

# Coca: Symbol of 500 Years of Resistance in the Andes:



## The Sacred Leaf and the "War on Drugs"

*They built their channels, their roads, with coca in their cheeks. With it they sang hymns of happiness and love to humans and to the gods. They made a rebellious earth produce thousands of fruits. If a shortsighted paper prohibits it, these people will respond with the subtlety they have always had... Ortiz*

Coca has been the object of debate since the Spanish invasion in the XVI century. It originated in Antisuyo, the rainforest region now considered part of Peru and Bolivia. From this region coca spread, thousands of years ago, to the Andean region. The discovery of pouches full of coca and packets of *llijta* (a lime mixture which is taken with the coca leaves) in gravesites ten centuries old, confirms assertions that coca use constitutes a long-standing tradition in the region.

The use of coca was widespread by the time of the European invasion of the Americas and there were no known laws prohibiting its use. During the colonial era, when coca was identified by the dominant Spanish class as an essential factor in the rituals of Andean culture, it was perceived as an evil herb which needed to be eliminated in order to assure the salvation of the Indigenous people's souls. Presently, attempts to prohibit the use and cultivation of coca are the consequence of the growing illicit use of cocaine, which has wrongly been identified with the coca leaf, from which it is derived.

The opposition to the use of the coca leaf is based on the supposition that the coca leaf is a narcotic drug. There is no evidence of this whatsoever. Nevertheless this assumption has been used by the oligarchy in their efforts to repress Indigenous people. The view that the coca leaf is a narcotic drug from which Indigenous people must be protected, is a notion steeped in paternalism, viewing the Indian as incapable of making his/her own decisions. Such an attitude constitutes yet another attempt to destroy the structures and values of Andean culture and Westernize the Indigenous population.

Coca is an essential component of the social web and human solidarity in the Andean world. It is used at ceremonies following strict social rules. Coca does not

produce harmful effects, nor the social decomposition associated with alcohol use in western social groups. With respect to social relationships, coca is used as an offering which signifies friendship and generosity. The act of sharing coca with other persons is a very important occurrence which seals the fraternal bonds of mutual trust among the participants. "When people care about each other, they invite each other to chew coca. First we chew it a little and thank each other; then we begin to chat" (Ataliano Perez). "We women have always participated in these rituals. All of us women form a group to chew the coca and to make offerings to Pachamama (Mother Earth), along with the men, because this has been the custom since long ago" (Serafina Cusipoma).

On the other hand there is no other remedy with as many nor as vast an array of uses and high efficacy as the coca leaf. In this respect, coca is one of the most outstanding components of popular medicine. It has become indispensable in sustaining the physical and emotional well-being of the Andean person. "Coca is used for just about every sickness. When the stomach hurts, we make a coca leaf tea. It is also used for cramping and swelling. It is very effective in warding off the cold and for curing snake bites. Pregnant women benefit from coca. When it is applied to a wound, the blood stops flowing immediately." (Ines Limachi, Macedonio Mendes, Demetrio Verduguez)

Studies of the chemical composition of the leaf have demonstrated that it contains significant quantities of vitamins A, B1, B2, and C, as well as iron and calcium. All of these vitamins and minerals are necessary to maintaining a healthy diet. In high Andean regions, vegetables and fresh fruits are scarce, making coca's contribution to the diet all the more important. Thus, it can be concluded that the factors which have motivated the prohibition of coca over the past five centuries are not due to problems existing in

the Andean culture. Nevertheless, the conflict with western culture has triggered the prohibition of coca, a measure reflecting the interests of the dominant classes and certainly not those of the Andean peoples.

Coca has been used in the Andes for about 4,000 years, despite continuous reprisals against those engaged in coca use and cultivation during the last 500 years. Those who support the abolition of the coca leaf, view themselves as saviors of the Andean inhabitants. The reality is that they are attempting to free themselves of a particularly western problem: cocaine addiction. This assumes that the Indian is a defenseless child, needing protection from himself. Once again, "integration" without respect for Indian culture is the goal. In fact, this is an effort to destroy the Indigenous culture under the pretext of "progress" and "civilization" in a manner similar to that of five centuries ago, when deep cultural values differing from those of the invading civilization, were ruthlessly attacked in the name of Christianity. The cross has now been replaced by the banner of progress, development and the "war on drugs." This latest assault constitutes one of the worst cultural aggressions in history and has been carried out consciously, without even the excuse of ignorance used retrospectively by the Spanish to disguise the crimes surrounding their invasion.

In 1962 the Geneva Convention resolved to eradicate coca cultivation within the next 25 years. This resolution is a violation of the right to free choice of entire peoples and cultures. Furthermore, since this resolution was passed, nothing has been added to the body of knowledge about coca which indicates that the manner in which it has been utilized by the Andean people is damaging to their health and would warrant such radical, unjust, repressive and far-reaching legislation. However, in the same way that a culture cannot be altered by the simple passage of a repressive law, the signing of a decree and the implementation of eradication plans which ignore the reality of the Andean people will not be successful in terminating coca use in the Andes.

We should ask ourselves seriously if the utopic goal of eliminating drug addiction in the United States justifies cultural aggression against the Andean people. The question should also be asked as to whether eliminating coca in the Andes is going to resolve the problem or simply motivate the international drug traffickers to switch to some other drug, equally desirable to the nation's youth in their quest to escape reality. Meanwhile, the Andean people will be left, having born the brunt of brutal physical and cultural assault on their population.

Ralph Bolton from the Anthropological Institute of the University of Trondheim stated back in 1979:

*Foreign pressure on the Andean governments to declare the use and production of coca leaves illegal, has intensified lately. These pressures are the result of measures taken by the North American and*

*international agencies which favor this line of action in combating the drug problem in the United States and Europe. These agencies do not take into account the rights of millions of Indigenous people in the Andes for whom the coca leaf is a sacred and integral part of their daily lives. The decisions adopted by politicians and bureaucrats of diverse nationalities, attempting to ban the use of coca, are a violation of the basic rights of the Quechua and Aymara peoples who wish to maintain their cultures, practice their religions, conserve their identities, and protect their health; that is to say, exercise their right to biological and cultural survival. The coca eradication program, judged by its effects, is a form of ethnocide. (Bolton, R.,1979)*

## The War on Drugs

Recently, the U.S. has launched an international campaign targeting drug trafficking and focusing on the media in order to influence the public and promote the dominant culture's ideology. This campaign seeks to pressure the producer nations. Military actions have been launched in these countries under the pretext of combating the drug problem. Such was the case in Bolivia in 1986 when the U.S. occupied the nation in an operation dubbed BOL-USA. At present the U.S. has installed military bases in the Peruvian jungle using the same pretext. The true goal of these activities, however, is to establish strategic control zones in areas considered "low-intensity conflict" zones, as well as in those regions where U.S. interests face imminent danger.

In February of 1990, the governments of Bolivia, Colombia, Peru and the U.S met in Cartagena, Colombia, to organize a plan of action against the narcotrafficking industry. While the U.S. insists on "militarization," the coca producing nations have attempted to establish a more integrated development plan. Indian people have been noticeably absent from all of these discussions. Nevertheless, there is no evidence today of a reduction in coca producing activities. Similarly, drug trafficking has continued unabated, and the drug traffickers have not been prosecuted.

Since the U.S Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) began operating in Bolivia, the area under cultivation for coca has multiplied a minimum of three times. Likewise, drug trafficking operations now involve capital over five times superior to that of pre-DEA operations in Bolivia. Considering these results, it would appear that the actual mission of this agency is the exact opposite of that which it claims to be.

