

THE HISTORY & RITUAL OF "THE TOAST"

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INTRODUCTION

In modern society the meal is divided into two major elements which can be generally described as solids and liquids. The liquids are usually either "eaten" first as in the case of soups, with a spoon, or as in the case of gravies or sauces poured over solids. This would also apply with creams, and syrups as are often used with breakfast pancakes.

In the ritual of modern dining however, one could almost say there is a legitimate third element when we discover that the "accompanying" drink is almost always considered and kept very separate, existing in most cases in a world and culture all its own and totally outside the meal itself. Frequently standing in a high glass, in an erect position as do the human species, it seems to be more a member of the "Homo Sapien" or "Erectus" families than other liquids which are found lying horizontal in a bowl. The "accompanying" drink finds itself totally at home and independent of the general meal, literally outside and beyond the arena of cutlery.

From the earliest periods of antiquity we find ourselves creating mystique and separate rules for dealing with drink. Although often celebrated within the general ritual of a meal, it always remains aloof in a specific ritual of its own entitlement.

THE COMMUNITY DRINK

Some anthropologists are convinced that this seemingly natural distance is seen very plainly when we consider the customs of antiquity. The ancient Sumerians for example were steeped in ritualistic drinking. They seemed to have developed the custom of drinking beer while keeping a respectable distance from the brew by means of long sucking straws. Apparently one practical reason for this is that straws may be attached to sieves, and many beers of the day required straining.

In time the custom developed intense ritual, and the fact that the straws permitted those participating to drink from one container, while at the same time separating them from what they were drinking allowed for the establishment of a community event. One could feel a deep camaraderie with other drinking members of his bowl group, and this feeling was intensified as consumption increased.

Additionally of course the straw had a mediating effect similar to that of the fork of the West, or the chopstick of the East, used between eaters and food. This ancient custom was very popular, and in many tribal communities of modern day Africa it is still found to be an intrinsic part of tribal activity.

In our modern Western world however, we have elevated the status of the drink as we enshrine it in fancy wine glasses, or clear beer mugs, and there from carry the liquid directly to our mouths. One reason for this transformation is that modern commercial beer is clear of solid matter, and needs no filtration; hence we drink it from tall mugs, stem, or vase like glasses which are often designed to enhance the colour, brightness or general beauty of the liquid within, as well as its display as it foams.

The ritual of drink has always been important to mankind and seems to have found its way into almost every form of activity of civilization. When early man ate he drank. when he played he drank, when he warred he drank, when he worked he drank and even when he prayed he drank.

"GIVE UNTO GOD THAT WHICH IS."

In prayer we find the most reverent as well as relevant use of drink and its symbols. It has been used to toast the gods since time began. Often in strange ways, but in all times man has so revered his drink, as to wish to share it with his gods. Early Northern Europe beers were often mixed with egg. It seems the egg in ancient mythology was a pronounced symbol of life everlasting with promises of divine reward. When included in beer it often became the tool of communication with the deity via a hardy toast offering. While the beer and other drink of that day was unattractive in appearance, their ritual demanded it be drunk from leather jacks, a material which in the mind of the warrior symbolized the armour of the day and was often considered the only suitable container of a masculine offering to their gods.

This custom, which survived through the middle ages, later migrated to pewter pots when the offerings as well as the men utilizing them became less fierce and more civilized. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century however, that glass and the pint beer mug began to become conventional. It was also around that time when the dark, opaque beers began to fail in popularity and give way to lighter, clearer, or golden beers which were then enhanced still further in appearance by faceted glass.

THE CAVES OF ODIN

At the Full Moon, in the early Northern European caves of Odin, and on the ancient rock sacrificial altars, fine glass would have had no place. There instead, still reigned the rough metal or ceremonial offering leather drinking jacket" from which the priests of Odin would "offer up" (a toast) to Odin, challenging the god to share in the rough religious festivities. These early warrior priests later developed the practice of using the skull of a fallen foe as a sacrificial offering cup, and some say this use was the forerunner of the well known Scandinavian toast "Skoal!" Certainly both skoal and skull are etymologically related, both meaning "a hollow thing."

It is interesting to note that even today modern European toasting rituals are not only strongest, but also most formal in the Germanic, Scandinavian, and Eastern European countries.

In Scandinavia no wine or other alcohol may be tasted until the host has made a toast. In that tradition the guests all raise their glasses as they look around at everyone else present; they then toast, taste, and look around at everyone once again. In Denmark it is customary for guests to then give subsequent toasts; before toasting, a guest is expected to attract attention by tapping his glass, and then proposing their toast.

It is also very interesting to note that while toasting has never been a very strong tradition in Mediterranean countries since the rise of Christianity, it is given German names in French, Italian, and Spanish. The Germanic form of the custom of toasting seems to have been reintroduced, in those countries sometime during the sixteenth century.

As a result in Spanish and Italian "to toast" is respectively "brindar" and "brindare", from the German "ich bringe die's," a toast meaning "I bring it to you";

In the French tongue the word "trinquer" is from the German word "trinken" meaning, "to drink."

Finally, in English, the word "toast" comes from the British practice of floating a piece of spiced or sweetened toasted bread on top of the wine, ale, or mead of the loving cup.

This was an ancient custom deriving from the tradition of the Eucharistic religious events of history. After the bowl had been shared by all guests, the host was expected to drink the last drops and consume the toast in honour of the guests and devotion to his Deity.

There are numerous other examples of ancient usage of toasts but essentially its origin can easily be seen by the inquiring observer of history to be an offering from man to his Deity. There can be no question but that in all of history, man has always expressed his highest honours to the Deity in the form of a drink and the offering of toasts.

THE EUCHARIST

The modern custom of offering up toasts is historically simply an offshoot of the ancient religious ritual referred to above, called The Eucharist, or the Lord's Supper!

According to early Christian belief Jesus instituted this "Sacrament" as it was called at the time. The Christian New Testament expresses the utmost importance to the offering of bread and drink to the Deity in the words and person of Jesus.

In Matthew 26:27 of the Authorized King James Version of the Christian Holy Bible it states; 'And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them saying, "Drink ye all of it ..."

In Mark 14:23, we quote; 'And he took the cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them; and they all drank of it.. '

Once again in Luke 22:17 we find; And he took the cup, and gave thanks and said, "Take this, and divide it among yourselves."

According to Margaret Visser in her book "The Rituals of Dinner", a little water is always mixed with the wine in the Catholic Mass, where the correct manner of drinking at the time of Christ is remembered and

given a new significance: the water is the humanity of Christ, the wine his divinity, and both are definitively intermingled.

In reality the ritual of offering up toast to a Deity was even then nothing new. Down through the centuries, the custom was shared by peoples around the globe and as far back as the dawn of history. In fact it had been an indispensable part of the Jewish Passover festivities for centuries.

This offering of bread and drink today called the Eucharist in Christian traditions, was indeed instituted many hundreds if not thousands of years before the time assigned for the birth of Jesus. Cicero the great orator and statesman of ancient Rome was born in the year 106 B.O E., and mentioned it in his works. At least 125 years before the establishment of Christianity he is quoted, "How can a man be so stupid, as to imagine that which he eats to be a god?" indeed there had been many esoteric mysteries associated with the eating of bread and drink among most if not all religious communities, including Pagan, Hebraic, Coptic and Christian in the west, as well as most religions in the Orient. In ancient America we find it prominent in both North and South American native cultures long before the arrival of the European.

In the Orient the followers of the Grand Lama in Tibet and Tartar, celebrate with the use of bread and wine in Eucharistic style. In the rites of both the Indian and Parsee religions the followers drink the juice of the Solna or Haoma plant, and consider it a god as well as a plant. They therefore believe they are drinking the "blood" of their god. The ancient Egyptians annually celebrated the Resurrection of their god and Saviour Osiris at which time they would offer up "toast offerings" by eating bread in the form of a sacred cake or wafer after it had been blessed by a priest and was said to have actually become the flesh of the god's flesh. The bread was then dipped in the wine and the Faithful was said to have eaten the body and blood of the god Osiris.

The Therapeutes also known as the Essenes used bread and drink in religious toast offerings, but in their case because they were temperate, they substituted water for alcoholic drink. The list goes on and on and even includes such famous religions as the Persian Mithric cult and the Kenite religion of Melchizedik.

There is no shortage of historic evidence when regarding the historicity of our toasting traditions, and simply because we today have become accustomed to toasting great people does not mean it has always been so.

In any case while there may be a personal individual self-inflicted restriction against offering a toast to one's Deity, there is no historical basis for it. Quite the contrary, historically it is surely shown to be an indispensable part of prayer offerings and religious festivals since the dawn of history in both Pagan and Judeo-Christian communities.

Even in ancient Greece a libation was a sort of concrete prayer, and a sharing of wine with the gods. To quote Ms. Visser, The Homeric ritual for this act entailed rising to one's feet holding a cup full of wine in the right hand, looking up into the sky, deliberately spilling some of the liquid, praying with both arms and cup raised, then drinking. The Olympian gods were not necessarily thought to have imbibed the wine, but they accepted the gift, the sacrifice of that all- important first mouthful, and a connection with them was thereby established.

"Drinking to" people was, and remains, in some respects similar to pouring libations. The toaster rises to his or her feet as a gesture of respect, and everybody else rises too, if the recipient of the honour is important enough; all must certainly raise their glasses. When men wore hats at meals, hats had to be removed. The toast is spoken, and it is very important to look the person being toasted in the eyes. A bow or nod of the head follows, and everyone sips wine. Taking only very little wine at this point is a modern constraint: toasting in the past has often meant draining the whole vessel. Because we all now have our own glasses, we substitute drinking simultaneously for sharing the cup....

Toasting can also be done between only two persons. The ancient Greek version of this was called *proposis*, (propose) "the drink before." The toaster sipped first, then handed the vessel containing the rest of the wine to the person honoured; on especially dramatic occasions the cup itself was a permanent gift to the receiver.

At a wedding, for example, a golden libation bowl full of wine might be given in this manner from father-in-law to son-in-law. The bowl became a symbol of the bride, "given away" (as we still say) by her father; the two men, the two families were now one in the shared wine. Many quite different wedding ceremonies still involve a sharing or exchanging of drinks, symbolizing unity. A gift entails a response. The Greek pourer of a libation expected the gods to reciprocate, in much the same way that the Provencal restaurant patron feels he must pour wine for a neighbour who has made the first move and filled his glass.

BE HALE !

Ms. Visser goes on to share many other interesting dinner rituals such as; The Saxon Wassail bowl was named after the toasting formula, Wass bad! - Be hale! or Be healthy! (The favourite toast has always been to wish for the good health of the person being toasted.) The Saxon host's wife or his daughter would enter the hall with a large bowl, sip from it as a taste test proving there was no poison in it, and offer the cup of welcome to the guests, toasting each one. Later, the cup-bearer would ladle out spiced wine or mulled ale into each person's own cup. But the custom of everyone partaking from the single bowl was remembered and survived, for example, as the British ceremony of passing the "loving cup" from person to person round the whole company. Three people stand up at a time, one to pass the cup, one to drink, and the third to "defend"; the defender once had to draw his sword and hold it at the ready as the huge two handled cup took all the attention of the drinker and left him vulnerable to attack. As always, love and the possibility of violence walk hand in hand at table. Today, the defender merely turns to face the company, "guarding the back" of the drinker. When he receives the cup, its lip having been wiped on the napkin which is tied to one of the handles, the person next to him stands to act as "defender," and so on round the company.

Finally as we raise our glasses, we do so as did our ancient forefathers for many reasons. If done in communion with our brethren, we should also share in its ancient reasons as we seek further light.

As I raise my glass I say... Just as the Architect of the Universe within us didn't build a staircase going nowhere, so too a toast to that great power is a just and proper historic conclusion!

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(It is better to light a candle. than to curse the darkness!)