage and yet are brewed differently.

In Africa, both traditional and modern beer is not only a drink that brings people together, but a source of economic activity with the brewing industry supporting an estimated 150,000 to 210,000 jobs.

Agriculture is an industry that the brewers also support. Beer is seen as being the only area in Africa that has the correct climatic conditions to grow one of the main ingredients for the brew. The hops industry in this region is not just about

agricultural development, but is also home to some homegrown varieties that are gaining international interest.

Brewing of beer is an art that keeps evolving with modern times and consumer preference. The growth of the craft brewer in South Africa is a strong indication of that. The growth of this category of brewers has brought innovation into the brewing of malt-based beer and sorghum-based beer. One such innovation is by the master brewer, Apiwe Nxusani-Mawela founder of Tolokazi Beer, Sorghum Pilsner – which is brewed with malted sorghum.

Beer's long history across the world represents an industry that builds economies, supports farmers, creates employment, supports entrepreneurs, and promotes tourism. When enjoyed responsibly it also builds vibrant social and participatory communities on the continent.

So, this Africa day, we raise a glass to Africa's oldest brew and that bring people together for moments of celebrations, honour, and thanksgiving.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Millicent Maroga is corporate affairs director at Heineken South Africa.

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