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COVER STORY

by ANNE GEORG

Rebranding Bolivia's demonized, sacred coca plant

A prophetic legend of how the Inca discovered the benefits of the coca leaf: captured by the Spanish conquistadores, high priest Khana Chuyma withstood torture without telling them where he'd hidden the sun god's gold. The soldiers left him for dead, but the sun god found him. Rewarding Khana Chuyma for his bravery, he showed him the coca plant that would help his people endure slavery and hardship under the Spanish. And he said, "While these leaves will signify health, strength and life for you and your people, they are accursed for your oppressors. When they attempt to exploit its virtues, the coca will destroy them." So the legend goes.

I discovered that I'd broken an international law only after I'd sent my parcel home from the central post office in La Paz, Bolivia. Among the alpaca sweaters and sundry trinkets was a seemingly innocent box of 20 Mate Windsor coca teabags and a bag of 100-per cent natural Vida coca candies, both pre-packaged commercial products I bought at grocery stores. By mailing them home I inadvertently broke a 1961 United Nations ban on the export of coca leaves and their products, because they contain the base product for cocaine. Thus was I initiated into the movement led by Bolivia's new president Evo Morales to rebrand the coca leaf, lift the ban on its export and sell it to the world.

Coca falls under the same UN ban that includes heroin, notorious company for the medicinal leaf, which for millennia has been part of the Andean medicine cabinet and a cultural and religious icon. Coca leaf is legal for personal and government-regulated small-scale commercial use in Bolivia, Peru and northern Argentina, where I first encountered it.

"We'll stop here so you can buy your coca leaves," Daniel, our squeaky-clean Argentine guide said to his vanful of middle-aged tourists, explaining that it prevented altitude sickness. We filed into the corner grocery store in Salta, Argentina, like guilty children out with an errant uncle and bought the plastic bags of coca leaves. We paid about a dollar for several days worth of the dried leaf.

Then Daniel showed us how to chew it: break off the dry spines, gently roll up about a dozen leaves and put the ball in your cheek. We didn't actually chew it, we sucked on it and it tasted like what you'd imagine a dry leaf might. The effects are super-charged by wrapping the leaves around alkaline substances like volcanic rock, ashes from the quinoa plant or sodium bicarbonate, that act as a catalyst.

I instantly liked coca. It energized me when I hiked. It stopped my nausea on long, winding bus rides. I often drank the tea. It's good for you. It helps digestion. It's full of proteins, vitamins and other nutrients. The list of conditions coca reputedly remedies includes thirst, cold, hunger, altitude sickness, headaches, fatigue, throat infections, rheumatism and bone dislocations, among others.

Bolivians from the humblest indigenous huts to the air-conditioned offices in downtown La Paz drink coca tea. If telltale bulging cheeks are indicators, lots of road workers, taxi drivers, sales clerks and people in cafes chew the leaf. La Paz's informative Coca Museum says up to 80 per cent of Bolivians use some legal form of coca.

That includes during rituals. The "hoja sagrada" or "sacred leaf" has enormous significance to Andean culture. It's still used for trade and currency. People leave small piles of coca leaves at roadside shrines and use them as blessings during ceremonies. Fortune-tellers throw coca leaves to divine the future.

In his campaign to promote coca to the world, President Morales maintains that international demand for legal coca products would make the black market less appealing for growers and tougher for narco-traffickers to work in Bolivia, while boosting the economy. Giving life to this ambitious concept, Venezuela's Hugo Chavez funded the construction of a coca processing plant that will produce products destined for Venezuela. Before that can happen, Morales needs the UN to repeal its 1961 ban so Bolivia can legally export coca products, like tea, wine, pasta, candy, shampoo, toothpaste and flour, already manufactured in Bolivia on a small scale.

Addressing the UN last year, Morales held a coca leaf and said "...this is a green coca leaf, it is not the white of cocaine, this coca leaf represents Andean culture, it is a coca leaf that represents the environment and the hope of our peoples. It is not possible that the coca leaf is legal for Coca-Cola and

that the coca leaf is illegal for other medicinal purposes in our country, and in the whole world." (For decades Coca-Cola has used tonnes of de-narcotized coca from Peru and formerly from Bolivia, to flavour its soft drinks.)

Bolivia wants Coca-Cola to take the name of its "sacred plant" out of its product branding, so far without success. The Bolivian government under Morales is considering a proposal to redesign the country's coat of arms, replacing the laurel and olive branches with the "sacred ancient coca leaf, as a symbol of perseverance and the people's economy."

No wonder the U.S.-backed war on drugs creates opposition by eradicating coca and replacing it with alternative crops. Yes, Bolivia has an active black market for coca leaves and illegal cocaine-processing operations. But demonizing Bolivia's ancient coca culture by equating it with cocaine, ergo criminal and to be eradicated, is short-sighted. It challenges the traditional "people's" economy Bolivia relies on and attacks a powerful symbol of dignity and self-sufficiency. About half of the 26,000 hectares that comprise Bolivian coca operations are grown legally for traditional uses and provide a critical livelihood for small growers.

Morales, a former coca grower who cut his political teeth leading the coca unions against eradication of their coca, directs his coca policy equally at the U.S. and the Bolivian coca unions: "Zero cocaine and zero drug trafficking, but not zero coca or zero cocalers." He is encouraging small coca growing operations for local commerce and individual consumption. He's accused the U.S. of using the war on drugs as a pretext to "subjugate the countries of the Andean region, just like they invented preventative wars to intervene into some countries of the Middle East."

The politics of the coca leaf have more layers than coca has uses. It is the banner under which Morales advocates for Bolivia's right to develop without U.S. intervention and for the dignity of indigenous people. The leaf is a powerful symbol to Bolivians and they're counting on Morales, Bolivia's first indigenous president, to save their heritage and their ability to eke out a living. Morales's scheme to sell coca products internationally is a tough sell, even with Chavez's support. Marketing a product that's in the same category legally as heroin and is the bull's eye in the sights of the U.S.'s war on drugs, is a long, hard road out of poverty, no matter how benevolent and healthy the product.

Back in the first world, sipping my illegal coca tea becomes an act of solidarity with beleaguered Bolivia and all Andean culture, which is a little like the coca plant – tough, defiant, grows where other things don't and subsists on very little.

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