

M. A. S. de

MAMA COCA



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Mama Coca
El Papel de la Coca
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Introduction

Story written out of old diaries and discarded bus tickets finds you back in Bogotá. It is the end of May, 1973, almost two years to the day since that first score, that opening gambit in a rapid sequence of missions as chronicler, as interpreter to a mis-marriage of cultures, to the nervous rubbing of frozen noses. Every time, it seems, the city hits you with the same nerve-tingling, sense-deadening coordinates: a seeping dampness underfoot, a chill freeze shot through the coke-thin air. Must be the old thirteenth floor Tequendama blues — anxious heart a-thumping, pumping minimal oxygen and vicarious thrills. Frame dissolves into a distant blurr of lush green fields and burnt-out volcanoes, the Sábana held within a timeless siege, its plateau encircled by the saw-toothed ridges of the Andes. You swallow the landscape whole, feeling that rarified atmosphere come on tight and uncomfortable in the lungs, a keen rush of fear erupting across the skin-deep surface of it all. Cold sweat as you walk past the dark-suited citizenry — their eyes empty ciphers, blank zeros held in catatonic suspense, hurriedly checking your face against the mugshot on the front page of their newspapers: *Detenido otro traficante gringo...*

Busts, Scams. Numbers, Deals. The rise and fall of the independent operator; flat pools of blood lying between the broken cobblestones of *atabobo*-Babylon. Bad old days no more. *La coca está en el culo de la madre del carajo* (a popular saying)... One day in '73, you wake up to feel a cold muzzle of grey automatic in the earhole. You got the message, kid? A puff of smoke deadened by the sound of downpour, a single no-watt, so-watt bulb strung from a leaning lamp-post. The light goes out on a back street behind the Hilton. Off-stage and shadow-bound, a pack of mangy street dogs are hoping for a corpse. First centurion: 'A hundred dollars or...' Second centurion: 'Extradition or life...' Easy deals no more. Take two on the automatic, aimed this time, and aimed at you.

So you got the message, kid. Riot police disgorge from cattle trucks and surround the intersection, beat sticks and gas cans at the ready. But what of your commitment to the service? to the subject? Your sense of

responsibility to the coca theme? One morning you go uptown for an interview with the Director of the Instituto: 'Ah, a social history of the use of coca in Colombia... very interesting, very *polemical*... you have monies from some international foundation? no?... some link-up with the health authorities? no?... a doctoral research project at least? oh no?... I see...' Sound track stuck at the point of no return.

Bogotá the ugly — a heritage of doom and despair. All the while the radio news hangs heavy in the air: 'Official sources have described this morning's outbreak of violence as an act of premeditated provocation on the part of an extremist minority without any popular support... in a series of preventive measures, the military authorities have declared a state of siege and sealed off access to the Universidad Nacional...' Far away, the hills echo back a distant soundtrack of steel ball-bearings on boxwood *carrito* carts, their reel and rasp muffled in the mist... ree ree, rra rra rra... a stench of corruption hangs in a pall over the dead-bled city, its shadow the carrion-feeding condor on the *peso* note... We huddle together and we wait, standing close to the door of the café and pretending to read the headlines of an *El Espacio* pinned to the rack on one side: *Descuartizó a su madre y luego se suicidó*...

Good fortune smiled in Popayán. Despite its petty chauvinism and small-town paranoia, it remains the most relaxed of Colombia's provincial capitals, the most easy-going. It has retained the placid colonial atmosphere of a town bypassed by industrial progress, the peace of its siesta hour disturbed only by the periodic sorties of the relatively inept young soldiers from the local NCO training college. On a fine, sunny day Popayán is a delightful place, with an excellent climate (av. temp. 18°C.), interesting street life and strong cultural traditions — not to mention what is probably some of the finest coca and marijuana in Colombia. It is not, however, the ideal place to simply score and hang out, for the town maintains a healthy disrespect for *gringo* tourists, and seldom greets the traveller with anything other than indifference, or even actual hostility. And personally to make matters worse, I arrived in the town in what were already pretty desperate straights. In a single month in Colombia I had been arrested, or narrowly escaped arrest, no less than half-a-dozen times, and my money was rapidly running out. True, I had the advantage of speaking good Spanish, but what I really needed was some kind of official *cover*, a cast-iron alibi for remaining in the area. As luck would have it, the local university was looking for someone to teach archaeology. 'That's my bag' I said, and in the absence of any other interested or accredited parties, they gave me the job. Just like that. I could hardly believe it...

Deep down, however, I could not help feeling that my return into the cloying embrace of academe was something of a sell-out, a relapse into pure careerism. Would not teaching obligations prevent me from spending more

time in the field, in the neighbouring countryside itself? Fortunately, any such sentiments were very much misplaced, for — as the result of quite legitimate student unrest and unbelievably dim-witted government intransigence — the Faculty of Humanities was actually closed more than half the time that I was in the area, allowing ample time for travelling outside Popayán. I say 'fortunately' with good reason, for in view of an almost complete institutional collapse, it was not difficult to convince some of the students that nothing, literally nothing, could be expected from the classroom-and-examination system, or indeed from the professional structure of the social sciences as a whole. The very absence of any organized university curriculum allowed for a chink in the armour of the system's naive, uncritical scientism, a gap through which the actual day-to-day practice of liberation could penetrate the shell of so much empty rhetoric, so much ineffectual theory. This point of breakthrough, a veritable *punta de lanza*, was provided by the example of the Indians of Cauca, whom some of the students began to visit with increasing regularity at this time — first with a patronizing desire to 'educate', then with growing awe at the Indians' surprising degree of political effectiveness, and finally with real respect and a genuine desire to learn from their successes — taking advantage of the long 'holidays' which the administration of the University of Cauca periodically decreed.

All this was during a period in which the Indian civil rights movement, CRIC (Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca), was beginning to cause quite a stir in many rural areas, and both the students and myself found ourselves subject to considerable harassment by the police and the army — notably at Huila, Belalcázar, Corinto, Caldon, Jambaló and Coconuco. Travel in the cocaine-producing regions of southern Cauca was equally fraught with perils: the first night I slept in Bolívar, for example, I was rudely awoken at dawn by the town's police chief and the cold snout of his service .38. He had set up a bust worthy of front-page treatment by the press — both the mayor and the local magistrate had come along for their share of the glory — and the assembled company was more than a little disappointed to find that my research was seemingly legitimized by a very ambiguous Government script pinned to the inside of my passport. Other drug-busts verged on the absurd; in Cali, a city with a 'swinging' reputation, I was stopped with a group of friends at the entrance to a Santana concert and taken away to police headquarters for carrying white lime powder in a gourd. (It is remarkable that, despite an official prohibition on coca, the accompanying leaves aroused no interest whatsoever.) I attempted to explain that the lime was simply an alkaline reagent for chewing with the leaves, but my story was viewed with the utmost derision, and it was not until several hours later that we were finally released, once a high-ranking narc had deigned to classify the suspicious white powder as (officially) harmless.

These occasions, however, served to underline the very real necessity of working 'under cover'. The use of coca in Colombia is a very marginalized phenomenon, and deserved to be treated accordingly — by means of a marginalized, unofficial and unsponsored anthropology, a form of counter-intelligence whose justification could only be a heartfelt sympathy for coca and coca chewers themselves. Such a position necessarily required 'cover' of some sort, for — although in the company of actual coca chewers it was easy enough to come straight to the point — it remained extremely foolhardy to even discuss the subject of drugs with any of the more respectable citizens of the small provincial towns. After a few false starts, I found that the key word to use on such occasions was *historiador* — 'historian' — as *arqueólogo* was widely associated with tomb-robbing and trafficking in antiquities, and *antropólogo* or *etnólogo* were, at least in the eyes of the basically anti-Indian local authorities, terms with unmistakably 'subversive' and 'communist' overtones. There was not, in any case, very much to be gained in the way of information about coca from those who never used the leaves themselves. The level of sheer ignorance with regard to coca — even among local white dope-smokers and student radicals — was literally staggering beyond belief, and I fear that very few Colombians would share the opinion that the plant is a vital and crucial element of their national heritage, one which deserves to be studied, defended, and even diffused among the population as a whole. In my experience, very few people — other than fellow coca chewers — were ever willing to contemplate the fact that a foreigner, an educated white man could possibly want to learn about coca leaves for their own sake. Among urban, middle-class Colombians, my motives were always construed to be very much more obscure. The fact is that in Colombia the word *coca* is universally associated with sensationalist newspaper headlines, and — whether the attitude is one of sniffing regard for refined cocaine, or one of high moral repudiation of the corruption produced as a result of the drug traffic — the common opinion of virtually the entire population is that the chewing of the leaf is foul, uncivilized, and more specifically, 'backward' and unhealthy.

The major reason for this is that — unlike the scene in Peru and Bolivia — the number of Colombian coca chewers is really very small, involving a total population of fifty or, at most, a hundred thousand individuals, which clearly cannot compare with the situation further south, where perhaps as many as six or eight million Quechua and Aymara Indians use the drug. Mainstream Colombian culture has little understanding or sympathy for its Indian minorities; they are considered anachronisms, remnants of another age, social dinosaurs who have survived only in the more inaccessible parts of the country — such as the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, the Amazonian rainforests, and a few isolated pockets within the major cordilleras of the Andes. One of these pockets, however — that

which is referred to throughout this book as 'the Cauca area', and roughly, though not exactly, coterminous with the *departamento* del Cauca, the administrative unit centred on Popayán — provides a very significant exception to the general rule. Here no less than 57 Indian reservations or *resguardos* still control a very substantial amount of land, and the indigenous population almost certainly reaches a figure of as much as 100,000 individuals altogether. (Other estimates vary from as low as 50,000 to as high as 235,000). Of these, over half speak the Paez language, a local dialect which forms part of the Macro-Chibcha linguistic family. At the present time they are distributed on both sides of the Central Cordillera — north of a line drawn between Totoró and Inzá, and south of the highest peak in the area, the Nevado del Huila — and in a few small communities in the Western Cordillera, notably in the *municipio* of Morales.

Another group, the Guambianos — of the *resguardo* of Guambía, near Silvia — speak a related, but mutually unintelligible language, and number close on 8,000. It is also likely that many of the other Indian groups living near Popayán — such as those in Coconuco and Puracé — at one time shared a language very similar to Guambiano. They have, however, suffered a great deal from the cultural and territorial inroads made into their communities, and today they only speak Spanish, though still maintaining a small area of land in *resguardos*, the shrunken vestiges of reserves assaulted for four centuries by the rapacious landowning aristocracy of Popayán. In southern Cauca, a handful of *resguardos* have likewise managed to survive in the more remote valleys of the Central Cordillera, but they too have lost their original languages and have assimilated a great deal of *mestizo* Colombian culture. In numerical terms, however, southern Cauca probably includes an Indian population of between 15,000 and 25,000, with well over half of it concentrated outside the reservations in areas such as the valley of the San Jorge river, where most of the old *resguardos* were extinguished over a hundred years ago.

The distribution of the coca habit in the Cauca area does not exactly fit the ethnic boundaries. The Guambianos, for example, abandoned the use of coca around the turn of the century, and — despite an otherwise strong respect for their cultural traditions — seem unlikely to ever seriously re-adopt the habit again. Even the situation in the rest of Cauca is not as homogeneous as might appear at first sight, and it is necessary to make a clear distinction between two main types of coca consumption in the area. One is that exemplified by the Paez Indians of Tierradentro, a traditional form of coca chewing which is often significantly at variance with the more acculturated pattern of the Spanish-speaking Indians and *campesinos* of southern Cauca. Such a dichotomy not only reflects obvious differences of external detail — such as a variety in the decoration of coca bags, or in the

preparation of the lime reagent chewed together with the leaves — but also expresses cultural dissimilarities of a much more fundamental kind. For instance, coca amongst the Paez is considered not only an aid to hard physical work, but also a 'magical' plant — being widely employed in the context of shamanism, healing and divination. This is a dimension almost entirely lacking in southern Cauca, where the leaves are used pretty much exclusively as a stimulant, or as a medicinal herb for the treatment of certain clearly identified complaints.

This 'profanity' of coca in southern Cauca would explain why it is only here — and not in Tierradentro, where coca is rarely traded outside the immediate family circle — that the leaf has become a major cash crop, spawning first a flourishing trade in coca to the markets of the nearby towns and, in more recent years, a booming cocaine industry as well. The historical and economic implications of this difference of attitudes are discussed in some detail in chapters III and IV, but there is a sense in which the whole subject can also be related to underlying, present-day concepts of ethnic identity as well. Southern Cauca, along with the adjacent *municipios* of San Agustín and La Cruz — in the departments of Huila and Narino respectively — is an area characterized by an almost complete absence of any specifically 'Indian' culture. That is to say, native languages and many customs have been forgotten altogether, nearly all the original reservations have been split up into private holdings, and the racial composition of the rural population has received significant additions of European and African blood.

To a considerable extent, therefore, class conflict has substituted ethnic solidarity as the major determinant of social behaviour, and the cultural differences that exist in the area are those which separate the farm-dwelling *campesino* peasantry from the provincial petit bourgeoisie which dominates life in the municipal towns. Within such a context, coca chewing is found only among the more economically deprived *campesinos*, and it is clearly considered a trait which should be abandoned by any farmer who aspires to a respectable position in local affairs. It is interesting that the terms *chino* or *indio* are normally used to refer pejoratively to all the poorer members of the peasantry, irrespective of the colour of their skin. For this reason, no racist implications should necessarily be ascribed to their everyday usage, and the words only express a clear social denigration of any kind of behaviour — such as coca chewing — which is considered backward, ignorant, and symptomatic of poverty.

While it is not uncommon, therefore, to find *campesinos* — even those with clearly Caucasian racial features — chewing coca in the southern parts of the department, the same phenomenon becomes increasingly rare as one travels further north. In Tierradentro itself, social identity is more often defined in explicitly ethnic terms, and there exists considerable antagonism

between the inhabitants of the proud, independent Paez reservations and the rapidly expanding white peasantry, anxious to convert the communal Indian lands into more profitable private farms. This situation leads to a notable degree of conflict between Indians and *blancos* — 'whites' in the cultural, and not necessarily the racial sense — as the split is quite evidently based on territorial and behavioural differences, rather than on simple economic inequalities.

For these reasons, any white settler who dares adopt the coca habit near an area of Paez predominance usually risks becoming something of an outcast among his own people, and is thought of as a man who has betrayed his race and his upbringing. It cannot, therefore, be at all surprising that very few converts to coca have emerged among the *blancos* of Tierradentro. And at the same time, it is quite easy to explain why a good number of the more 'progressive' Indians — those who have been led by the Church and the authorities into dissociating themselves from a 'savage' and 'primitive' past — have actually begun to abandon the coca habit, as if ashamed of its barbarity. The real irony remains that, in the name of progress, they have been encouraged to replace coca with the far more damaging combination of coffee and cigarettes. It is, therefore, particularly encouraging to note the attitude of CRIC, who in 1975 made the following statement regarding the use of coca:

'to conserve coca as part of Indian culture; for the purposes of shamanism and agricultural work, and as a medicine. It is necessary to stop trading coca with whites, because coca is a thing worthy of respect, and traders use it in a way which is not appropriate...' (from the General Conclusions of the 4th Congress of CRIC, Tóez, August 1975.)

This position has not been taken in isolation from the broader context of Paez resistance to ethnocide and incorporation by the enveloping Colombian society, CRIC's program includes the following seven points:

1. To recuperate reservation lands which have been lost.
2. To increase the size of the reservations and institute a self-reliant, communal economic system in the areas liberated from control by white landlords.
3. To strengthen the freely-elected Indian *cabildos* ('Councils') which govern each reservation.
4. To stop paying the illegal *terraje* ('land-tax') which makes the Indians, effectively, into share-croppers on land which is really their own property.
5. To make people aware of the existing laws for Indians and to insist on their proper application.
6. To defend the history, language and customs of the Indians, and foster a new awareness of their own musical forms, their mythology,

and their traditional system of shamanism and herbal medicine.

7. To form Indian teachers to educate the children in their own language and culture.

Since its foundation in 1971, CRIC has scored a number of remarkable victories in attempting to carry through this program, and since early 1975 has succeeded in bringing out its own monthly newspaper, 'Unidad Indígena', which provides a wealth of detail about its current activities and those of like-minded Indian groups elsewhere in Colombia. A fuller account of the historical background and recent growth of CRIC can be found in Appendix C, and one should only add that its case has recently been taken up by that august body, the UN Working Group on Slavery of the Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities: The UN Commission on Human Rights. The final recommendations made to the Committee were that the Government of Colombia should be asked to admit a UN sponsored investigatory mission to look into the following questions:

1. To ensure that titles to land were clearly defined and rightful claims supported at all times.
2. To ensure that central government laws are carried through locally without corruption.
3. To ensure that the Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca (CRIC) is unequivocally established as a judicially accredited organization, with the power of the central government behind it.

(Survival International Review: Vol. 2 No. 3 — Summer 1977.)

Whether or not such initiatives are successful in exerting any effective pressure on the government in Bogotá remains, of course, very much in the realm of conjecture. Nevertheless, as Survival itself has pointed out: 'we do... feel it important to ensure that a voice on behalf of the indians is heard wherever and whenever possible...' It is with a similar perspective in view that this book has attempted — by placing the use of coca not only in a subjective context, but also in that of a legitimate Indian struggle for self-determination and self-respect — to contribute both to a growing understanding of the much maligned coca leaves, and to a global commitment to protecting the economic, cultural and political rights of all ethnic and social minorities marginalized by the orthodoxy's crass conception of progress, misrepresented by the ethos of a paternalistic science, and repressed by the institutions of the authoritarian state. Rather than assuming to 'leadership', or membership of a revolutionary 'vanguard', the anthropologist must find his purpose in supporting and publicizing those movements where the people themselves are manifestly in control of their own destiny.

'The future organization of society should be carried out entirely from below upwards, by the abolition of the State and the free association of the workers and peasants . . . ' Michael Bakunin.

Note: Though the major Indian group in the Cauca area have been referred to throughout this study as 'the Paez', it has become common in this century to denote them in the plural in Spanish as *los Paeces* (with the stress on the first 'e') or, probably more correctly, as *los Páeces* (with the stress on the 'a'). In anycase, the Paez call themselves a quite different name — *nása* — which could be translated as 'we, the people' . . .

The pronunciation of Paez words, as written in this book, should follow Spanish usage, with the exception of those sounds — notably the 'sh' — which are absent from Spanish. While the results of such a transliteration are, admittedly, only very approximate, the obstacles to a more accurate rendering place it beyond the scope of the present study. As far as I am aware, no comprehensive linguistic analysis of the Paez language has ever been published, and remains a field which could fruitfully be explored in the future.



With all the notoriety currently associated with cocaine, it is perhaps surprising to note how little attention has been directed at the coca leaf itself — source of the illicit white powder — and particularly at the real, as opposed to merely sensational, dimensions of the cocaine industry and the so-called 'war on drugs' in South America. Being conceived in terms of a quest for the mythological spirit which resides within the coca bush, 'Mama Coca' is both an indictment of the monopolization of the cocaine traffic by the reactionary security forces, and a passionate defence of the habit of chewing coca leaves in their natural, unrefined state. The book first examines the overall cultural and economic history of coca in the Andes, and then concentrates on the way the plant is cultivated, prepared and consumed by one particular group of coca adepts, the Paez Indians of Cauca, Colombia. The book is a libertarian analysis of the role of coca in the broader context of Paez magical and medicinal practices, and an understanding of its significance in the struggle which these Indians are currently waging in defence of their land and their cultural integrity.



Mama Coca