



Leaves of the Land: A Quick History of Coca

History nugget

Coca has been used for thousands of years by indigenous peoples of the New World. The coca bush (from *kboka*, 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 villages in the highlands 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 widespread 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

Instructional strategies

Have students work in groups to review the [handout](#) and discuss one or more of the following:

1. Coca use was a symbol of high social status for the Quimbaya of Colombia, who made golden containers to hold their lime powder. In what ways might substance use be associated with social status in Canada? What substances? In what contexts?
2. Coca had an important role in formal and informal relationships among Andean peoples (e.g., rituals, social gifts, sealing agreements). What role do substances play in the way Canadians greet, socialize or interact with family, friends or strangers? Provide examples.

3. Throughout time, people have always been surprised by the curious habits and fashions of others. In 1499, for example, Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci met the people of today's Venezuela and was taken aback by the strange custom of coca chewing:

*...all of them had their cheeks full of a green herb that they chewed constantly like beasts, so that they could barely speak. Each one carried around his neck two gourds, one of them full of that herb and the other of a white powder that looked like pulverized plaster. They dipped a stick into the powder, and then put the stick in the mouth, in order to apply powder to the herb that they chewed; they did this very frequently. We were amazed at this and could not understand its secret of why they did it. (Cited in Feiling, T. (2010). *Cocaine Nation: How the White Trade Took Over the World*. San Jose, CA: Pegasus Books.)*

What everyday social or cultural practices do we have that might surprise people from other places? Are there any social and cultural practices that we all share? Why or why not?

Sources

- Gahlinger, P.M. (2004). *Illegal Drugs: A Complete Guide to Their History, Chemistry, Use and Abuse*. New York: Penguin.
- Stolberg, V.B. (2011). The Use of Coca: Prehistory, History, and Ethnography. *Journal of Ethnicity in Substance Abuse*, 10:2, 126-146.
- Feiling, T. (2010). *Cocaine Nation: How the White Trade Took Over the World*. San Jose, CA: Pegasus Books.
- Courtwright, D.T. (2001). *Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Drug Literacy

Big ideas

- People have been using drugs for thousands of years and in almost every human culture
- Drugs can be tremendously helpful and also very harmful
- As humans, both individually and as communities, we need to learn how to manage the drugs in our lives
- We can learn how to control our drug use by reflecting on the different ways people have thought about drugs, exploring stories from various cultures and listening to each other

Competencies

- Assess the complex ways in which drugs impact the health and wellbeing of individuals, families, communities and societies
- Explore and appreciate diversity related to the reasons people use drugs, the impact of drug use and the social attitudes toward various drugs
- Develop social and communication skills in addressing discourse and behaviour related to drugs



Links to Curriculum

First Peoples' principles of learning

- Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors
- Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place)
- Learning is embedded in memory, history and story

Social Studies 8

Big ideas

- Exploration, expansion, and colonization had varying consequences for different groups
- Exploration, expansion, and colonization had varying consequences for different groups

Competencies

- Use Social Studies inquiry processes and skills to ask questions; gather, interpret, and analyze ideas; and communicate findings and decisions
- Assess the significance of people, places, events and developments at particular times and places
- Explain different perspectives on past or present people, places, issues and events, and compare the values, worldviews and beliefs of human cultures and societies in different times and places