

Coca has been used for thousands of years by indigenous peoples of the New World. The coca bush (from *keboka*, the Aymara word for tree) grows wild across western South America but was also one of the first domesticated plants in the western hemisphere. It was considered sacred and central to life among the people of the Andes Mountains. They believed the vitamin-rich leaves embodied the spirit of Mama Coca, the nurturing and protective force of nature, and they chewed the leaves to cope with the stresses of life.

Chewing a wad of coca—along with lime powder to release chemicals in the leaves—was similar in effect to drinking a strong cup of coffee and taking an aspirin. This was useful for people travelling long distances in high altitudes. Many Andeans chewed coca leaves all day long and carried a small, decorated leather pouch or ceramic gourd for the leaves and lime. Some brewed the leaves into tea. Coca was also used as a medicine (e.g., for fighting colds, pain, fatigue) and spiritual aid (e.g., used in rituals and as offerings to deities).

Even before the Inca period (1438-1533 CE), coca was an important commercial product. It was grown in the lowlands and traded with village in highland for meat and minerals. The Incas promoted coca agriculture and took control of the coca trade and used it and other crops to finance their fast-growing empire.

Officially, coca was regarded as a sacred substance and its use was restricted to elite members of society. How wide-spread or enforced such restrictions were is unclear. Under the Spanish conquest coca was made widely available to the common people as it allowed peasants and miners to work longer and harder, though religious use was discouraged.

Coca became a marker of cultural identity among people of the Andes, particularly among the Aymara and Quechua. During a special ceremony, for example, Quechua adults exchanged coca and phrases of gratitude unique to their people. Friendship and affection among them was shown by visiting a person's house and chewing coca with them. (Opting out was regarded as rude.)

Today, coca continues to play an important role in the traditions and daily lives of many Andean people:

- A man might offer coca leaves to the father of a potential bride
- When a child is born, relatives and friends might celebrate by chewing coca leaves together
- Coca-chewing plays a role in Quechua carnivals and celebrations
- Aymara women chew coca as a source of inspiration for their weaving projects

