



# **The Health of African Nova Scotians: Social and Cultural Aspects of Addiction**

By

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# Who is Robert Wright

An African Nova Scotian

A social work clinician

A full-time graduate student  
at Dal

A former: child welfare worker  
and executive director,  
correctional mental health  
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# Tonight's presentation

Cultural Considerations in Substance Use  
Treatment and Prevention

Patterns of African substance use

Lessons learned from the Nia Centre

Implications

Resources



# Cultural Considerations in Tx

We have known about cultural and racial differences in substance use since the 1940's:

“We candidly believe that it would be most unwise to refer a problem drinker to a helping professional who was not sensitive to the kind of diversity we have reported. One cannot, for example, treat an Irish alcoholic like a Jewish alcoholic or an Italian alcoholic . . . to do so risks making tragic mistakes in understanding the dynamics of the person's problem” (Greeley, et al. 1980)



# Pre-colonial African Substance Use

All African societies has some form of substance use: qat, colanut, marijuana, fermented beverages

All use was strictly confined to use in social or ceremonial settings: traders around the campfire, elders at council, senior men extending hospitality to visitors, warriors preparing for battle





# Colonial Destabilizing Influences

European colonizers disrupted African patterns of substance abuse through 2 main factors:

The disruption of the social structures that constrained substance use,

The introduction of distilled alcohols which were foreign and came with no social parameters



# The Trade Triangle

The Transatlantic Trade in Enslaved Africans consisted of three journeys:

1. The outward passage, Europe to Africa, manufactured goods (including distilled alcohols)
2. The middle passage, Africa to the Americas and Caribbean, enslaved Africans captives and other 'commodities'.
3. The homeward passage, America to Europe, carrying sugar, tobacco, rum, rice, cotton and other goods back to Europe.



# The Strengthening Link

Slave trade disrupted culture and introduced distilled alcohol in Africa

Enslaved Africans in Americas were encouraged to use alcohol during down time to discourage resistance to ill treatment

Family and social life of enslaved Africans was further disrupted, robbing people of their cultural constraints



# Urbanization and Substance Use

With the civil war, and emancipation large numbers of African Americans moved into large urban centres

The Church, the strongest institution of African society was a weaker influence in Urban centres

Urban life further disrupted the remaining sense of African community and subsistence economy that existed in rural America



# Prohibition . . . not so much

The 1800's brought the opium wars, reaction to the exploding drug trade resulting in Prohibition

Prohibition drove the use of alcohol and drugs into the speak easies and gin-joints of the inner city, many in African American communities

The criminal trade in narcotics became controlled by white ethnic criminal gangs who actively recruited African Americans to traffic the poisons in their communities



# The Cementing Connections

Disrupted social structures, systematic impoverishment, normalized coping use of substances, systematic recruitment into narcotic trafficking, controlled territorial distribution resulting in organization of gangs and the use of guns and violence to enforce territory . . .

Similarly other crimes associated with African Americans followed a similar pattern



# The Nia Centre

1993 an Afrocentric Substance Abuse  
Prevention Programme established in Halifax  
Sponsored by the Mayor's Task Force on Drugs  
Established through a community consultation  
process



# Lessons Learned from the Nia Centre

Community consultation

Afrocentric programming focusing on history and anti-racism

Group work based on principles of collectivity

Gender segregated for sex specific programming

Community engagement

Civic responsibility



# Implications

Intervention cannot differentiate between substance use and trafficking

Practitioners must not only have clinical expertise but cultural competence and skill in community change

Anti-oppressive approach must be taken

Particular clinical issue related to history of colonization of African peoples must be addressed



# Resources

James, W.H. & S.L. Johnson (1996). Doin' Drugs: Patterns of African American Addiction. Austin, TX: University of Texas.

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