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COCA AND COCAINE: THEIR ROLE IN "TRADITIONAL" CULTURES IN SOUTH AMERICA

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This article examines alternatives to the War on Drugs through a comparative analysis of attitudes toward coca and cocaine in South America. Two regions of traditional coca use and cultivation – northwest Amazonas state in Brazil and the department of Cusco in Peru – are compared to highlight the differences between Peruvian and Brazilian attitudes toward coca and ethnic identity. Formulations based on a rigid dichotomy between "good" coca and "bad" cocaine are shown to confuse morality with purely practical considerations. Rather than a simple distinction between substances, the experience of indigenous drug users in South America points toward greater understanding of the importance of cultural values in controlling any kind of drug consumption, and recognition of the long-term effectiveness of "user-friendly" strategies of prevention.

The last two decades have witnessed the rapid transformation of cultural attitudes toward coca and cocaine in South America. Cocaine production, originally a marginal phenomenon, has grown to perhaps the single most important economic activity in the Andean region. The traditional use of coca leaf, once a subject of interest only to a small circle of biologists and anthropologists, has become a major issue of ethnic and national identity.

Political and intellectual debate about this issue has not kept pace with economic and cultural changes. Drug prohibition, with its attendant climate of hysteria, has made it difficult and unpopular to question current policies. A purely repressive approach to controlling the use of coca and its derivatives has prevailed. In 1961, the United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs

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called for coca leaf chewing to be "phased out" in twenty-five years. Despite cosmetic changes in the 1988 Single Convention, which recognized (albeit with ambiguous wording) the legitimacy of "traditional uses," the concept of a "war on drugs" continues to underpin most official thinking on this question. This is ironic and even tragic, especially since prohibition has obviously failed to prevent the spread of problematic drug use. For this reason, an alternative view which stresses the importance of non-authoritarian cultural controls has gradually been gaining ground, prompted by close observation of various forms of drug use in their native settings, particularly the indigenous use of coca leaf. Since the publication in 1978 of an issue of *America Indigena* (Volume 38[4]), dedicated to the question of coca, a new consensus has emerged among Andeanists which clearly separates coca from cocaine, and "traditional" types of drug use from more "modern" and/or "alienated" forms.

It seems to me that a major contradiction underlies this formulation. While it is true that coca and cocaine have distinctly different pharmacologies, it is one thing to distinguish between drugs on a purely practical cost/benefit basis, but quite another to engage in judgements of moral value. By definition, "informal" or "cultural" controls on the use of drugs exist, to a greater or lesser extent, for *all* forms of drug consumption. What distinguishes traditional uses from modern ones is not their inherent virtue, but the fact that they have had more time to develop and coalesce. These considerations have prompted me to ask: How far does the experience of the inhabitants of coca-producing areas actually support the idea of a neat moral dichotomy between "good" coca and "bad" cocaine?

Ethnicity, Coca and Cocaine

The currently fashionable separation of coca and cocaine is based to a considerable extent on a shared perspective regarding the nature of ethnic conflict. This view, developed particularly by the Brazilian ethnologists Darcy Ribeiro (1970) and Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira (1976), suggests that in any case of "inter-ethnic friction," the two principle variables are the nature of the "economic fronts" which impinge upon Indian areas, and the structure, culture and history of contact of the indigenous societies themselves.

A brief typology of both sets of variables shows that the coca and cocaine issue involves either a high degree of complexity when viewed as a single phenomenon, or else an equally marked degree of geographical specificity when examined on a case-by-case basis. For example, the external forces in a given area of coca production may involve ancient, pre-Inca patterns of trading reciprocity between highland and subtropical zones, legal commercial monopolies such as Peru's *Empresa Nacional de la Coca* (ENACO), some form of illicit cocaine business, and/or one of the more or less aggressive programs of crop substitution and forcible eradication. The differentiation among "indigenous coca producers" is equally striking, ranging from the seminomadic

Makú on the Colombo-Brazilian border to the resettled miners and other workers of urban origin in the Chapare region of Bolivia.

This diversity suggests that an examination of inter-ethnic conflict must consider the unique combination of factors in each particular zone of coca production. In this, perhaps, the "cocaine cycle" is no different from previous economic booms in the region, except for the fact that a traditional economic activity has been sanctioned by law, thus becoming "illegal" in certain areas while remaining "legal" in others, and in the vast majority of cases being subject to a constantly changing definition influenced by the broader negotiation of political power.

It is here, in my view, that the current model of inter-ethnic conflict, and hence the simple distinction between "good" coca and "bad" cocaine, prove inadequate. The question is not one of simply opposing balanced, indigenous forms of coca consumption and commercialization on the one hand and "modern"/"capitalist" types of cocaine use and production on the other. Considerable interpenetration in both discourse and practice has occurred in the producing areas over the last two decades. For example, some Indians have taken a war on drugs position on the strict equivalence of coca and cocaine, decrying the customs of their ancestors with as much virulence as any drug-war zealot. In contrast, some "capitalist" interest groups – drug traffickers, government spokesmen, serious doctors, as well as transparent demagogues – have raised the banner of traditional coca use, in different contexts and for differing purposes. In short, there is a *circularity* in the distribution of representations of coca and cocaine which renders analysis on the basis of "inter-ethnic friction" largely misleading. One suspects that the desire to distinguish coca from cocaine reflects an unwillingness to consider the very ambivalence of this drug in any of its forms. It is safer, easier and less complicated to draw the line between substances than it is to judge widely varying forms of drug use and commercialization in terms of their potential for problematic consequences.

Though I have supported the dichotomous view in previous publications (Henman 1981 and 1985), I now believe that to defend coca while decrying cocaine is no longer a useful position. Three reasons prompt me to this conclusion. Firstly, such a distinction provides tacit support to crop eradication programs with their highly selective, socially divisive and unfair distinctions between legitimate crops ("for traditional use") and illicit crops ("surplus to traditional needs"). Secondly, by sustaining the logic of criminalizing at least part of the coca crop, this distinction actually increases profitability, and thus, strengthens the cocaine-producing sector. The resulting price imbalances render the supply of coca leaves for chewing ever more difficult and problematic. Thirdly, and perhaps most crucially, the distinction between "good" coca and "bad" cocaine is given only token lip-service in the producing regions. In fact, criminalization of a significant portion of the coca crop has

shifted the patterns of drug consumption in large areas of South America toward cocaine. The use of cocaine base, a compact and chemically stable substance which is easily produced and transported, has become generalized in the Andean countries and has recently spread into border states of Brazil as well. International bodies, while stressing the threat cocaine presents to the developed world, have consistently failed to assess the social costs of their interdiction policies on the countries that supply the raw material.

To illustrate these arguments against a dichotomous view of coca and cocaine, I have chosen to focus on two areas of "traditional" coca use and production, northwest Amazonas in Brazil and the department of Cusco in Peru. These two examples suggest the complex economic and cultural dynamics of the coca issue. I trust that the distortions observed in these regions will also alert readers to the spiralling social cost of the War on Drugs, and point the way to a more humane approach in the future.

Northwest Amazonas, Brazil

Few Brazilians realize that their country has as much right as any Andean nation to the status of a "traditional producer/consumer of coca leaves." Whenever Drug Enforcement Agency-directed eradication programs in the Amazon basin are reported in the press, the idea is conveyed that coca plantations have somehow spread across the frontier, instigated by Colombian traffickers. Never is it pointed out that coca was reported from the Brazilian Amazon in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, well before the onset of cocaine production, by such acute and reputable observers as Ribeiro de Sampaio (1825:34), the German naturalists von Spix and von Martius (1831:1169), and the English botanist Richard Spruce (1908:446). These early accounts describe precisely those areas where the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and Brazilian Federal Police have made their most sensational "discoveries": the Alto Rio Negro, home of the Tukano and Makú Indians, and the district around the twon of Tefé on the main course of the upper Amazon (here called Solimões). In the latter area the population includes many traditional coca users among both the local Miranha Indians and other detribalized groups who fled to the region from Colombia at the turn of the century.

Altogether, one could confidently speak of five to ten thousand indigenous coca users/producers in the Brazilian Amazon. In the two areas mentioned here, a consumer is also of necessity a producer, since there is no real trade in coca leaves. A highly localized supply is needed for the preparation of *ipadú*, the powder form in which the leaves are traditionally consumed. Since it spoils quickly in the humid conditions of the Amazon basin, discriminating users tend to produce only small amounts at daily or, at most, weekly intervals.

This, in turn, has important implications for the ways in which coca is cultivated in the region, since supplies of fresh leaves must lie readily at hand.

Each bush can be harvested four times a year, so long as there are no significant droughts. While the local cultivars demonstrate considerable resistance to disease, the competition of weeds and the invasion of scrub makes it impractical to maintain the same coca plantation for more than four or five years, at the end of which it is abandoned to the encroaching forest. New plantations are rapidly established by means of stem cuttings, since the Amazonian variety of the bush is incapable of setting fertile seed (Plowman 1981). At a purely visual level, the untrained observer might conclude that "there is a whole lot of new coca planting going on around here..." (words of a narcotics "expert" in Tefé 1981). This interpretation is further strengthened by the local custom of planting coca bushes in rows among the manioc crop, a practical and labor-saving arrangement which strikes most law-enforcement agents as a means of "hiding" the coca. Since such agents are under pressure from their superiors to "show results," they proceed to destroy precisely those coca plantations which are nearest to human habitation and which constitute the native supply for traditional ipadú processing.

This is not to deny that a certain amount of coca planting has occurred in the Brazilian Amazon for the purpose of producing cocaine. This was most notable during the cocaine price boom of 1981-82, when Brazilian producers took advantage of the quick growth of ipadú cuttings to bring new sources of supply on stream faster than in the traditional Andean areas. The advantage was rapidly lost when cocaine prices fell, because the high cost of transport and relatively low alkaloid yield in the Amazon meant that local varieties could not compete with commercial coca from such areas as the Chapare and Alto Huallaga.

Today there is, therefore, little concrete evidence of a major "economic front" dedicated to cocaine production in the Brazilian Amazon. How, then, might one interpret the logic of a decade of ongoing coca eradication? I do not think conflicts in the area can be analyzed in terms of the classic model of "inter-ethnic friction," which would suppose a straightforward confrontation between Indians and "capitalism," here represented by the Colombian cocaine dealer. Given the absence of any significant levels of cocaine production, there is a sense in which the destruction of the coca crop is predominantly a symbolic exercise ("ethnocide") designed to pave the way for other forms of economic integration.

From the establishment of large agri-business projects in Tefé to the partition of Indian lands and the expropriation of rich mineral deposits in the Alto Rio Negro, the Brazilian state apparatus is making a concerted attempt to "develop" its last frontier. This process naturally distracts the attention of critics from the specificities of the coca issue, and in such a context, the assault on indigenous traditions can flourish unhampered and unchecked. For example, the Rio newspaper *O Globo* (1 November 1988) reported, a propos of coca chewing: "The result of this new (sic) practice is visible in the physical

appearance of the Indians: their teeth rapidly rot and fall out, their average life expectancy is only 50 years, and all suffer from a process of precocious aging." Opinions such as these come to be accepted by many social scientists and younger, more "integrated" Indian leaders, despite all evidence to the contrary provided by science and by elder Indians themselves. The latter continue to view coca not only as an excellent physical stimulant, but also as a major element of traditional healing practices and, through the support and stimulus given to myth recitation, the prime means of activating the collective memory (Buchillet 1987). Thus, to denigrate coca chewing in the Amazon involves a fundamental assault on the cohesion of a culture which has existed for millenia.

Despite attacks on traditional coca use, there is evidence of some hesitant retrenchment and resistance. Precisely in the vicinity of Tefé, where coca plantations have been hardest hit and where native inhabitants are considered most "acculturated," there are growing signs that the use of ipadú may re-emerge as a major symbol of ethnic identity. However, it is not clear how far coca eradication campaigns have already forced the relocation of plantations well away from areas of human habitation. The renewal of traditional customs could prevent the spread of cocaine-base smoking, but only if coca is accessible for ipadú production. The alternative is the smoking of cocaine base, which is much easier to store and transport, and which has already become popularized in the area through the Colombian port of Leticia.

In short, the Brazilian Amazon presents the classic scenario of the War on Drugs: the destruction of tried and tested cultural mechanisms for controlling the use of drugs, in combination with the shortsighted (and possibly intentional) economic incentive to commercialize a drug substance in its most harmful form. At the same time, there is a possibility that the traditional cultural controls represented by coca chewing may acquire a new validity in the process of reaffirming political and cultural identity.

We seem to be verging on the very proposition of "good" coca and "bad" cocaine which I set out to demolish at the outset of this article. Unfortunately, I do not have the data on cocaine-base smoking in the Brazilian Amazon which would allow an assessment of how problematic it might be. However, on a purely anecdotal level it is worth recalling the words of a Tukano Indian who once described to me his experiences with these two different forms of the drug:

> I went to Colombia to work for a cocaine-base producer who was living near Mitú. He used to give us some (base) so that we would work harder, and to begin with I used it every day. Then my lungs started to hurt and I lost my stamina. So I asked him if I could make ipadú instead, and he said O.K., so long as we keep working... Once or twice a week he would let us go to Mitú, to see women and go out drinking. Then I really used

to like smoking base. It stopped me from getting drunk (laughs).

In a nutshell, such a practical and hard-headed appraisal of the relative advantages and disadvantages of different coca products would seem to indicate a considerable degree of self-awareness, and a welcome refusal to be drawn onto the uncertain ground of moral discrimination.

Valle de la Convención, Cusco, Peru

The subtropical zone of the department of Cusco, centered on the town of Quillabamba, has been the principal source of coca leaves for chewing among the highland Quechua and Aymara of southern Peru. It was an area of major importance to the Incas, and by the 1920s its economic development, based principally on the cultivation of coca, was sufficient to warrant the only railway line ever built down the eastern slopes of the Central Andes.

Coca production in this area was traditionally "neo-feudal" in nature (Hobsbawm 1983), organized in large *haciendas* owned by absentee landlords. This caused considerable peasant unrest and a short-lived guerilla outburst led by Trotskyist organizer Hugo Blanco. However, land reform which began in the 1960s has led to the emergence of a powerful peasant federation – the *Federacion de Productores Campesinos de La Convención y Lares*. This group is understandably a strong and highly articulate defender of the legal market in coca leaves, which may explain why La Convención is the only major coca-producing region in South America never to have suffered the effects of forcible eradication.

Evidence suggests that strategists in the Peruvian state bureaucracy have also realized the political importance of maintaining a legal outlet for local coca production. Despite constant pressure from the United States and the United Nations, Peru has consistently refused to embark on an all-out campaign against the cultivation and use of coca in the department of Cusco. On the contrary, ENACO, the state company dedicated to coca commercialization, has recently been expanding its infrastructure around Quillabamba by building new warehouses and multiplying its leaf-purchasing outposts. One of the few state enterprises to turn a healthy profit, ENACO derives eighty-seven percent of its total coca supplies from the region of La Convención and Lares. Leaves are graded into two main qualities, *regular* and *exportación*. The former are used to supply traditional highland markets, and the latter are converted to cocaine base at eighty percent purity, which is legally shipped abroad for the pharmaceutical market. Paradoxically, legal exports of cocaine have risen during the War on Drugs, from 170 kilograms in 1980 to 1,350 kilograms in 1988. This has compensated for the decline of coca leaf exports from 522 tons in 1980 to forty-six tons in 1987.

Not surprisingly, the existence of ENACO is a thorn in the side of the DEA and the United Nations Fund for Drug Abuse Control. The latter funds the *Corporación de Desarollo del Valle* (CODEVA), a crop substitution project with offices in Quillabamba. Its chief agronomist, Victor Claudet Torres (personal communication, February 1989), has complained "All my superiors want to know is how many hectares we have managed to eradicate this year." CODEVA sees itself as an innocent body, caught in the cross-fire between coca growers and the anti-drug warriors of the international agencies. However, leaders of the peasant federation accuse the project of soaking up most of its budget in internal administration rather than helping coca growers to develop new sources of income, and are not supportive of the project's plan to support coffee and coca purchases in the region. Indeed, the irony of an "imperialist" organization engaging in price-support ventures, while a "socialist" peasant union defends the economics of a free market, is not lost on the peasant leaders themselves. Peasant leaders view CODEVA's attempts to strengthen the coffee and cocoa sectors as a deliberate ploy to divide the peasant movement by setting the older, more diversified producers, who already have significant harvests of these products to sell, against the younger, more remote communities whose principal crop continues to be coca. Such a division, between "responsible" peasants who collaborate with crop-substitution projects and "lumpenized" peasants who do not, is viewed as a preparatory justification for the eventual use of force to eliminate coca plantations.

CODEVA has begun to criticize the very existence of a legal coca industry, complaining that the guaranteed prices paid by ENACO serve as an encouragement to new coca planting. ENACO counters by arguing that legal prices must keep pace with the illicit market, and cites the fact that its total purchases of coca leaves are actually falling in the area of La Convención and Lares. The strategy of strengthening the infrastructure and paying the going market rate for coca is, therefore, justified by ENACO spokesmen as a means of mounting a viable alternative to the illicit cocaine industry. The attractions of this industry, as indicated by the decline in ENACO's legal purchases of coca leaves, must undoubtedly be growing in some of the outlying districts of La Convención and Lares.

Many other petty distortions of the market are produced by ENACO's attempts to control coca production in the area legitimately. For example, ENACO buyers constantly lament the fact that peasants deliver leaves in a state of excessive humidity, which increases their weight, and therefore, their value to the producer, but which also leads to higher rates of spoilage in ENACO warehouses. On the other hand, peasants resent ENACO's monopoly on the trade of coca leaves to the highlands, which is maintained through humiliating body searches on the buses and trains between Quillabamba and Cusco. However, these are relatively minor issues in the overall context of the War on Drugs, since the peasants must of necessity support the existence of a legal,

state-regulated coca industry, if only as a defence against the encroaching logic of criminalization.

Maintenance of the legal coca industry also serves to restrict the spread of problematic forms of drug use, through positive reinforcement of coca as a stimulant, ritual lubricant and symbol of ethnic identity (see Wagner 1978). The ready availability of coca leaves, together with the cultural incentive to use them, has done much to prevent the emergence of widespread cocaine-based problems which exist in other Andean regions. While many local inhabitants admit to smoking cocaine occasionally during prolonged festivities and drinking bouts, coca is the everyday stimulant of choice, even among many foreign visitors and middle-class students at the university in Cusco. The consensus of most drug users in the Cusco and Quillabamba districts, like that of the Tukano Indian quoted earlier, seems to be that "pie," the regional slang for cocaine base, is fine for an occasional binge, but that a daily habit becomes counterproductive.

A Comparative Analysis of Cusco and Amazonas

What broader lessons might be learned from comparing these two areas? Though both could be described equally as "traditional" producers of coca leaf, and though a small illicit cocaine industry is undoubtedly present in both areas, the recognition of its existence has led to fundamentally different official responses. In Brazil this response is characterized by scapegoating, ethnocide and crop burning; in one region of Peru it is characterized by the strengthening of a legitimate coca industry (unfortunately the same cannot be said of other parts of the country). These differences arise mainly from the historical size and structure of the coca market. In the case of Amazonian ipadú, local patterns of self-sufficiency have not favored the emergence of widespread trade, whereas in La Convención, the continued vitality of a large coca-leaf market in the highlands has supported a series of reasonably stable long-distance economic arrangements. These stretch back through Republican and Colonial Peru to the putative state monopoly of the Inca period, and represent developments of underlying Andean patterns of inter-altitudinal reciprocity.

However, differences in the coca market do not completely explain the considerable discrepancies between Cusco and Amazonas. For example, I believe that if the Brazilian areas of Tefé and the Alto Rio Negro had lain within the confines of a major Andean republic, they would not have suffered such a violent process of crop eradication, because their coca production would have been recognized as tangential to the main thrust of the illicit cocaine industry. The essential difference here lies in a series of historical and cultural attitudes, deeply ingrained in the ideology of each nation.

In Brazil, the traditional use of coca has been perceived as a marginal and insignificant phenomenon, warranting only a haughty dismissal as "primitive" and "unhealthy." In police statements regarding the "spread" of coca across

the border from Colombia, one senses a deep-seated ethnocentrism, perhaps even latent racism, which views the use of coca as profoundly "un-Brazilian." Even the Brazilian Association of Anthropologists, despite a strong stance on many Indian issues, has failed to follow up a motion on the use of ipadú in the Alto Rio Negro which was presented at their meeting in 1984. In Peru, on the other hand, anti-coca campaigners have always been subject to strong opposition from intellectuals concerned with indigenous realities. From Juan Matienzo's (1567) spirited defence of coca against the Spanish inquisitors to Carlos Monge's (1953) counter against the slurs on coca by Carlos Gutierrez-Noriega (1949), coca-chewing has been recognized as a time-honoured indigenous practice.

There is a broader theoretical difference inherent in the way ethnic identity has been conceived in these two South American nations. In Peru, the inevitable point of reference is provided by indigenous civilizations which flourished in the Andes in the pre-Hispanic period: ethnic identity existed long before contact with Europeans. In Brazil, however, theorists such as Darcy Ribeiro and Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira define ethnic identity as a product of the conflict between indigenous societies and the advancing fronts of integration into national society. In terms of the coca question this difference has important implications. For Peruvians, coca refers back to the mythical origins of the nation; for Brazilians, it merely represents an "otherness" which is offensive in the eyes of the cultural majority.

Conclusions

It seems likely that these differences in cultural attitudes will continue to affect developments in the two countries with respect to the coca and cocaine issue. I predict that in Brazil, where showpiece coca eradication operations reflect a willing alignment with the DEA, one will witness an escalating use of cocaine in all its forms, including base. Given the absence of collective self-awareness among younger and poorer cocaine users in this country, and the insistent broadcasting of negative stereotypes by both media and official sources, much of this use is likely to be socially and individually problematic. More balanced perspectives, provided by the example of ipadú use in the Amazon or by reasonably well-established patterns of recreational cocaine sniffing among the elite, are unlikely to acquire either the legitimacy or prominence necessary to offer an immediate alternative to the "bad" model of cocaine use.

In Peru, the growth of base consumption already shows some signs of stabilizing. Casual observations of its use seem to indicate two main reasons for this. First, the Peruvian population shares a longer exposure to cocaine in all its forms, so informal cultural controls have had more time and opportunity to emerge and consolidate themselves. These include subcultural prescriptions on the right time, place and frequency of use, as well as practical details such

as the mixing of bicarbonate of soda with the base in order to neutralize its sulfuric acid residues. While such a maturing process may also occur among the Brazilian population over time, a further feature distinguishes Peru – one which I believe to be of crucial importance. This is the undoubted validity of traditional coca chewing as a positive model of drug use. On occasion this has been misinterpreted as a simple question of valuing the use of coca while sanctioning the use of its chemical derivatives. *Coca sí, cocaína no* is a formulation of great political appeal, for it separates the issues in a straightforward way which allows for no misunderstanding. However, in the long term I believe the example provided by coca transcends this simple separation of substances. The indigenous model of culturally controlled use, demonstrated not only by coca and ipadú but also by many other substances, offers a perspective on how society can discipline the use of drugs without fear, violence and intimidation. It shows that effective controls are not produced by negative sanction, but rather by the positive reinforcement of use in its most adequate, historically tested forms.

Put another way, the prevention of drug problems in any society, traditional or modern, must of necessity go the route of proposing the "right" way to use a drug rather than attempting to scare people away from using drugs at all. Within such a perspective, there are still opportunities for stressing the relative advantages and disadvantages of different preparations of a given drug, or of different routes of ingestion. These are not moral arguments, however, nor even properly medical arguments. They are the arguments of maximal pleasurable effect, or of minimal physical harm and psychic distress. In short, they are the arguments of the user. Rather than attempting to act on the realities of drug taking from without, by means of coercion, intelligent social policy should seek to work from within, from the mental perspective of users themselves.

This is not easy task, for it amounts, in effect, to generating and transmitting cultural representations in various viable and authentic forms. It cannot be done at the whim of a bureaucrat, nor by simply designing "educational" programs. It involves valuing everything the orthodox view has sought to deny – the consumers' point of view, the belittled and despised "drug cultures" themselves. It also requires constant vigilance in defence of those stable forms of drug use which have managed to survive the prohibitionist onslaught. In this article I have illustrated these ideas with examples of the legal coca industry in Peru and the traditional use of ipadú in the Amazon, but such examples could be multiplied around the globe. I believe we must seek to understand the working of such cultures, and to build upon this understanding in such a way as to propose a positive, respectful and, above all, "user-friendly" relationship with drugs.

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