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Traditional alcoholic beverages linked to rise of complex political systems in early human societies

Study finds communal drinking fostered social bonds and leadership but agriculture played a greater role in state formation

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A new study has found that traditional alcoholic beverages may have played a role in the development of complex political systems in early human societies. Researchers Václav Hrnčíř, Angela M. Chira, and Russell D. Gray analyzed 186 traditional societies from around the world and published their findings in Humanities and Social Sciences Communications. Using advanced causal inference methods, the team discovered that cultures with indigenous low-alcohol fermented drinks were more likely to develop hierarchical political structures with multiple levels of governance.

The researchers suggest that alcohol's social effects—such as fostering group bonding, building trust, and encouraging creativity—helped early communities come together and cooperate. These qualities, they argue, were important as societies moved from small kin-based groups to larger, multi-layered political entities. The authors note that communal drinking rituals often made people feel part of a collective, which was critical during periods of social transition.

However, the study also emphasizes that alcohol was not the main driver behind the rise of complex societies. When the researchers accounted for agriculture, they found that its impact on political complexity was much greater than that of alcohol. Intensive farming allowed for food surpluses, population growth, and permanent settlements—all essential elements for state formation. While alcohol's influence was present, it was modest compared to agriculture's dominant role.

The study highlights how alcohol served various functions in early societies, especially in political and ceremonial contexts. Communal feasts involving alcohol helped reinforce social bonds and provided opportunities for emerging leaders to build alliances and mobilize labor. Archaeological evidence from regions such as Mesopotamia, China, and South America shows that rulers invested significant resources in producing and distributing alcoholic beverages. According to the authors, providing valued goods like alcohol allowed leaders to strengthen loyalty and embed their authority within daily life.

Despite these findings, the relationship between alcohol and political complexity was not universal. The study notes that many societies in North America and Oceania did not have indigenous alcoholic beverages. This absence may be explained by

geographic factors, the availability of alternative intoxicants, or cultural preferences. The researchers also caution that alcohol did not always promote harmony; while it often encouraged cohesion, there were instances where communal drinking led to conflict instead.

The research offers a historical perspective on current debates about alcohol's place in society. In recent years, countries like the United Kingdom have seen declining alcohol consumption but rising rates of alcohol-related deaths, leading to renewed discussions about regulation and public health policy. The authors argue that while modern challenges should not be ignored, it is important to recognize alcohol's historical role in fostering cooperation and social bonds.

Ultimately, the study concludes that alcohol was one of several tools—alongside music, ritual, and belief—that helped early human groups grow larger and more organized. While it did not replace agriculture or religion as a foundation for civilization, traditional fermented beverages contributed to the social fabric that allowed complex societies to emerge. The research adds new depth to our understanding of how people have used shared experiences—including raising a glass together—to build communities throughout history.