

Coca~ the exalted leaf

While travelling in Bolivia Philip J. Clark encountered the uses, both sacred and everyday, of this much mis-understood leaf

It is probably best not to ask about some of the things which are hung up for sale by the *mercados* in Calle de los Brujos, 'The Street of Sorcerers'. Where else in the world can you buy mummified llama? At least I could recognise those, unlike most of the other things in the bottles and boxes, or hung from hooks at the side of this busy cobbled street in the heart of La Paz in Bolivia.

I had been in La Paz for a couple of days, climbing its steep hilly streets. It's another world to explore, if you have the energy, walking around watching the local inhabitants in their ubiquitous bowler hats. These are a left-over from Spanish domination, when the native population were forced to wear the hats to identify them as Indians.

It was in La Paz that I had first seen the coca leaf sellers, the green of the leaves often contrasting with the bright red sacks that contained them. In the West we tend to think of coca as being some form of unrefined cocaine - a drug; and yet here it was for sale openly.

But coca or *k'oca* has been a sacred plant to the peoples of the high Andes for thousands of years, and its very name means 'sacred' or 'exalted'. It is a vital part of the life of the people, as a folk medicine, a food supplement, a way of divining the future, an offering to the spirits, and more importantly to give the hard-working native people energy to survive in their oxygen-starved high-altitude lives.

A mouthful of leaves will be carefully chosen from an often exquisitely-woven coca bag or *chuspa*, and even today, distances are measured in *cocadas* - how far a person carries his load under the stimulus of one chew of coca.

The Spanish conquistadors at first tried to stop the native people from using the leaves, because they saw them as devilish and pagan, a corrupting influence to be stamped out. But they soon found that coca was essential to make the enslaved population work and do their bidding. With the use of the leaf the Indians worked harder, longer, and as coca is an appetite suppressant, with less food.

I had been in La Paz about three days when I met Andrew. He was a hardened back-packing traveller and when I first met him his cheeks were

Top inset:
mummified
hummingbird
charm

Right: dried llamas
in 'the sorcerer's
market'

Centre: a Bolivian
woman wearing a
traditional bowler
hat

Bottom: women
sell coca leaves
in the market
in La Paz



The Coca-Cola Company.

DELICIOUS REFRESHING



EXHILARATING INVIGORATING

filled with leaf cud. He was the first Westerner I had seen chewing the leaf and I asked him about it.

The New & Popular Fountain Drink, containing the tonic properties of the wonderful COCA PLANT, and the famous COLA NUT.
ON DRAUGHT AT ALL POPULAR SODA FOUNTAINS,
AT 5¢ PER GLASS.

He offered me a paper bag full of the bitter leaves, and told me to strip off their stem, fold them up and pop some into my mouth together with a little *cal*, or *lehia*, the ash-paste like substance that releases the chemicals contained in the leaf.

Amongst the physical effects I noticed after chewing them for a while were a slight decrease in my need for food and water, a slight energetic feeling and a sense of ease and wellness most of the time. But that energetic feeling began to fade gradually about an hour or so after I had stopped chewing. My general digestion improved and I didn't get tired but sleep at the end of the day was not difficult.

Many Western staple foods have come from the Americas - potatoes, tobacco, tomatoes, even chocolate were amongst

the plundered treasures, and coca leaves were no exception. But unlike the other exotics, coca leaves never became popular.

It was not until the 19th century that chemists extracted the active ingredient, cocaine hydrochloride, from the leaves, and its (then legal) narcotic effects rapidly became popular with such luminaries as Jules Verne, Sigmund Freud, and even Pope Leo XII.

Probably the most popular, legal form of Western coca consumption was the drink Coca-Cola. In May, 1886, Dr John Pemberton, a pharmacist from Atlanta, Georgia, invented the drink in a three-legged brass kettle in his backyard. It was marketed as a tonic, declared as 'therapeutic for weak nerves and sluggish brains' and advertised as 'the

drink that relieves exhaustion.' It contained extracts of cocaine until 1905 when the cocaine was removed.

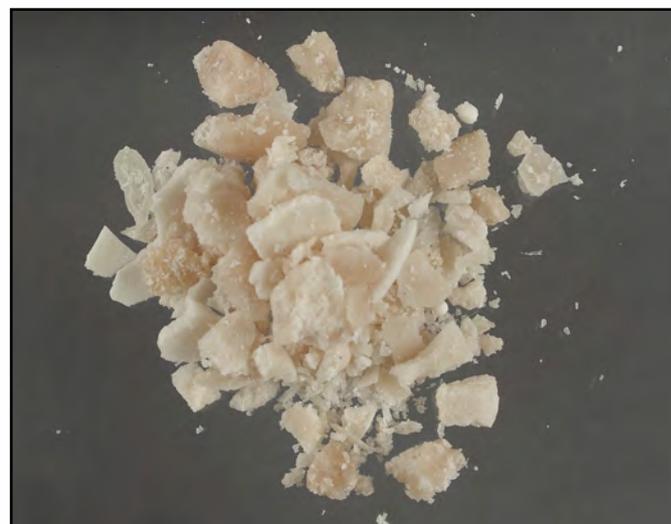
Eventually the harmful effects of cocaine became evident, and Coca-Cola removed it from the drink. From 1914 the use of the drug has been prohibited for both medicines and for recreational use, and so its consumption went underground.

Coca leaves themselves contain just 0.5 percent of the alkaloid cocaine, and there is no evidence that they are addictive, but this didn't stop the United Nations declaring coca chewing a drug addiction in 1952, and the US declaring it a Schedule I substance. It takes about one ton of leaves to produce one ounce of cocaine.

Most Bolivian natives view coca as a natural dietary supplement that supplies much needed calories, proteins,



Top: an old Coca-Cola letterhead extolles the benefits of the coca extracts it contained
Above: coca bag
Bottom: cocaine (left) and crack cocaine (right)





Above: a woman with a big bag of coca leaves in a market

carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals. It is a mild stimulant, containing around 14 different alkaloids and it also facilitates the oxygenation of the blood; coca tea, or *mates*, is often served to tourists to help with altitude sickness. Natives see the chewing of coca as natural, whereas the white cocaine powder is seen as harmful.

One post-conquest story is about a man called Khana

Chuyma who hid gold from the Spanish and was tortured to try to make him reveal it. The Sun God spoke to him after his ordeal and promised him that the coca plant would 'relieve the sufferings of the people, give them vitality from their endless toil, alleviate their hunger and cold and make their life more tolerable'. And that the coca leaf will be 'divine nourishment for the native people, but will create conflict and illness amongst the invaders'.

With the rise in use of cocaine as an illegal recreational drug, the US has declared war on the leaf. But instead of clearing up their internal drug problem and the social problems that cause it, they have destroyed the livelihood of many Andean *campesinos*, and added to the destruction of the rainforest by using powerful herbicides which not only kills the coca plants but the nearby forests too.

The roads in Bolivia are generally simply dirt tracks and can be dangerous. Local transport is often the back of a truck, or maybe an old bus, and there is always a tussle for space between the would-be passengers. The bumpy, dusty roads give no ease or comfort,

but the leaf takes your mind off it and makes the trip seem to go faster. Everywhere you go the native people you see chew the leaf while they walk, work, or carry loads.

I travelled to Lago Titicaca, the world's highest lake at 12,507 feet above sea level, where the Quechua and Aymara people use the leaf in their ancient sacred practices, which the Catholic church never managed to eradicate.

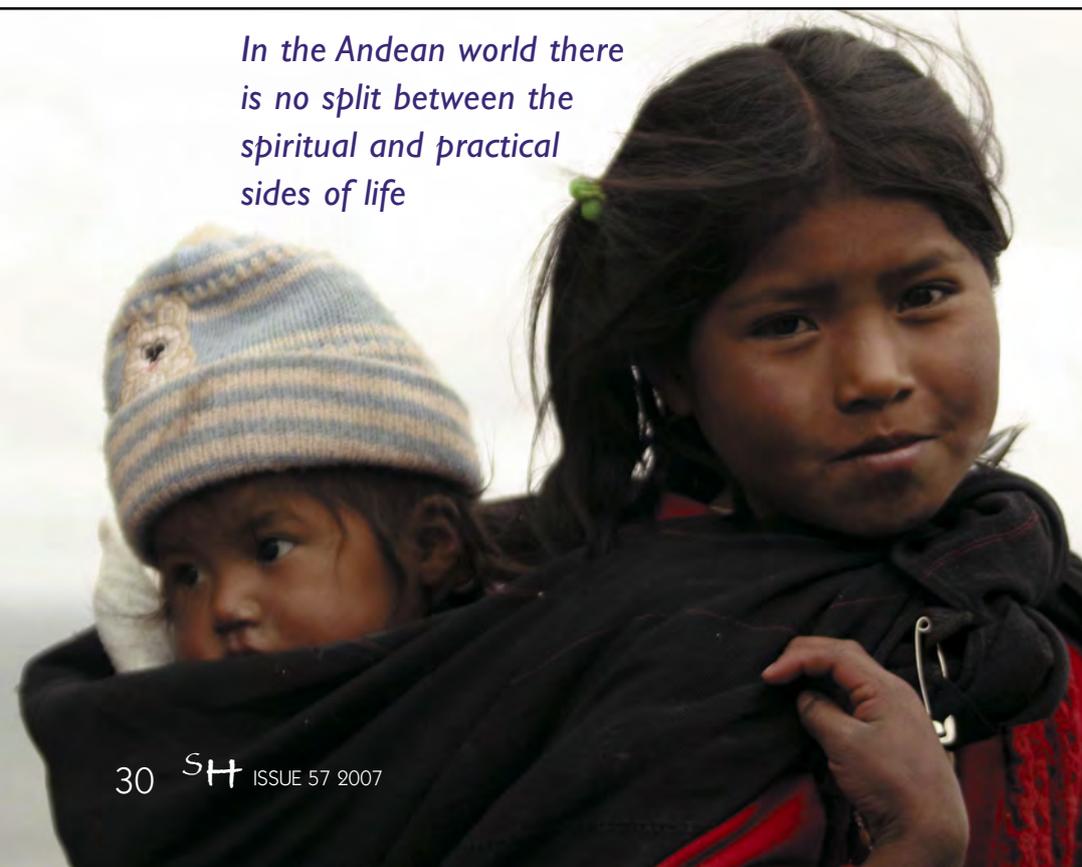
I climbed to the town of Potosi at 13,015 feet, and saw the silver miners who spend their lives inside the mountains, working only with handtools and dynamite, and dreaming of the riches that would come with the bright flash of ore.

The miners rely on the leaf to survive. Cheeks stuffed, they enter the tunnels into the heart of the mountain where noxious fumes and other dangers and discomforts dwell. They drink little water and eat little food and work an eight hour day, interspersed with coca breaks, finally coming out for food, and then sometimes returning for another eight-hour shift.

Most miners die young because of the 'black lung' disease. To ask for help during their work there are devil icons carved into the mountain to which the miners make offerings each morning. At these *tio* (uncle) statues cigarettes, coca leaves and alcohol are left in exchange for protection and perhaps the blessing of a good vein of ore.

I spent several hours in the mine with these men, crawling around the tunnels deep below the mountains and the sky and fresh air. The work conditions were dreadful, and the feeling of the weight of the rock above me, the heat, the darkness, the thin air and the ever-present dust were more than I could bear as I bent and squeezed my body through narrow tunnels and between sharp rocks. As I got back to the surface I gave a prayer of thanks to Inti the Sun God.

In the Andean world there is no split between the spiritual and practical sides of life





The Sun God promised that coca will relieve the sufferings of the people, give them vitality from their endless toil, alleviate their hunger and cold and make their life more tolerable

Coca leaves are traditionally used in the *despacho* offering ceremony and many other pre-conquest spiritual traditions. One ceremony which brings out the essentially shamanistic dimension to coca leaf is the *mesa*, which unites the whole community.

The *mesa* often begins with a discussion of pressing social and political issues; this too is accompanied by ritual coca chewing. Then later, offerings are made to *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) and the *Apus* (nature spirits or spirits of the mountains). In some places the *mesa* can be an all-night session, held secretly indoors. After this, divination with coca leaves is performed on a specially woven cloth.

In the Andean world there is no split between the spiritual and practical sides of life. Their concept of health is holistic and ecological, the focus is on keeping the balance between the individual, their community and the environment.

A harmonious individual is happy and healthy and can work hard, so there is abundance for the community. A happy and healthy community without internal conflicts can care for the children, who do not produce. A willingness to do community work means that terraces and irrigation systems are maintained, while storing seed crops for the next year and other community efforts make the environment healthy.

It is estimated that 120,000 acres (approx 48,000 hectares) of coca is cultivated in Bolivia, which is the poorest, most underdeveloped country in South America. There are two main growing areas, the *Yungas* and the *Chapare* regions, and each region's coca is

different. The *Chapare* coca has a bitter taste, and is the sort mostly used to make cocaine. The sweeter *Yungas* coca is the one used by locals for chewing, tea, and herbal folk medicines.

The coca plants are small shrubs, and are plucked bare of leaves a few times each year. The bushes live for about 12 years, and are on plantations, most of which are small and owned by a single family.

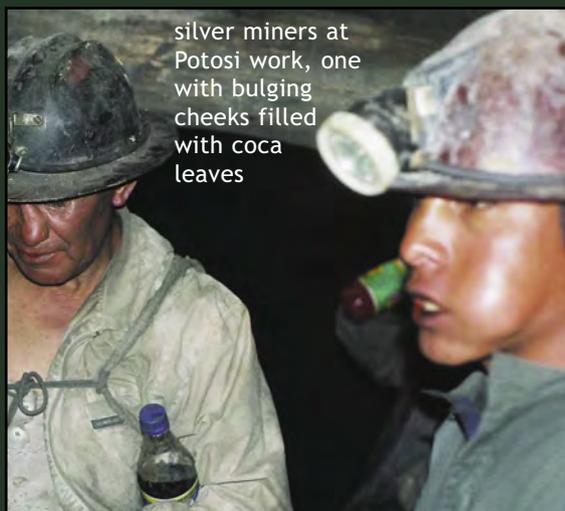
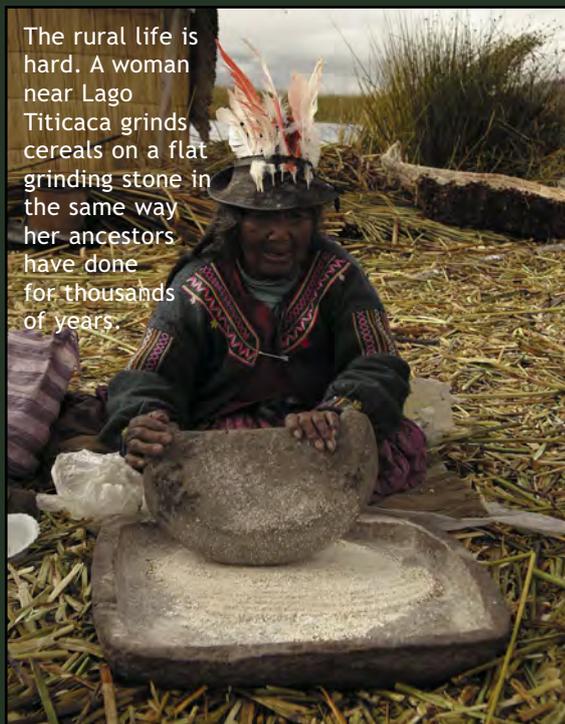
The ash-like *cut*, or *lehia* or *lethe*, taken with the leaf is a paste of lime (ground rock or seashells) or alkaline ashes. It is used to release the alkaloids and is supplied by all the leaf sellers. There are several different sorts of *lehia*, the plant-based ones are made from baked quinoa grain, or potato. Sometimes it is flavoured with anise or other things, and each flavouring adds its own taste to the leaf.

Coca is a far cry from cocaine, and the streets of La Paz are a world away from the streets of London or New York. The drug lust found in the alienation of modern Western societies has tainted the image of this respected and valued sacred plant. Coca is a sacred bush of life and its leaves remind us of the sacred connection we all have with the air we breath, the land we walk upon and the sun and wind that bless us as we move through the world.

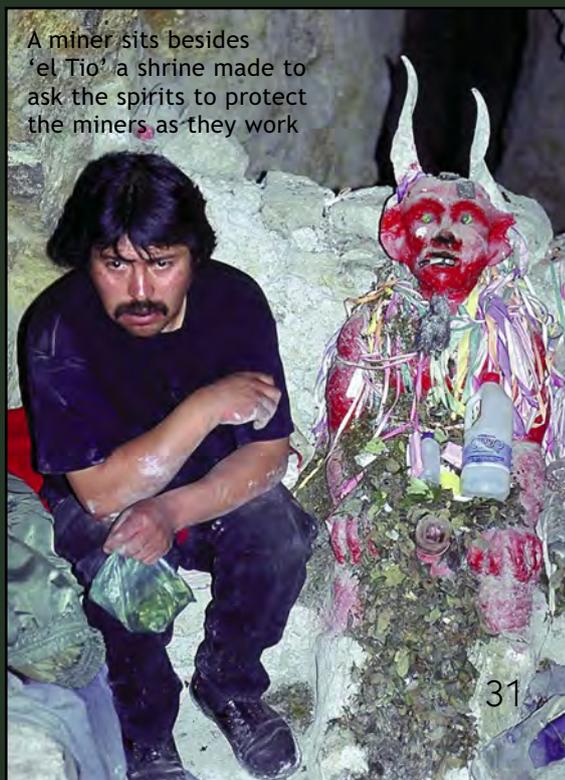
Perhaps if those chemists had not discovered cocaine, we would now be buying organic coca leaf tea and using it as the latest health supplement.

Philip J. Clark has travelled in many areas of South America and worked with many Inca shamans and healers. He lives in California.

The rural life is hard. A woman near Lago Titicaca grinds cereals on a flat grinding stone in the same way her ancestors have done for thousands of years.



silver miners at Potosi work, one with bulging cheeks filled with coca leaves



A miner sits beside 'el Tio' a shrine made to ask the spirits to protect the miners as they work