

COCA AND COCAINE

Effects on People and Policy in Latin America

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NOTES ON PRE-COLUMBIAN CULTIVATION OF COCA LEAF

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It is still quite widely thought that coca leaf in pre-Columbian times was a special, politically unique monopoly of the royal group. However, there is no evidence whatsoever to substantiate this widely held belief. In fact, contrary evidence from investigations seven years and about 35 years following the European invasion of the Andes, indicates otherwise.

Indeed, there is an interesting continuity to the foreign efforts to eradicate cultivation of the coca leaf in the Andes, efforts which have continued since the first serious campaign soon after the European invasion. Everybody on both sides of the debate about the eradication of coca plants agreed that the leaf was deleterious. The question was, could the Andean economy afford to stop coca cultivation and exchange, and particularly its consumption at the mines in Potosí? Potosí at that time was the largest city in the New World, and was larger than most cities in Europe as well. Supplying the miners with coca leaf to make it possible for them to continue mining was a major issue.¹

Coca, which was sold to the miners, became highly commercialized. Because so many people — middlemen, wholesalers and local traders — were involved, and such large fortunes were made in the cultivation of the coca leaf, it is instructive to compare the data from the pre-Conquest period to the debate today. Well-meaning people who thought that the pre-Conquest Andean system should serve as the model for what the Europeans were doing in the Andes, were opposed to the cultivation and the use of coca leaf. European assumptions about the nature of the pre-Conquest pattern of production, exchange and consumption of coca were therefore crucial to the conquerors' policy decisions.

Why, then, there is such an obsession to relegate the leaf as a high status sumptuary activity for the royalty in pre-Columbian times and not as an ordinary matter accessible to the peasant — as it is today — can only be speculated.

Among modern students of this issue there is a tendency to take the leaf out of the category of ordinary activities in which both peasants and lords were interested, and in which both invested much effort and land. It is true that coca leaf did not occupy a sumptuary role in Andean life in pre-Columbian times. But, in much the same way as maize was never a staple in the Andes, the sumptuary role of coca leaf needs to be located in the proper economic framework. Sumptuary is used here not to suggest a superfluous article whose restricted consumption confirms the high status of the user, but rather to designate a non-staple, a specialized article brought in from

outside. Coca leaf is part of a whole series of special, warm-weather crops considered indispensable by the people living under high altitude conditions (see Allen this volume). Not only coca leaf was imported from regions of 3,600 m to 4,000 m elevation, but also maize, hot peppers and many other crops grown at lower elevations.

Some mechanism was necessary in order to obtain these lowland crops which are indispensable in the highlands, but which cannot be produced locally. Of course barter or trade or some other form of exchange could secure these specialty crops. The fact is that the Andean solution was quite different, forming a pattern in which the land at the disposal of a specific social unit was widely dispersed — anywhere from four to 12 days' walk away — and the group's own people cultivated it on their behalf. Coca leaf, then, fit into this wider category of products produced, exchanged and consumed in the vertical "archipelago" of ecological zones so essential to the Andean economic system. This fact helps us understand coca's role in pre-Columbian times and, I believe, today.

The predominant notion of the special, extraordinary role of coca leaf cultivation notwithstanding, the tendency in recent research goes quite another way. Many argue that all these sumptuary crops were unimportant in the basic economic organization of Andean societies. It is frequently true that their cultivation involved few people, particularly since the places where coca leaf is grown are also the appropriate places for maize and hot peppers. Often the gardens planted for coca leaf produced many other items, including fruit. Three, four or even five ethnic groups from the highlands would share one of these garden areas. This raises the question of how to reduce competitive tensions and prevent continuous battles for hegemony of such an area. This is one of the many problems in Andean social and political organization which deserves much more research than it has received.

Thus to study coca leaf we should see it in this broader context of warm-weather crops, routinely available to highlanders who did not rely on a government monopoly or on an itinerant trader. They made sure they had access to this particular, extraordinary wonderful leaf.

A tradition seems to have built up, particularly in the secondary literature, perpetuating the notion that not only was coca leaf a sumptuary good, but that it was somehow a monopoly of the ruling group in Cuzco. It has been common to assert that the average person had no access to the leaf, did not cultivate the leaf and had not incorporated the leaf into his or her social, political, religious or other organizations.

The contrary evidence demonstrated by descriptions of an investigation (de Zuñiga, 1967) made about 1539, only seven years after the Europeans gained control of the Pillkumayu Valley, seems to me quite clear-cut. Because this area is one of the few places of successful Andean resistance to the Europeans, one can assume that in seven years no drastic changes had occurred. The whole Andean superstructure collapsed easily, yet here and there pockets of resistance lasted for five to eight years, and in the

Pillkumaya Valley for 10 years. In fact, these people remained undefeated as long as they fought just the Europeans. Only when the Wanca, traditional enemies of the Inca state, allied with the European invaders did the resistance in the Pillkumayu Valley succumb.

The investigation, which consisted of a town-by-town survey, provides a valuable context for understanding the status of the coca leaf in pre-Columbian times. Timber, hot peppers, honey, feathers and coca leaf are all produced in the same area and at the same elevation, and they all are part of a complex of lowland produce. The honey and feathers are wild, but all the other products are cultivated. The sources available to us, developed to determine levels and types of revenues from the area, are based on *quipu*, knotted cords Andean peoples use to keep statistical and historical records. These records make clear that even seven years after the European invasion, every highland village had its own administrators and cultivators, people responsible for producing or extracting a range of tropical products, from timber to coca leaf, for the villages at higher altitudes. The group in the Pillkumaya Valley was a small ethnic group, comprising just a few thousand people. Even though the lords of such small groups lacked power and importance, each of them had his own timber cultivator, his own coca leaf producer and his own honey gatherer.

Such sources as these town surveys provide clear evidence that the coca leaf, as well as other sumptuary goods, were not monopolies of a restricted elite group or of an overarching state organization prior to the European invaders, even though it may have been that people of higher status had more access to these sumptuary goods. But the fact is that all of these goods were part of the normal peasant repertoire in the Andes.

Elsewhere, where the polities were much larger, coca leaf gardens could be located much further away — eight, even 10 or 12 days' walk away. A group could keep permanent cultivators at distant lowland sites, to mind their particular terraces and to bring back coca leaf, which can be harvested several times a year, on special occasions a few times a year. The Europeans were interested in this practice because it affected, of course, the trade and the benefits of the trade to Potosí. Local witnesses consistently stated that there are two crops a year which are reasonably good, unless the year has been bad. The third *mit'a*² in August, is very weak. It produces little, and only rarely, say informants, can they contribute, "what is expected of us."

Further evidence comes from another documentary source (Archivo General de Indias 1568) that offers a description of conditions in a small area, called Songo (one of many places of that name in the Andes), about 35 years after the European invasion in 1568 and 1569, and around 26 years following the inspection of the Pillkumayu Valley. We should take into account this difference in time: a particularly long period in terms of changes expected since this coca leaf-producing area was tied tightly and directly into the mining activities in Potosí early on. Thirty-three years after the invasion, perhaps 90 percent of the increase in coca leaf production was directed to *the population newly concentrated in Potosí. Neither the use of coca in*

that way nor the large population was a traditional circumstance or condition.

These descriptions of conditions in Songo provide one important piece of information which, again, points to the significance of coca leaf not only at the state level, but also at the local peasant village and household level. The report refers to the many people in the area as *yana*, the Andean social category still poorly understood but generally considered to include people who had lost their membership in an ancestral community and were attached in some way as servants or retainers to members of the community where they currently resided. The report notes that every single one of the *yana* had access not just to food but to coca leaf fields as well. Judging by the productivity reported, the fields were not large, but the document verifies that the *yana* had systematic access to them. *Yana* status is vague, and even today we know little about it, but this new evidence that the *yana* had access to coca supplies reinforces my point that the idea of coca as the monopoly of the elite few cannot be sustained.

On the one hand we are constantly awed by the great continuities that exist in the Andes between pre-European conditions, values and ways of thinking, and present-day ways of thinking, acting and believing. On the other hand, it is important to remember how long European colonial rule has continued — now four and a half centuries — and how profound the changes were, even in the first 50 years, so far as the Andean peoples were concerned. The production and consumption of coca leaf is one of the areas where underlying continuities can be traced for Andean people, along with the undeniable transformations and arrogation of the product for the purposes of the European invaders in the period following the conquest, when the mining core of the colonial system was implanted.

Notes

¹Chewing coca leaf reduces perceptions of hunger and fatigue, therefore making it possible for miners to work long hours at high altitudes even without adequate food. — Ed.

²*Mit'a* is a fundamental concept in the Andes. I insist on the glottal stop because the colonial administration took over not the word alone, but the institution in organizing silver mining in Potosí and elsewhere. Putting in the glottal stop is one way of signaling that you are talking about things before the European invasion. If you drop the glottal stop, in the Spanish way, people will know you are talking about the Spanish times. Thus, *mita* normally refers to obligatory labor service provided to the state.

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