

The Coca Plant: Gendered Conversations with a Totemic Persona

A Planta da Coca
Conversações Genderizadas com uma Persona Totêmica

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how the Coca plant [*Erythroxylum coca*], despite its persecution in Americas since the XVIth Century and its criminalization during the “War on Drugs” in the XXth Century, remains a key interlocutor for Indigenous and rural communities in South America, with a focus in the Andean highlands. Viewing Coca as a *persona* involves understanding it within a complex web of totemic entanglements and plural ontologies. In the Andes, interpretations of Coca emphasize gendered interconnectedness rather than an essential femininity. Coca's gendered agency manifests itself in social, therapeutic, and spiritual practices, reinforcing meaningful conversations between human and nonhuman beings.

KEY WORDS: Coca [*Erythroxylum coca*], Indigenous communities, Andes, Gender, Totemic entanglements.

RESUMO

Este artigo explora como a Coca [*Erythroxylum coca*], apesar de sua perseguição nas Américas desde o século XVI e criminalização na “Guerra às Drogas” no século XX, continua sendo interlocutora fundamental para as comunidades indígenas-rurais da América do Sul, com foco nos Andes. Ver a Coca como *persona* envolve entendê-la dentro de uma complexa rede de emaranhados totêmicos e ontologias plurais. Nos Andes, as interpretações dela enfatizam a interconectividade de gênero em vez de uma feminilidade essencial. Finalmente, a agência genderizada da Coca se manifesta em práticas sociais, terapêuticas e espirituais, reforçando conversas significativas entre seres humanos e não humanos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Coca [*Erythroxylum coca*], Comunidades Indígenas, Andes, Gênero, Emaranhamentos totêmicos.

Introduction

“La vida es dura, sobre todo en la Puna. La coca ayuda a aliviar las penas de la vida y une a las personas para que se ayuden mutuamente. Es, como ellos dicen, ‘el aroma de Nuestra Madre’ - mamanchispa q’apaynin”.

[“Life is tough, especially in the highlands. Coca helps to alleviate the hardships of life and brings people together so they can support each other. It is, as they say, 'the aroma of Our Mother' - *mamanchispa q’apaynin*.”

Catherine Allen, *La Coca sabe*. 2008: 12, our translation.

This essay observes how the Coca plant [*Erythroxylum coca*], despite its persecution since the European Invasion of the Americas since the XVIth Century, and after its criminalization during the “War on Drugs” in the XXth Century, is still a key interlocutor for many Indigenous and rural communities in the South American landscapes of the Andes. It also discusses notions of gender and explores the more holistic understanding of a gendered totemic persona, in the context of a dialogue between anthropological knowledge based on ethnographic accounts, and psychedelic philosophical discussions. How has the Coca plant maintained its significance for Indigenous and rural communities in South American landscapes despite persecution and criminalization? How does the problematic representational identity of the feminine gender reflect essentialist bivalent structures inherited from

Western projections? And finally, in what ways do gendered interpretations of Coca challenge strict notions of essential femininity and emphasize interconnectedness with other *naturecultures*?

While psychedelia means, “in its radical and substantial definition, the manifestation of the soul, mind, or consciousness” (Costa De Freitas, 2023a: 163, our translation), an anthropology based on ethnographic accounts explores how these manifestations are culturally mediated and expressed through rituals, symbols, and social practices. This approach examines the ways in which different societies understand and integrate altered states of consciousness into their worldviews, revealing the diverse meanings and significance attributed to psychedelic experiences across cultures.

If in psychedelic approaches we can observe, for example, how entheogenic creativity can derive into “an antidote to spiritual suffering and existential unhappiness” (Costa De Freitas, 2023b: 4, our translation), anthropological perspectives will bring up discussions linked to contexts, settings, and their rooted cosmopolitics.

In parallel, regarding the problematic of representational identity of the feminine gender in Western cosmologies, the concept of “woman” follows the same strategies as the rest of technologies of the liberal “self”, while the notion of feminine gender stays in direct opposition to the masculine gender, reproduces an essentialist bivalent structure inherited from Platonic metaphysics. As highlighted by philosopher Susana de Castro:

Currently, there is much talk about 'women's politics', (...) 'women's issues', or 'women's literature', 'women's psychology', etc. The indiscriminate current use of these categories 'woman' or 'women' or 'the feminine' reveals a society's absorption of women's issues, which have already been incorporated into public spaces as a real and relevant concern. While this absorption is beneficial as it drives advocacy and fight for women's rights, on the other hand, we have reasons to be suspicious (De Castro, 2021: 179, our translation).

This suspicion leads us to review our understanding of gender and the use of specific plants in concrete settings, asking ourselves “how feminine” can be a relevant plant such as Ayahuasca or Coca be (Echazú Böschemeier, 2016; Flores, 2017). In fact, gendered interpretations of Coca draw our attention more to an entanglement of elements, than to a strict worshiping of essential femininity. The idea of companion species proposed by Haraway (2003) emphasizes the interconnectedness and co-evolution of humans and other species, highlighting the idea that humans are not isolated beings but rather entangled with various other organisms in complex relationships. More specifically, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) understands such relationships as entanglements, conceived as the possibility of speaking of a set of relationships between

...nonhumans and other than humans such as things, objects, other animals, living beings, organisms, physical forces, spiritual entities, and humans” (...) [in] relational ontologies that engage with the material world less from the perspective of defined ‘objects’ and ‘subjects’ but as composed of knots of relations involving humans, nonhumans, and physical entanglements of matter and meaning (...). *Naturecultural* thought is also invoked to name a strand of thought in the social studies of science and technology (2007: 140-141).

This wider understanding involves the task of permanently demystifying the “good savage” imposed by Rousseauian Western views (Moreira, 2023), making the effort of delving into local, less explored, cosmopolitical perceptions. Regarding the philosophy of contemporary techniques, we also see a “growing concern with how things are designed and in what sense there is an ethical commitment before, during, and after the process of making” (Kussler, 2023: 5, our translation). In this sense, we are interested in the fact that relationships between human and non-human beings are modeled through “ways of doing” (Echazú Böschemeier, 2015; Flores, 2017), while unmaking essentialist perceptions in their daily practices.

Western projections, Western persecutions

The European invasion of the Americas (Tsing *et al*, 2021) highlighted a significant disruption in the Indigenous relationship with the Coca plant, amidst other transformative changes such as the introduction of new crops, microorganisms that intensified genocidal processes, and new forms of governance. From the early days of Spanish colonization, Coca became associated with “dark forces,” including the *Tio* and the importance of her presence in *apachetas*, believed to facilitate communication with malevolent spirits (Flores, 2017).

In the 20th century, Coca and its proponents faced further colonization through the War on Drugs, resulting in global criminalization and stigmatization of those involved in its cultivation and consumption. The Commission of Inquiry on the Coca Leaf, conducted in Bolivia and Peru and published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's Program on Coca Plant in 1950 gave a new twist to the ongoing persecution of European invasion and colonization, strengthening the power of necropolitics (Mbembe, 2016) to raven itself, threatening the plural ontologies between Coca and human subjects. Is it possible that a gendered perspective on the Coca plant is influenced by a Westernized feminization of her *persona*? To be able to contribute to this topic, we will bring up the case of the ayahuasca plant.

In the lowland Peruvian Amazon, plants are defined by their totemic *persona*. This *persona* is gendered, but not in an individual way. The way plants are gendered is dynamic and depends on the perspective of each *curandera*, *curiosa*, *sobadora* and *shaman* - all categories used for different practitioners

who perform therapeutic practices with the help of plants (Echazú Böschemeier, 2016). It seems that Ayahuasca has been traditionally linked to the world of male practitioners, and many times depicted as a masculine force, prepared and consumed to deal with the most complex cases of magic, violent deaths, and a connection with the spirits of the most distant trees of the deep forest.

However, due to the rise of shamanic tourism, the Ayahuasca plant is increasingly viewed as embodying a feminine spirit by Westerners seeking female shamans, placing local female healers in a complex cultural position. They must decide whether to align with traditional healers, cultivating their practices in domestic gardens as their heritage dictates, or adapt to the trend of other women healers, some of them locals, some of them foreigners - who work in tourist lodges preparing ayahuasca, potentially making it a common "feminine" remedy that is "feminizing" the patriarchal world.

This feminization could significantly alter historical gender interactions, providing women more opportunities for local women to expand their knowledge and practices beyond the domestic sphere and challenge traditional taboos. At the same time, it could represent the reinforcement of a new age, Westernized projection on local gender relationships. The daily engagement of traditional curanderas with these plants, influenced by shamanic tourism, is already impacting therapeutic strategies, human-plant relationships, and gender dynamics within their community.

The totemic *persona* of plants

The case of the Ayahuasca plant shows us how careful we need to be when, and it might be interesting to put it in a conversation with the case of Coca. "Master plants" [*Plantas maestras*] are defined by being configured with chemical and spiritual components, given that they have their own mother or spirit (Luna, 1986), but the idea is that these plants teach and guide humans through embodied conversations. In both the Andes and the Amazon, Coca has been historically regarded as a master plant that in its different ways and uses manifests agency as a living and social being. The ethnic reach of Coca is not only through a depth of its presence in both the Amazon and the Andes, but also that it implies the political aspect of a relational ethnicity.

How did anthropology engage with the understanding of the relationship between humans, plants and other non-human subjects? One of the classic approaches has been the concept of totemism. Totemism is a term derived from the North American Indigenous people Ojibwa's expression *totam* or *totem*, which means a figure that represents the identity of a collective, was later used in classic anthropology to describe the association between humans and non humans, particularly species of animals or plants within a clan or subsection of society (Rivière, 2013). Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss (1903) observed that the primary characteristic of totemism involved delineating distinct groups

within a given society by linking each of them to a specific emblematic totem. In a framework characterized by totemic divisions rather than Aristotelian categories (Mauss and Durkheim, 1903), certain plants are linked with both human and non-human entities, contributing to a shared identity - a network of diverse entities forming part of a larger whole.

For Indigenous peoples of Andean South America, Coca has been historically perceived not solely as a botanical species (*Erythroxylum coca*), but also as a distinct *persona* - possessing desires, limitations, an ancestral lineage, a mythical origin, and a gendered presence. In this sense, Coca is a plant, but not only a plant. As an agent, an emissary connected to a particular ontological entanglement, it is a *persona*, but not embedded in a singularity - it is a totemic and non-individual *persona*.

Such qualities denote the presence of agency, defined here as the ability to act, or to influence other's actions. There are philosophical implications in the concept of agency, since it is related to a previous understanding of the world, as classified between subjects and objects. Several ethnographic accounts in South America have shown how agency perpasses an understanding that attributes the ability to act not only to people and animals, but also to plants, spirits, sacred places, and other non-human entities (Gow, 2001).

Tracing a parallel with the Melanesian case, Marilyn Strathern's concept of "dividuality" (1988) bring another layer of complexity to this, challenging Western notions of individual agency by emphasizing the interconnectedness of persons and the relational nature of action within kinship and other social networks.

Thinking of Coca as a person implies opening up the field of plural ontologies (Echazú Böschemeier and Flores, 2018), it is to regain the pluriverses inhabited by beings with non-human agency, within a network of complex relationships, which account for the heterodoxy of inter-epistemic life. To think of Coca as a gendered *persona* implies studying its genealogy and linking it to gender roles in Andean culture.

The gender of the Coca plant

Anthropologist Marilyn Strathern wrote in "the Gender of the Gift" (1988), after analyzing Melanesian forms of sociability, that gender is defined by

those categorizations of persons, artifacts, events, sequences, and so on which draw upon sexual imagery upon the ways in which the distinctiveness of male and female characteristics make concrete people's ideas about the nature of social relationships [...] understanding how Melanesians present gender relations to themselves is not to be separated from understanding how they so present sociality (1988, p. 5).

Strathern's concept of gender as a transactional activity resonates with the abstract's discussion of gendered interpretations of the Coca plant, highlighting how gender is not inherent but emerges through social interactions and actions.

Where are the women in the contemporary narratives related to the Coca plant? Have they been represented? And, if represented, how have they been depicted? We will explore some present ethnographic examples from the Andean area, specifically, from Southern Bolivia and Northwestern Argentina, to make visible the processes of representation of a gendered Coca plant, taking into account indigenous traditions, communal values, reciprocity, and conflict.

Likewise, gender inequalities related to Coca materialize in South American ethnographic contexts, where Coca is linked to a “maternal” social role, being called by Andean communities as *Mamacoca*. We are interested in moving away from essentialist readings of Coca and women, a label that covers up practices of colonization and subalternization. This has been the case of the appropriation of this master plant by broad sectors of global society and consumerist capitalism, silencing the struggle of Indigenous movements who defend the sacred sociability linked to Coca. Other superficial and derogative representations include the tirelessly formula Coca = cocaine, pouring a set of purist, eugenicist, hygienist and developmentalist discourses into contemporary representations of the Coca plant.

The gender of the Coca plant in Andean cultures

In Andean cultures, the Coca leaf is usually associated with some aspects of femininity. It is often considered a symbol of fertility, motherhood, and the connection with the Pachamama, mother earth deity: “La coca son los ojos de la Pachamama [Coca is the eyes of Pachamama]” (Tata Jiménez, 2009:122). However, the ones who appear to use it - at least publicly - are male subjects. They *coquean* to work, they *coquean* to have fun. But where are women now? Did women just stop existing as a human, gendered subject and became a symbol in the interpretative *mesa* of the *Akëbulli*?

2.14. Hoja Chacha/Warmi (hombre/mujer).

Son dos hojas unidas en el pecíolo:

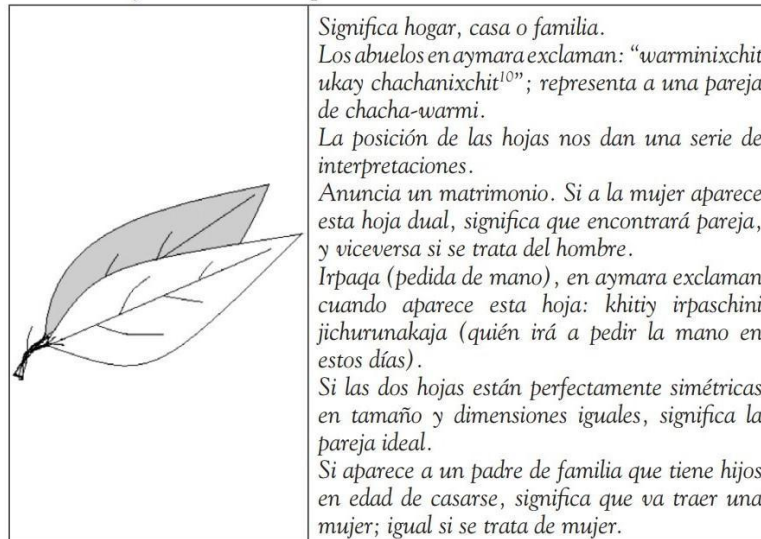


Figure 01: Akhulli, 2009. Page 24

Concerning other aspects related to the gender of the Coca plant in Andean cultures, Bolivian intellectuals have stated:

[A word is needed] regarding how the feminine aspect of coca is conceived in this part of the *Qullasuyu*. Both the feminine expression of *Pachamama* and of *Inal mama* (coca) are depicted as mature women entering old age: *taykas* or *amichas*. The connotation of mature women is extremely important in the Qullana worldview, hence it is said that they embody wisdom (*'chuymanijim'*), occupying a position of balance between the old and the new generation. Therefore, they hold a place that guarantees the continuity of future generations (Quispe, 2008: 80, our translation).

Other gender aspects that intersect with traditional uses of Coca leaves is exemplified by the ethnography described by Catherine Allen for the Quechua people of northern Bolivia, where she highlights how Coca chewing varies from one region to another. In this context, men exchange bags of coca leaves among themselves, while women consume from the same pile. The author mentions that in the Cuzco region - in the neighboring country of Peru - , both men and women exchange *k'intus* of Coca, using specific phrases of invitation and gratitude (Allen, 2008:102).

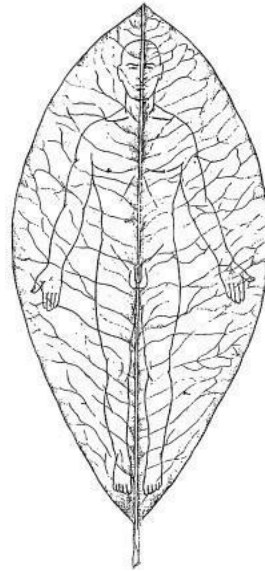


Figure 02: Leaf/Person: anthropomorphism of a Coca leaf.

In: Emanuel Amodio (1993-1994).

In Figure 02, observed above, we can see an equivalence in the representation of the male human body and the Coca leaf, which is thin and elongated, allowing sections of the leaf to be associated with parts of the patient's/consultant's body (FLORES, 2016:153). Being a plant that comes from the Latin American lowlands, the agency of Coca as an oracle and offering is used as such both in lowland and highland South America, highlighting the characteristics of master plant for indigenous and rural peoples. Particularly, it is deeply rooted in Andean mythology, as its presence in Andean oral tradition is ancient, being present in the origin myths of the Aymara people. These Aymara mythic accounts mention that “the existence of coca dates back to the age of *Ch'amak Pacha*, and to the origin of the existence of all beings, including *Jaqi* (man/woman). Its presence in the multidimensional reality of Pacha is decisive because it organizes and leads the *Ayllu* (community)” (Akhulli, 2016: 122, our translation).

Every being in the existence of the universe contains parity, and parity of the universe is expressed in the Coca leaf. Polar opposites, as masculine and feminine, seem not to be absolute in the Andean world. It has been noted that there are signs of exchangeability of gender in the identities given to the Coca leaves while interpreting them. “*The coca leaf that symbolizes the woman has a rounded shape, without a point at the apex of the leaf. Meanwhile, the male coca leaf has a more elongated shape and ends in a pointed apex*” (Akhulli, 2009: 45, our translation).



Figure 03: Akhulli, 2009. Page 47.

Latin American anthropologist Emanuel Amodio (1994) also studied how Coca leaves are represented in some places in Peru. In these instances, the elongated leaf represents the male, and the round leaf represents the female, just like in the aforementioned document *Akulli*. Additionally, there are representations of leaves that depict boys and girls, marking a distinction similar to that between adult male and female representations. In other words, the more rounded shape refers to the feminine, while the elongated shape represents the masculine, both for adults and children.

The ethnographic emphasis on reevaluating oppositions between male and female resonates with Strathern's critique of hierarchical relations and control within gender relations, suggesting fresh grounds for analyzing gender dynamics surrounding the Coca plant.

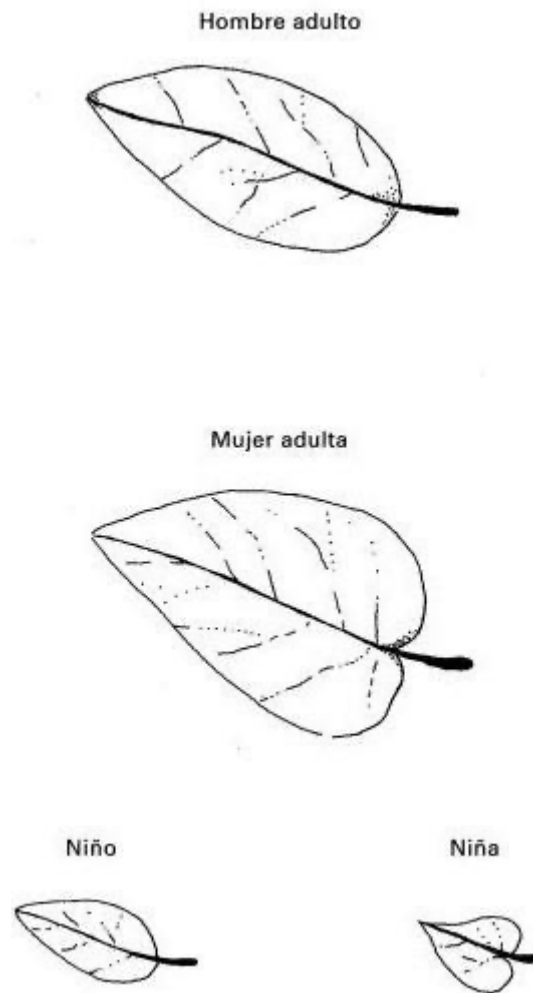


Figure 04: Gender and age in Coca leaves. In: Emanuel Amodio (1993-1994).

Strathern's critique of Western gender imagery's underlying assumptions about society's nature parallels the abstract's exploration of gendered interpretations of the Coca plant, emphasizing the need to challenge essentialist views and recognize a fluidity of gender and attributes in Andean culture. The imperative to contextualize presuppositions in Western society, as mentioned by Strathern, applies to understanding gendered interpretations of the Coca plant within Indigenous communities, where Western feminist perspectives may not fully capture the complexities of local and regional gendered relationships.

Protocols for rethinking the world

Another way to stir up our conversation on the gendered existence of the Coca plant is to bring a discussion that has been very precious to Andean people: the importance of Coca for social meetings,

as a bond-warmer and an excellent diplomatic agent, and also for divination rituals, which are many times incorporated in wider therapeutic practices. That is, a person with whom you interact.

The document “*Aprendiendo Nuevos Protocolos: El Akhulli - La Hoja de Coca en la Diplomacia de los Pueblos*”, elaborated the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from Bolivian government, and published in 2009, describes the language of interpretation of Coca leaves in divination practices of Aymara people: “*Socially, coca leaves are the indispensable ingredient at gatherings, weddings, baptisms; they are the preamble that extends the beginning of a conversation and the communicative link*” (p. 16, our translation). And continues:

The act of dispersing or scattering coca leaves on a *Tari* or in a *cb'uspa* is nothing more than a casual and fortuitous conglomerate of chaotic and erratic leaves; in the face of this chaotic fact, there is a logical structure of the coca leaf, which the interpreter (*Yatiri*) will conceptualize through visual reading” (p. 16, our translation).

Speaking of which, coca is read but also listened to. For this Indigenous nation, Coca is considered the firstborn daughter of *Pachamama*. Therefore, for the Aymara people, coca deserves the same respect as *Pachamama*, especially if it is linked to the origin of *Ch'amak Pacha*, also known as the “age of darkness” (Akhulli, 2016). In this document, it is also described that identity in the Andean world expresses the qualities of being in relation to its context. In the case of spirits, “they have a dual identity that allows them to move in two planes and dimensions of Pacha” (Akhulli, 2016: 9).

This idea suggests, on the one hand, that the identity of Coca itself will be linked to the contexts of leaf use, and on the other hand, it shows us that coca also has a spirit that has agency in two planes, in the past or age of darkness (*Ch'amak Pacha*), and in the present or age of luminosity (*Qhana Pacha*), which is represented in the physiognomy of the leaf being light green on one side and dark green on the other. For the Aymara people, Coca is the name of the plant spirit on the light side of the leaf, while *Inalmama* is the name of the plant spirit from the past on the other side of the leaf. Its name is ritual and mythical in the realm of *Ch'amak Pacha* (Akhulli, 2016: 123). The relationality of Coca is established with *Pachamama*.

Regarding gender, we believe that, just like it is an epistemic violence to reinforce the idea that Andean Coca is “chewed” (Flores and Echazú Böschemeier, 2024), it is not possible to fit the persona of the Coca in a specific, fix, gendered identity. More productively, we can define it as a gendered subject, and observe how gendered subjects engage in conversations with her within different *naturecultural* contexts. But, since Coca does not refer to an individual, but to an agency belonging to a wider ontological arrangement, we add that it would be not only impossible, but also a strict epistemic violence, to insist that the Coca subject is an “essentially” feminine or masculine plant.

Conclusions: conversations as *countercolonial* acts

As anthropologists engaged with ancestral conversations in this regard, we consider the persona of the Coca as an actual interlocutor for a decolonizing theory of social relationships in the Americas. What is the role of gender in this inter epistemic conversation? After the anthropological reading of ethnographic materials, we observe that, when associated with femininity, Coca does it in an ever-changing context of gendered relationships, and in a way that is not necessarily related to the female bodies of “women” as essentialized, distinct individuals. For getting a better apprehension of this, a brief discussion on the notion of “persona” for non-Western and Indigenous communities is needed.

As a conclusion of this essay, we note that the agency of the Coca plant manifests itself as prerogative in social and spiritual practices related to creating and reinforcing relationships and meaningful conversations between human and nonhuman beings, always connected to specific contexts as well as to particular “ways of doing”.

In fact, despite all persecutions, there is an aspect of celebration and cultural resistance of peoples in Abya Yala - the Indigenous territory called the Americas after its invasion - who have engaged for centuries with Coca as a companion species. In several latitudes of the continent, the Coca plant would never be considered only a vegetal species, only a crop, only a product of human agriculture: it is considered a persona, an agent of specific and appreciated knowledge. As to elders in the communities, Coca’s opinion is frequently asked, and her answer is deeply valorized. Echoing this understanding, and from a perspective that goes beyond the Western notions of governmentality, Indigenous government from Evo Morales in Bolivia proposed an official dialogue with Mama Coca as a subject of diplomatic dialogues and interchanges.

The paradoxes of the colonial condition to which Coca is subjected place her in a contradictory status as its use and consumption are penalized by international laws. However, at the same time, it is possible to observe a permanent act of counter-colonization, mostly linked to local and regional dynamics, and places where global capitalism has not managed to scorch. Bolivian intellectuals highlight this aspect of resistance: “despite the inquisition, the penalization, or the criminalization to which we are subjected, today the presence of coca in various sectors of society imposes respect, dignity, identity, and sovereignty” (Quispe, 2008: 81).

Organized communities, holding on to the dignity of their cosmopolitics, are taking into their own hands the idea of removing the colonialist narrative of cocaine that prevails around the Coca plant, as they themselves take it and share it as part of the diplomacy of the Andean, Amazonian, and other South American peoples. Among these paradoxes, Coca cultural landscapes and narratives emerge as

spaces of resistance. Engaging with it means engaging with different communities and their ancestralities in an act of resistance to colonization as well as of re-existence. In this sense, the Coca protocols works as an Indigenous counter-hegemonic strategy. In this sense, we agree with Bolivian writer Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui when she says that there can be no discourse of decolonization without a decolonizing or counter-colonizing practice (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2019).

Complementarily, the concept of counter-colonization, when framed by Afro-Brazilian *quilombola* afro-descendant writer Antônio Bispo dos Santos (2015), refers to the permanent tension and unmaking of the coloniality of power and people, a practice that has been permanent since the European invasion. So, in different acts of silent but constant counter-colonization practices, many voices, ways of doing, and ancestral projects of resistance protect Coca against the criminal-criminalization against her.

Despite all the persecutions and ignorance of the non-Andean and non-Amazonic rest of the world, the Coca is still a basic part of the conversation of many South American communities to this date. In this context, Coca is gendered but not in a definite side of the male-female dichotomy: its gender will depend on the context of its totemic *persona*, bringing up a wider cosmopolitics that can not fit in the fast-thinking dichotomies proposed by contemporary appropriations of the subject. In the *naturecultural* landscapes observed, as the gender aspect of existence is not individual, but as “dividual” - meaning that it contemplates its identities through their relationships with others -, the gender of the Coca is intrinsically dependent on exchanges with subjects totemically integrated to the voices of wider other non-human subjects.

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