

# Guest editorial: A future with coca: embedding indigenous Andean knowledge on the medical, spiritual and recreational opportunities of the coca leaf in contemporary regulatory space

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## Introduction

The inclusion of the coca leaf in the schedules of the international drug control conventions is something of an outlier case or what the [Bolivian government \(2023\)](#) has termed a “historical error” that is in urgent need of correcting. The illustrious *club of gentlemen* ([Lande, 1976](#)), who in the years before the first world war begun their deliberations on the status of different plant-based substances behind closed doors and without a popular mandate, were less concerned with the traditional chewing habits of Andean populations, than with the potency of one alkaloid. Once isolated and synthesized, cocaine hydrochloride, a substance that was derived via a series of at the time complicated processes, was finding increasing popularity for medical and recreational purposes among society and beyond. Cocaine was the perfect fit for schedule 1 – the class of substances that had the power of producing *addiction* in its users, “an evil” that a global drug control apparatus revived by the *1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs* (hereafter Single Convention), sought to combat. Perhaps racial prejudice against the coca-chewing habits of Andean people influenced the 1950 WHO report that informed the decision, perhaps it was simply sloppiness and ignorance of pharmacology and potency.

The Single Convention effectively imposed an international ban on both the chewing of the coca leaf and the non-medical consumption of cocaine, although neither appear to have been successful. Coca leaf consumption remains cultural consumption practice in Bolivia, Peru and Colombia, in spite of the considerable damage that has been inflicted by the entire suite of repressive policies that impacted Latin American states to Andean societies and ecosystems ([Bradley and Millington, 2008](#); [Labate et al., 2016](#); [Lyons, 2018](#); [McSweeney et al., 2014](#)). Meanwhile, the strong demand for powder cocaine is driving coca leaf production which in 2021 reportedly reached record highs [1]. At the same time, approaches to drug control that assumed a quasi-normality over the past half century are increasingly being called into question. The ecological damage, the suffering of the rural poor and the criminogenic explosion that was triggered by the war on drugs have prompted significant policy shifts. This special issue is curated to support the efforts for revising the status of the coca leaf in the international conventions. To that end it offers discussions for different applications (recreational, medical and others) of different coca leaf products and

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As the guest editorial team, the authors would like to dedicate this special issue to all the activists and communities in Bolivia, Colombia, Peru and other countries, who committed themselves to re-establishing and preserving the value of the coca leaf; for many, it is and has been a decades-long life work. With this, the authors also pay tribute to our beloved late friend Erec O. Kozar, whose work for decriminalizing plants and their consumers was enacted with bright enthusiasm and heartfelt ambition for justice.

by tracking both the complications that have been caused by current arrangements as well as opportunities for alternative regulations.

Of course, there are important cultural and philosophical dimensions to these debates. Carlo Brescia demonstrates the importance of stepping beyond the recreational/medical binary by exploring the role of the coca leaf as a mediator between human and nonhuman relations. The paper offers insights into ontologies other than Western materialism and anthropocentric dualism that dominates institutions and research globally. Embedded in the ontology of their specific locality, the spirit of coca is considered a teacher, who conveys knowledge on healing practices and multispecies relations. The divination rites used in the Andes, regardless of mechanisms of action, function as communicative and interpretative efforts by which meaning is given and complex causalities explained. The marginalization of such practices is in fact the present-day continuation of an imperialist project that has imposed a predominantly materialistic model on health and excluded traditional medicine from regulatory laws. The detailed case study from Ancash in Peru provides a deep insight into the way that misfortune, here in the case of a landslide, was interpreted in the context of socio-political developments, and the role of coca leaves in opening a space for discussion and commentary.

While in some disciplines and areas of work relativist approaches have become well established, the legal framework in most European countries is defined by the international drug control treaties. Bouso and Sánchez draw on their own experience with the legal NGO ICEERS in providing legal support to Bolivian and Colombian migrants charged for trafficking offenses for bringing in leaves in their natural form from their country of origin, as well as legal databases, to demonstrate the dilemma faced by the authorities. In all countries that are signatories to the 1961 Convention, the coca leaf is framed as a precursor for cocaine. When defendants were carrying the leaves for their own use and/or in quantities too low to pose a significant risk of harm to third parties the authorities are placed in a difficult position. In Spain, the courts have made decisions without reference to jurisprudential criteria or scientific analysis, by introducing an arbitrary limit of two kilograms as the maximum amount that is considered to constitute “personal use” and impose, at times, carceral sentences on those convicted for importing higher quantities. In Madrid, the police and *Guardia Civil* avoid these contortions by turning a blind eye and not intervening in the first place.

Unfortunately, medical professionals cannot be relied upon to join this project argues Baldomero Caceres. Although coca was much appreciated in general medicine up until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards coca fell under control of psychiatry, a newly established branch of medicine. Locating coca within the newly developed “addiction” model, psychiatric professionals signed up to the prohibition. Despite scientific knowledge available on the nutritional and medicinal properties of the coca leaf, and counterproof of coca not being addictive (Aulik *et al.*, 1975; Weil, 1981), academic psychiatry has adopted a position where coca chewing is treated as a form of *cocainism*. More recent efforts to revise professional attitudes notwithstanding, there are no concerted efforts for exploring how coca leaves could be employed constructively by mental health practitioners.

The hope for change then, argue Ghehioeche & Riboulet Zemouli, comes from efforts outside the established professions and drug control institutions. The association “Amigos de la Hoja de Coca” was formed in 2011 to push for the wider acceptance of coca products in Europe and South America. The idea is to inspire policy reforms that help “*industrialise* a licit coca market” to secure social and development benefits for coca farmers and their communities by removing intermediaries and expanding the range of products and added value. These efforts are timely as there is a growing interest in plant-based health and well-being products.

Meanwhile in Colombia, as Snapp & Quintero address, such a market of coca products has been successfully initiated by indigenous communities, successful in the sense that they have been inventive in developing a wide range of coca-based products, such as beverages, energy bars, flour and fertilizers. Despite the Constitutional Court's support and the changed societal prejudices of the coca leaf through these products, the National

Institute of Medications and Food concluded that coca is exclusively for indigenous communities and products are too risky, which confined these communities from expanding their market. Current debates by the new government provide new opportunities for regulations and a market that is based on a social justice perspective: how to ensure direct participation of cultivating communities and include reparations for victims who have been impacted by prohibition and physically, financially and socially?

Our hope is that the papers in this issue will contribute to the exoneration of the coca leaf. This issue's contributors are grassroots activists who've applied their professional expertise into destigmatizing, decriminalizing and/or decolonizing the coca leaf, a mission that is driven by their deep sense of respect for the coca leaf's medical, social and spiritual virtues. Even while mindful of the risk of biopiracy, this is also an effort for Andean and Amazonian forms of knowledge and indigenous relationships with plants to share opportunities in shifting from an anthropocentric perspective, towards what anthropologist Myers (2017) refers to as the planthroposcene: an epoch that is defined by collaborations between plants and humans. Acknowledging the coca plant's virtues would mark the beginning of recovering a damaged relationship, and may open new pathways in which coca and people may mutually provide opportunities for one another.

## Note

1. Acreage of land under coca cultivation is one of the key indicators for estimating production by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

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