Coca in Every Day Life:
An Exploration of the Life, Culture, and Beliefs of Indigenous Andeans through Traditional Coca Practices

Introduction

Catherine J. Allen opens her book, *The Hold Life Has: Coca and Cultural Identity in an Andean Community*, with an intimate story of the funeral of a dear Quechua friend, Rufina Quispe, whose family she had lived with in the Peruvian Andes for months prior to her death.[1] Rufina was a 45 year old peasant woman who passed away from complications after childbirth from her thirteenth pregnancy. Allen arrived to the gravesite and gathered with the family about a week after Rufina's untimely death. Rufina's husband, Luis, fulfilled his duty as a host by giving out frequent gifts of coca leaf. Luis' eighteen-year-old son, José, passed out a round of *trago* (cane alcohol) in a shot glass. They all shared *k'intus* (small offerings of coca leaves), blowing on them to call upon and share them with *Pacha* (Mother Earth), *Tirakuna* (the Sacred Places around them), and *Machula Aulanchis* (the Old Grandfathers or the souls of the ancestral dead).[2] To chew coca was a privilege that "back in Cuzco was denigrated as a nasty Indian habit."[3]

This paper will examine pre-Hispanic, Indigenous Andean culture, religion, and ritual and daily life through the use and consumption of the sacred coca plant. It will show how the use of the coca plant has been an integral part of the Andean way of life for over 4,000 years and into the present, despite various challenges over the last several centuries. This essay will begin with an exploration of the coca leaf, it's properties and how it is and has been typically consumed by Indigenous Andean people. It will then discuss the coca leaves' cultural significance and give a brief history of its origins and usage in community as offering or tribute and as sacred healing

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1. Catherine J. Allen, *The hold life has: coca and cultural identity in an Andean community*, (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988), Kindle e-book, Introduction.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.

and prophesy. Lastly, it will address the challenges Indigenous Andean peoples have faced over the centuries in fighting for their right to continue their cultural and sacred practice of chewing coca leaf with examples of resistance to attempts by mestizos and whites to further colonize them.

What is Coca?

The coca bush, scientifically known as *Erythroxylum coca*, is indigenous to northwestern Peru and is "one of the oldest domesticated plants in the Andean region."[4] It "has been cultivated as a traditional crop for more than 4,000 years," spreading across the Andean region from northern Colombia south to Bolivia and Argentina.[5] Growing at altitudes between 1,600 and 6,500 feet above sea level, it's cultivation "is and has long been a traditional practice for many indigenous peoples in the Andean countries of Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia."[6]

The coca leaf contains many nutrients and an impressive amount of vitamins and minerals.[7] A study was done on Bolivian coca that compared its nutrients to that of the average content of nutrients of 50 of the most common Latin American foods and it found that "coca was found to be higher in calories, protein, carbohydrates, fibers, calcium, phosphorus, iron, vitamin A and riboflavin."[8] It has been praised as having many medicinal properties, with early Spanish chroniclers reporting the chewing of coca with relieving toothaches and treating various stomach

4. María Clemencia Ramírez, "Growing coca leaf in the midst of the war on cocaine," In *The Andean World Reader*, eds. Linda J. Seligmann and Kathleen S. Fine-dare (New York: Routledge, 2019), 650.
5. Ramírez, 650.
6. Ibid, 649-50.
7. Ibid, 651.
8. Ibid, 651.

and intestinal disorders.[9] Besides the medicinal qualities coca contains, it perhaps most known for its "stimulant properties and for suppressing hunger, thirst, pain, and fatigue."[10]

Coca leaf is traditionally "chewed," an action known in Quechua as *pichar* in Peru, though it is also used as an infusion in the form of herbal tea and consumed in the form of coca flour for nutritional purposes.[11] In order to "chew" the coca leaves, a saliva-soaked wad of leaves is typically held between one's gums and inner cheek, accompanied by an alkaline substance which activates the "active agent of coca known as cocaine."[12] Before the chewing takes place, the *k'intu* is made by choosing "three or more of the best leaves from your coca bundle."[13] The leaves are placed, shiny side up, one on top of the other and held between the thumb and forefinger.[14] You wave the *k'intu* a few inches from your mouth and preform the *phukuy* (ritual blowing) by blowing on it softly. As one blows, you call out to the Earth, the Sacred Places, and your *ayllu*, (either the neighborhood or the community).[15] Allen notes that the exact etiquette for chewing coca varies from region to region, but that the element that remains unchanged is the fact that coca is always shared.[16]

History and Significance of the Coca Leaf

Coca is especially important in the lives of the Indigenous people of the Andes and it has a significant influence over their "world view and cosmology, and on their cultural, religious, and ritual life."[17] It is said that *hallpay* (coca chewing) was invented when *Santísima María*, Our

9. Ramírez, 651.
10. Ibid, 650.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Allen, chapter 4.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ramírez, 650.

Mother, lost her child.[18] "Wandering aimlessly in her grief, she absentmindedly plucked some coca leaves, chewed on them, and discovered that this eased her pain. Andean people have chewed coca ever since."[19] María Clemencia Ramírez explains that in the Andes, coca is sacred because it is "considered the medium between man and the supernatural, as well as the expression and maintenance of social relations, encouraging wisdom, reflection, and introspection."[20]

For Andean Indigenous peoples, "coca chewing is present at every social, religious, and other activity" in which they participate together.[21] The *Runakuna* (plural of *Runa*) chew coca "after their three daily meals and pause for a coca break in midmorning and midafternoon."[22] Coca is also consumed during celebrations and burials, and after significant natural events like earthquakes, storms, or droughts with the intent of pacifying *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) or offering her tribute for providing all that they need to live.[23] For Andean Indigenous peoples, coca comforts them in their grief and it "protects them from the sickening wind of the dead."[24] Though coca is consumed very regularly, every individual act of chewing coca leaves carries a sacred meaning with both social and religious dimensions.[25] Besides its common and daily use in community, in pre-Hispanic times, it also has been documented that coca leaves were used as a form of quasi-currency in the peasant economy, often used for trade and tribute.[26]

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18. Allen, Introduction.
19. Ibid.
20. Ramírez, 650.
21. Ibid.
22. Allen, chapter 4.
23. Ramírez, 650.
24. Allen, Introduction.
25. Ibid, chapter 4.
26. Ramírez, 650.

Coca as Sacred Healing and Prophesy

Coca is said to have been imbued since pre-Hispanic times with supernatural powers that help shamans heal and prophesize.[27] Physicians during the colonial period "prescribed the application of coca leaf plasters to contusions, the use of coca infusions to treat stomach and intestinal disorders, and a poultice of coca leaves tied to the forehead for headaches."[28] Ramírez argues that perhaps the most important medical use of coca was for gastrointestinal disorders such as "dysentery, indigestion, cramps, diarrhea, and ulcers, followed by providing relief for the symptoms of altitude sickness, which include nausea, dizziness, cramps, and headaches."[29]

It is believed that *Pacha* and the *Tirakuna* communicate with human beings via coca, but that not everyone knows how to interpret the messages that are encoded in the leaves during the process of divination.[30] *Coca qhaway* ("looking at coca," the art of coca divination) is an extremely serious act, one that is performed in secret and by a specialist.[31] There are two kinds of *coca qhaway*, "one to determine the cause of illness" and another "to determine the nature of events distant in space and time."[32] In her research, Allen spoke with a divination specialist, or *paqo*, named Erasmo who wanted her to document exactly how he performed the divination ceremonies using coca leaves.[33] When asked if he was sure if he wanted her to write it all down, he insisted "as long as [she] wrote it in English and published it in [her] country, where Sonqo

27. Ramírez, 650.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Allen, chapter 4.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.

[the region in which they were located] *Runakuna* would not know about it."[34] According to Erasmo, her "fellow gringos could not misuse it…since they don't have coca anyway."[35]

In both types of *qhaway*, the *unkhuña*, or coca-carrying cloth, "serves as a field against which the diviner interprets configurations of leaves."[36] In order to divine distant events, Erasmo "spreads the cloth before he begins and places a coin in its center," this coin is the *ñawin* (eye).[37] The diviner then takes a handful of leaves in his right hand and lets them fall through his fingers onto the coin. The diviner then carefully studies the configuration of the leaves on the *unkhuña* to understand their meaning. In both types of *qhaway*, leaves that land right side up that land pointing to the right are good signs; those that fall upside down or that point to the left are bad signs. The diviner then picks out particular leaves as significant or as "standing for particular individuals or objects."[38] In Allen's case, one small leaf on top of a large leaf represented the "cargo" (load or burden) of stories she was to bring back to the United States.[39]

Interestingly, after the arrival of the Spanish, people of Andean, African, and Spanish decent "mutually adopted elements of each other's culture" when it came to "practicing magic or participating in religious ceremonies."[40] The records of the Inquisition offer evidence of both the cross-cultural use of coca leaves and Indigenous practices employed by African and Colonial Spanish magicians.[41] There is evidence that in the "urban centers of the colony, magical rituals

34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Allen, chapter 4.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Iris Gareis, "Andean gods and Catholic saints," in *The Andean World Reader*, eds. Linda J. Seligmann and Kathleen S. Fine-dare (New York: Routledge, 2019), 276.
41. Ibid.

such as propitiatory, healing or divination rites, brought people from different ethnic sectors and layers of society together."[42]

Challenges Against the Traditional Use of Coca Leaf and Resistance

The Spanish conquest greatly affected Indigenous Andeans' traditional use and consumption of coca. Soon after the arrival of the Spanish, "colonists and missionaries rejected the practice of coca chewing, thereby making coca a symbol of cultural resistance."[43] It was then that "coca chewing began to mark the developing boundary between *Runa* and *Misti* and their respective world views."[44] *Runa* meaning "human being or, culturally, an Indigenous Andean person" and *Misti* being those of mixed race or Mestizos.[45] Around the 18th century, the colonizers imposed increased "Indian tribute quotas and *alcabalas* (sales tax)" on various products that significantly impacted the Indigenous populations.[46] Another imposed policy was "the *repartimiento forzoso de mercancías,* or forced distribution of goods," a commercial monopoly that forced the indigenous peoples to buy goods like mules, iron, rope, and coca "from the chief Spanish provincial magistrates (*corregidores*) at higher-than-market-value prices."[47]

The evangelization and continued colonization of Indigenous Andean communities continues to affect present day practices of chewing coca leaf. In his essay, "Evangelicalism in the rural Andes," Guillermo Salas Carreño shows how in one particular community in Cuzco, the

42. Ibid, 276.
43. Ramírez, 651.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid, 662.
46. Sergio E. Serulnikov, "Violence, resistance, and intercultural adaptations," in *The Andean World Reader*, eds. Linda J. Seligmann and Kathleen S. Fine-dare (New York: Routledge, 2019), 176.
47. Ibid, 176-77.

conversion of one member to Evangelicalism causes serious problems within said community.[48] In this example, "Evangelicals' refusal to consume and offer alcohol and coca leaves hindered their ability to arrange cooperative groups crucial for some agricultural tasks in the Andes."[49] The rejection of these sacred and traditional practices has, understandably, been a source of conflict since "the consumption and offerings of alcohol and coca leaves are considered basic acts of consideration and respect, not only between humans, but also between humans and agentive places."[50]

The War Against Cocaine

When hearing about coca leaves, usually, first impressions revolve around cocaine. Allen attempts to dispel some of these misunderstandings and assumptions in her book by addressing how entirely different chewing coca leaves is from ingesting pure cocaine.[51] Given that there is limited knowledge around this topic, Allen states that "it is not yet possible to compare coca chewing with cocaine ingestion in quantitative terms."[52] Though she points out that what is clear is "that—physiologically speaking—coca chewing is more comparable to our consumption of caffeine in coffee, tea, and soft drinks, and to our over-the-counter pain relievers," than it is to the recreational use of a highly refined and concentrated form of cocaine.[53]

Cocaine was first extracted from the coca leaf in Germany in 1860, quickly becoming the "wonder drug of the late nineteenth century; it was touted as an anesthetic, a cure for opium

48. Guillermo Salas Carreño, "Evangelicalism in the rural Andes," in *The Andean World Reader*, eds. Linda J. Seligmann and Kathleen S. Fine-dare (New York: Routledge, 2019), 284.
49. Ibid.
50. Carreño, 284.
51. Allen, chapter 9.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.

addiction, and a general tonic."[54] The United States banned cocaine in 1914 through the Harrison Narcotics Tax Act and by 1940, facing pressure from the U.S., "the Peruvian government outlawed the private production of cocaine.[55] "After 1945, the U.S. was able to project its anti-drug policy on a global scale," with cocaine coming to be depicted as both harmful and addictive.[56] Unfortunately, these efforts against the trafficking of cocaine eventually drew Peruvians and Bolivians to begin criticizing coca chewing and those who practiced it. This criticism, veiled as concern over the wellbeing of Indigenous communities, was largely motivated by continued colonization and white supremacy. The Peruvian physician who spearheaded this movement in the 1940s, Carlos Gutiérrez Noriega, blamed coca chewing for the "dullness and apathy attributed to Indians" as well as "their poverty, ill health, and even illiteracy."[57] He was able to convince the United Nations that "coca chewing had negative physical, moral, economic and social effects," resulting in their recommendation to phase out coca chewing over the next 25 years—all of this had been decided without any consultation with the coca chewers themselves.[58] Since then coca cultivation has ironically increased, however, not because Indigenous Andeans continue to chew coca leaves, but because cocaine continues to "boom" in the drug trade.[59]

This war on cocaine continued throughout the late 20th century and continues still today. At the time of her writing her book (the 1980s), Allen noted that for the *Runakuna*, access to coca was severely restricted, resulting in a black market where coca leaves were sold.[60] Though

54. Ibid.
55. Ramírez, 652.
56. Ramírez, 652.
57. Allen, chapter 9.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid.

"the 'war' [had] been declared on drug traffickers, not on coca chewers," traditional chewers have been affected, "caught up as they are in the general web of deception and violence."[61]

The "Mystical Tourist Industry"

Moving forward to the present, coca chewing has made a comeback, although not for the benefit of Indigenous Andeans. In and around Cusco, Peru, "tourists engage in coca leaf divination rituals or offerings to *Pachamama* or other earth beings."[62] It's not only tourists that are engaging in these practices, but neo-Indians as well. Interestingly, neo-Inca ceremonies are sprouting and multiplying throughout Peru. "Offerings are made to Pachamama, the Andean earth goddess, in banks and grocery stores, whereas these practices were condemned as "Indian" only a few years ago."[63] Antionette Molinié notes in her essay on "'Indian' identity" that "luxury hotels advertise services for divination with coca leaves… alongside services for hairstyling and massage."[64] While on the surface this may seem like a benefit for Indigenous Andeans who are simply trying to maintain their cultural practices, *who* is actually benefitting from this revival of coca chewing, coca offerings, and divination using coca leaves is highly racialized. In this revitalization process, "Indigenous cultural resources are transformed into financial capital and profit for white/mestizo owners and intermediaries who sell their product to mostly white and mestizo national and international tourists."[65] In other words, it is the continuation of

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61. Ibid.

62. Michael Hill, "The political and cultural economies of tourism," in *The Andean World Reader*, eds. Linda J. Seligmann and Kathleen S. Fine-dare (New York: Routledge, 2019), 621.

63. Antionette Molinié, "'Indian' identity and Indigenous revitalization movements," in *The Andean World Reader*, eds. Linda J. Seligmann and Kathleen S. Fine-dare (New York: Routledge, 2019), 379.

64. Ibid.

65. Hill, 621.

colonization through the exploitation of Indigenous Andeans and their sacred traditions and cultural and spiritual beliefs for the social and financial benefit of whites and mestizos.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have shown the various ways in which coca has been, and continues to be, integral in the daily, spiritual, and cultural lives of Indigenous Andean people. I have explored what the coca leaf is, its various elements and uses over the millennia, as well as discussed the recent and present day struggles Indigenous Andeans have faced in trying to exercise their rights to chew coca. Considering the fact that coca chewing has remained an essential and daily practice in the lives of Indigenous Andeans over the span of 4,000 years, it is clear that these communities have shown resilience and commitment to their sacred practices and beliefs, resisting colonization, and faithfully fighting for their rights to practice their beliefs.

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