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The Coca Plant and Bolivian Identity

Matthew G. Russo

ABSTRACT

The political battle rages between the U.S. government, the U.N. and the Bolivian President, Evo Morales, about his efforts to protect, legalize and preserve the symbol of the Andean indigenous identity: the coca plant. The human rights of indigenous populations are being violated by culturally insensitive governments in compliance with U.S. and U.N. law. The questions posed are: Is coca cocaine? What are the economic benefits of the production of coca and who benefits? What is the relationship between coca and Bolivian identity? What would be the impact in the global community if coca is eradicated permanently?

The coca leaf has been cultivated in the Andes for many centuries by many indigenous ethnic groups. Today, with “The War against Drugs” and the intentions of the United States and the UN to eradicate the cultivation of coca in South America, Bolivian President Evo Morales fights against the eradication and illegalization of one of the greatest symbols of Bolivian identity (Metaal and Jelsma, 3). After becoming president, Evo Morales, who is of the ethnic group Aymara, has vowed to defend *los coccaleros*, whose means of economic survival is to cultivate coca. Evo Morales’s plan is to raise the cultivators of coca out of poverty through the production of coca and, at the same time, boost the economy of Bolivia. The problem lies with the regulations against the cultivation of coca, supported by the U.S. and the U.N. through their war backed with one hundred million U.S. dollars against the smuggling of drugs through the U.S. border. The coca plant is associated with cocaine in the eyes of the U.S. government; therefore

the U.S. government has promoted the eradication of the coca plant. The United States officials see the coca plant as the source of their problems (Patton, 1-3).

Even if Evo Morales continues to fight against the eradication of coca, he has already adopted the regulation of “Coca sí, cocaína no [coca yes, cocaine no]” and in 2006, his administration destroyed 2.5 more tons of cocaine than his predecessor did in the previous year (Esch, n.p.). Despite this, Evo Morales has industrialized the cultivation of the plant and has proposed the production of products made from the leaves of the coca such as coca pasta, coca toothpaste, coca arthritis medication, and even Evo-Cola (Esch, n.p.; Metaal and Jelsma, 16-17). There are already many products previously made from coca, including tea, soap, ointments, chocolate, and an alcoholic beverage (Esch, n.p.; Metaal and Jelsma, 17).

The most recent triumph is the legalization of chewing coca, which is called “acullico” and has finally been recognized as an indigenous custom. According to teleSur, Evo Morales explains that “Es un triunfo de la unidad del pueblo boliviano para defender su cultura, medicina y alimento, que está representado en la hoja de coca [it is a triumph of the unity of the Bolivian people to defend their culture, medicine, and nutrition that is represented in the coca leaf]” (teleSur, January 14, 2013).

In this essay I want to discuss the vast difference between coca and cocaine, including the beneficial impact that the production of coca has on the economy of Bolivia. Also, I would like

to focus this essay on the cultural link of the coca with Bolivian identity, especially with the indigenous people of Bolivia. The questions that I propose as my theses are: Is coca cocaine? What are the economic benefits of the production of coca and who benefits? What is the relationship between coca and Bolivian identity? What would be the impact in the global community if coca is eradicated permanently?

Part I: Coca is not cocaine

During a conference over the eradication of the plant, after displaying a coca leaf in front of the diplomats, Evo Morales argued, “This is a coca leaf, it is green, not white like cocaine” (Esch, n.p.). In James Patton’s article, “Counter development and the Bolivian Coca War,” he explains, “The coca leaf is not cocaine, and much like other substances, has medicinal uses in its natural form that are distorted when it is concentrated” (11). The plant in question is called “*Erythroxyllum coca*” and according to Miguel Molina, who is a columnist for BBC Mundo, “La ciencia ha determinado que en la salvia de las hojas de la coca hay más de diez sustancias alcaloides, entre ellas la cocaína, que constituye menos de 1% [Science has determined that within the coca leaf there are more than 10 substances, among them the cocaine, that which constitutes less than 1%]” (n.p.). Also according to the same article, “Los indígenas usan la hoja de coca para aliviar el hambre y la sed, para vencer el sueño y los efectos de la altura, para medir el tiempo y la distancia, para ablandar las vetas minerales y para divinar el futuro [The indigenous people use the coca leaf to alleviate hunger and thirst, to conquer sleep and the effects of the altitude, to predict the weather and the distance, to soften the mineral deposits and to predict the future]” (Molina, n.p.). Therefore, it can be concluded that the coca leaf is part of

the traditional medicine of the Andes and the alkaloids from the leaves have many beneficial effects. The juices from the leaves are still used today to make sodas and, in addition, are used to make tea; which is drunk to aid digestion (Molina, n.p.). According to the article by Caitlin Esch, the coca leaf is rich in minerals, "...phosphorous, calcium, iron, and vitamin A, and riboflavin..." (n.p.). An article provided by the General Consulate of Bolivia in Rio de Janeiro lists many of the components of coca:

Every 100 grams of coca leaves contain:

Total Nitrogen – 20.06 mg	Phosphate- 412.67 mg
Total non-volatile alkaloids- 0.70 mg	Potassium- 1,739.33 mg
Fat- 3.68 mg	Magnesium- 299.30 mg
Carbohydrates- 47.50 mg	Sodium- 39.41mg
Beta carotene- 9.40 mg	Alúmina- 17.39 mg
Alpha carotene- 2.76 mg	Bario- 6.18
Vitamin C- 6.47 mg	Iron- 136.64 mg
Vitamin E- 40.17 mg	Estroncio- 12.02 mg
Thiamin (Vitamin B1) - 0.73 mg	Boro- 6.75 mg
Riboflavin (Vitamin B2) - 0.88 mg	Copper- 1.22 mg
Niacin (factor p.p.)- 8.37 mg	Zinc- 2.21 mg
Calcium- 997.62 mg	Manganese- 9.15 mg
Chrome- 0.12 mg	

(Consulado General de Bolivia)*

*Compare and Contrast with the article by Henman and Metaal, 7

According to Tom Blickman, who is an independent researcher and journalist that specializes in international drug control policy and organized crime as a researcher at Transnational Institute's Drugs & Democracy Program (TNI), "When chewed, coca acts as a mild stimulant and suppresses hunger, thirst, pain and fatigue. It helps overcome altitude sickness. Coca chewing and the drinking of coca tea is carried out daily by millions of people in the Andes without problems, and is considered sacred with indigenous cultures" (n.p.). In addition, Pien Metaal and Martin Jelsma explain that, "Existe suficiente evidencia científica para respaldar que el uso tradicional de la coca no tiene efectos negativos para la salud, y que tiene efectos positivos de orden terapéutico, sagrado y social [Sufficient scientific evidence exists to support that the traditional use of coca does not have negative effects on a person's health, and has positive effects of the therapeutic, sacred, and social order]" (3). The coca leaf is simply a stimulant with similarities to coffee and other natural herbs. According to Miguel Molina's article, "...el debate en Bolivia no es sobre la legalidad sino sobre la necesidad del cultivo de la coca, y por eso se entiende que el presidente [Evo Morales] quiera concentrarse más en la industrialización de la hoja que en el cultivo de la planta [the debate in Bolivia is not over the legality, but over the necessity of the cultivation of coca, and through this it is understood that the president wants to concentrate more on industrializing the coca leaf and the cultivation of the plant]" (n.p.). Evo Morales hopes to revitalize the production of coca through means of creating beneficial products with the hope that these products will be desired in other countries.

The reason the U.S. and the U.N. want to eradicate coca is that coca leaves are the base in the production of cocaine (Cornaz, n.p.). The question is: Can the dependency on the drug trafficking market be resolved? With the war against drugs raging with the support of the U.N.

and the U.S.A., Evo Morales fights to defend not only the *cocaleros*, but to protect the indigenous identity of Bolivia through promoting the cultivation of this ancient crop.

Part II: The *Cocaleros* and Economic Impact

Coca is cultivated in two primary regions in Bolivia; the most prominent is the region called Chapare- in the subtropical cochabambino (Stefanoni, 16). In the article by Esch, “Coca Adds Life to the Bolivian Economy,” the author conducts an interview with a woman who is a *cocalera*. The following is a summary of the interview with the woman:

Marina is part of the ethnic group, Quechua. Marina is 36 years old and is a *cocalera* in the Chapare region and has been cultivating coca since she was 12 years old. With the author of the article she speaks about the most recent eradication of her crop of coca. She explains that, “[The soldiers] came in trucks, about 200 of them. They threw chemicals on our crops and they stole things. They took our food, smashed our pots, and beat me and my daughter. Some women were raped” (n.p.).

In concurrence with Esch’s article on the injustices against the *cocaleros*, Blickman, states, “In Peru and Bolivia manual forced eradication has led to clashes between coca-growers (*cocaleros*) and military forces, resulting in deaths and human right violations. Colombia is the country where forced eradication of illicit cultivation of coca is executed in the most aggressive way by aerial spraying with herbicides (fumigation)” (n.p.). For this reason, Evo Morales has vowed to defend the *cocaleros*, even increase the production of coca to benefit the *cocalero* population in Bolivia. Through the production and creation of alternative products made from the coca, Morales hopes that this method will protect the coca from the determined eradication by the U.S.

Many people believe that if coca is introduced to the legal market, this method will eliminate the quantity of coca leaves that the drug traffickers will be able to use in the production of cocaine. According to the article by Esch in an interview with a Nasa community leader (indigenous Nasa community of south-western Colombia), David Curtifor notes, “Each kilogram of coca leaf that goes to the legal market is one less for the drug traffickers” (n.p.). According to the article by teleSur, “Hoy nuestros campesinos controlan el limite del cultivo de la hoja de coca para evitar que sean utilizados para cocaína [Today our campesinos control the limit of the coca leaf crop to avoid that it will be used for cocaine]” (teleSur, January 14, 2013). In addition, the demand for drugs in the United States indicates that the root of the problem is internal to the U.S. On the issue with progress within the Bolivian government and governmental assistance to *cocalero* families, “Progress cannot be made if the interests and legal framework of international human rights and the Bolivian government’s legal framework are at odds...only one-quarter to one-half of families in the Chapare have received alternative crop assistance, leaving thousands of families with no livelihood once their coca has been eradicated” (Patton, 11).

According to Esch, “Other Andean Nations have already capitalized on the controversial cash crop. Peru’s state company, Enaco, signed a deal with South Africa, agreeing to export over 150,000 packets of coca tea. Japan and Belgium receive coca cargoes to use as anesthetics, and Coca-Cola continues to use coca leaves as a flavoring agent” (n.p.). Many countries have already invested in coca-based products with other Andean nations. Some of the most important products made from coca are used for therapeutic and medicinal purposes. Medical pharmaceutical anesthetics such as Benzocaine, Novocain/Procaine, Lidocaine, etc, are used as local anesthetics for surgeries that are extremely painful and at times dangerous and make it

possible to combat severe pain during surgical procedures (Metaal and Jelsma, 16). The biggest issue that will result in the eradication of coca will be a regional impact on Argentina with the mass migration of displaced *cocaleros* who have no means of survival. Where will they go? According to the October 1996 online article, Migration News, there were 7 million migrants working in the agricultural community of Argentina picking fruits and cutting sugar cane and an estimated 200,000 illegal immigrants who usually find work in the Korean owned textile shops that hire illegal immigrants (n.p.). The Argentine people called this mass migration and immigration the ‘Bolivianization’ of Northern Argentina (Migration News, n.p.). This trend foreshadows the future if coca is eradicated indefinitely.

Part III: Coca and Bolivian Identity

Coca is the most important symbol of the indigenous people in Bolivia and is connected with the natural blessings in the form of herbs. Reverence of nature is a huge part of the way of life with all indigenous people. Before the arrival of the Spaniards, the people were cultivating these herbs, which were used in traditional medicines. More importantly, partaking in *acullico* (the chewing of coca) after praying to the gods served as a spiritual connection to Pachamama (Mother Earth). This stems from the ancestors of the modern-day indigenous peoples, especially with the Inca, who had a great reverence for nature and worshipped nature on a daily basis (Damian, 41). In “The Virgin of the Andes: Myth and Mystery,” Carol Damian explains that the Inka believed in a sense of oneness with nature. She says, “...In traditional Western society the world is human-oriented and grounded in the individual; the primitive world view regards the universe as nature-based or in physical terms. Physical forces are interwoven with the lives of

human beings. There is a lack of differentiation between Man and Nature. The worship of the Earth dominated the lives of those who revered everything in nature as sacred” (41). Chewing coca also signifies a sense of group oneness which gives the indigenous population a sense of national identity within the context of their ethnic background. According to the article by Esch, “Coca expert and director of the La Paz Coca Museum, Jorge Hurtado, points out that in the rural high plains of Bolivia, 92% of men and 89% of women are regular coca chewers. He writes, ‘[Chewing coca] is a powerful symbol of group identity and solidarity...One could say that the coca leaf is the backbone of the cultural structure of the Andean region’” (n.p.). In concurrence with the ritual significance of coca to the indigenous people of the Andes, Patton in his article, “Counter development and the Bolivian Coca War,” explains, “Coca also has profound cultural significance for the various Andean indigenous groups, most importantly the Aymara, who use the leaf in their seasonal rituals and consider it to be one of the four pillars of natural mysticism, as manifest in the Southern Cross constellation” (11).

According to the article by Stefanoni, “‘La Biblia predicaba por ‘la fiera blanca’ le ha caído al indio peor que la coca y el alcohol,’ e inserta a la coca en la matriz de opresión que padecen los pueblos originarios: ‘la coca que masca el indio, que masca el niño indio, que masca el anciano, la coca que mascan indias e indios es la sustancia que anestesia, que adormece el hambre del indio [The Bible predicted through ‘the fierce White man,’ the Indian has fallen worse than with the coca and the alcohol,’ and inserts the coca in the womb of oppression that the original people undergo: ‘the coca that the Indian chews, that the Indian child chews, that the elderly chew, the coca that male and female Indians chew is the substance that anesthetizes, that makes dormant the hunger of the Indian’]” (17). Stefanoni argues that the coca was going to be the damnation of

the Indians. This discussion lacks the value of the coca in the eyes of the indigenous people as their herbal cultural symbol and tries to demonize coca as a symbol of oppression. According to the author Rocio Cornaz in his article, “La Coca: hoja sagrada de los Incas,” Cornaz explains that “the coca leaf was considered a ritual component in the pre-Hispanic civilizations of the Andes millennia ago and has played a central role in their system of beliefs, customs, and knowledge, inserted in an original Cosmo vision [Translation from Spanish] (n.p.). After the arrival of the Spaniards the indigenous people were enslaved and forced to work in the mines. The Spaniards acknowledged that the indigenous people lacked the ability to continue labor in the mines without the natural boost that was given with the use of coca. Esch confirms the acknowledgment by the Spaniards of the effects of coca on the indigenous slaves; her article explains, “Coca was promoted by the Spaniards who realized that the indigenous slaves could work longer and harder in the mines of Potosi if they chewed the leaf that fights off hunger and sleep-deprivation” (n.p.).

In modern times, coca is not only a sacred herb of indigenous people, but also the only source of monetary income for the indigenous population. Cornaz explains that, “... [La coca] fue apreciada como objeto de adoración y considerada una planta divina [La coca] was appreciated as an object of adoration and was considered a divine plant” (n.p.). In the article by teleSur January 14, 2013, Evo Morales explains (during the triumph of the acknowledgment and legalization of the chewing of coca [acullico] as an indigenous custom) that:

“Durante mucho años, Estados Unidos y los gobiernos neoliberales de nuestro país intentaron eliminar el cultivo y masticado de la hoja de coca después de que se los prohibiera en 1961 y decidieran erradicarlos en 25 años. Sin embargo, ahora la comunidad internacional reconoce como una actividad lícita el consumo

y cultivo de hoja de coca, lo que significa una victoria de esta revolución cultural que llevamos a cabo” (teleSur, January 14, 2013) (My emphasis).

[“During many years, the U.S. and the neo-liberal governments of our country intended to eliminate the cultivation and the chewing of the coca leaf after they prohibited it in 1961 and decided to eradicate it in 25 years. However, now the international community recognizes as a licit activity the consumption and the cultivation of the coca leaf, that which signifies a victory of this Cultural Revolution that we are carrying to the end”]

Conclusion

It is concluded through scientific evidence that the alkaloid that is cocaine constitutes less than 1% of the coca leaf. It has been determined that within the coca leaves there are more than 10 alkaloid substances. The coca is used by the indigenous people to alleviate hunger and thirst, conquer sleep, and to relieve the effects of altitude sickness. The leaves contain many vitamins including phosphorous, calcium, iron, vitamin A, riboflavin, etc. With limited bias, this information is being spread through the media. With international acknowledgment and education it will be possible to preserve and protect the indigenous people’s rights to coca.

The economic benefits of coca products, if they are promoted successfully, would include alternative products that would benefit health and food services. The *cocaleros* would benefit economically from their crops and hopefully lift them out of poverty. The Bolivian economy would get a boost with international trade and the usual large quantity of coca leaves that fall into the hands of drug traffickers would also be avoided.

Coca is the cultural birthright of the indigenous people who have roots in the pre-Hispanic civilizations of the Andes, including the Inca Empire. Coca has been used in every facet of the lives of Bolivian indigenous people. To deny the indigenous people rights to coca is a great crime and injustice. Evo Morales and his delegation continue to fight for the victories and triumphs that are being won such as the acknowledgment and legalization of the chewing of coca [acullico]. Perhaps, there will be more triumphs in the future.

With hope, this cultural symbol of the indigenous people of Bolivia will not be eradicated and will be respected by the global authorities as a cultural birthright. The easily foreseen consequences of such eradication are evident and yet foreboding. As with many global issues dealt with by the U.S. government and the U.N., the global authorities are not able to foresee the boomerang effect that would cause even more potential international problems on top of the thousands of people in the Andes that rely on their crop of coca as a means of survival. This significant trend of 7 million migrants leaving Bolivia and seeking employment in neighboring Argentina, on top of 200,000 illegal immigrants, can be expected if coca is eradicated.

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