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*The Colombia Reader*

# A Jesuit Writes to the King: Profits from Coca Leaf Could Surpass Tea

*Antonio Julián*

*In 1787 the Catalan Jesuit Father Antonio Julián published in Madrid a book-length survey of the environs of Santa Marta, titled La perla de América (The Pearl of America). The book was the fruit of ten years' residence in Santa Marta, where he had arrived in 1749, and then of eight years' teaching at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá. The Crown had expelled the Jesuits from the colonies in 1767, and Julián used his return to Europe as an opportunity to produce detailed descriptions for his book, including the excerpt below, a sketch of indigenous people near Riohacha and their cultivation of an "herb called hayo." The Pearl of America focused on the benefits that Spain would gain by developing the resources of Caribbean Colombia, not only the famous pearl fisheries of the region, but also the potential export of gold, gems, sugar, and brazilwood. His greatest optimism, however, he reserves for hayo, also known as coca leaf—an export product with the potential to surpass coffee, tea, and tobacco, in Julián's opinion. As the prolific historian Jorge Orlando Melo puts it in introducing Colombian readers to this text: "He did not lack for vision."<sup>1</sup>*

It is with singular pleasure that I begin my discussion of this plant, not so much to provide news to the curious, but to promote its cultivation and use in Europe, to the benefit of the Monarchy of Spain, and for the greater good and health of peoples and foreign nations. The latter have strived to introduce tea and coffee, and have tried to promote the virtues of these herbs. They have cleverly tried to make common their use, filling the cities with cafés as outlets for the fruits of their colonies and regions, with untold advantages for their states and commerce. We Spaniards, so easily swayed by foreign ideas and so quick to embrace their fashions as we are enthusiastic in giving up our own and not attaching importance to them, we allow the Indians to eat and find sustenance in an herb that could prove to be a

very profitable new commercial endeavor for Spain while providing health to Europe, serving as a cure and tonic for so many ills, a replenisher of lost strength, and a prolonger of human life. It is the herb called *Hayo*, celebrated in the Province of Santa Marta, and throughout the New Kingdom. In Potosí, Kingdom of Perú, it is known as *Coca*.

Before stating its virtues, I want to refer to the manner in which it is used by Guajiro Indians. To date they alone use this herb in all of the New Kingdom. The manner in which they do so is curious, and seeing it provoked me no less admiration than laughter. I will tell what I saw, so as to make known the general custom of this nation. Finding myself in the *Rio de la Hacha* (now Riohacha), there appeared at our house a troop of Guajiros that came to see the Bishop who was there for a visit. Some of them were Christians from the mission of the Capuchin fathers; others were savages and gentiles, so innocent that when I asked one of them if he wished to become Christian, he furrowed his brow greatly, and in a deep voice answered with a firm “no.” I went out, thus, to look at that troop of Indians. I was among tall youngsters, healthy, and well-built, with handsome faces and olive skin, whiter than that which other Indians in the Kingdom generally have. They carried folded over their right shoulder a cotton blanket, finely woven by their own hand (as they excel at such tasks), which covered most of their body, and hanging from their necks was a *mochila*, or a small shoulder bag, which fell underneath their left arm; and on their waist, like pious pilgrims, they carried a small gourd that held a tiny, rounded stick inside, which came out from a little opening. Inside that small bag they carried fresh green *Hayo* leaves, and inside the gourd was a finely powdered lime, which they make themselves from seashells, so white and well ground that it looks like starch, or like *manjar blanco*. As I was happily talking with them, I saw that every so often, each of them would reach into their bag and take out a fistful of herbs, place it in his mouth, and between chewing and talking they would be swallowing. When the dose was finished, they would put their hand on the little stick that protruded from the mouth of their gourd, which they call *Popóro* in their language, and they would stir the lime powder a little, and would take some out with the tip of the stick. Then with great skill they would apply it, using that brush to take away the green stain of the *Hayo* juice, leaving their lips painted white. The *Guajiros* were truly that refined. I asked one of them, who seemed more amiable and jovial, “Why do you eat the herb like this?” And the rascal Indian put his fingers to his nose, like a person taking snuff, and he answered me, “And white man, why do you do this?” and he did it exactly like a person taking

Tobacco. I confess the Indian left me red in the face, and I did not know how to respond, because when it comes to the ways and customs of diverse nations, it is difficult to be convincing about differences. . . .

The *Hayo* leaf is smooth, and ends in a single small point, and it is of a beautiful dark green hue. When the *Hayo* is in season, the Indians cut each of the leaves with their thumbnail at the leaf stem and place them in a cloth they have ready for this purpose. They gather the harvest, and later place it in clay vessels, while they wait to sell it to the pearl merchants that do business with the Guajiros, or to others for their own use.

Its commerce is constant, because the Guajiros use this herb continuously, chewing it day and night, at all times. And they are so fond and accustomed to it, that they would go without food rather than go without a secure supply of *Hayo*. As a person accustomed to tobacco snuff cannot be without his snuffbox, so to the Guajiro Indian cannot be without his *mochila* of this herb. So true is this, that their custom has become second nature. Knowing the Guajiro's passion for *Hayo*, the merchants travel to the towns of Molino and Villanueva, and they buy *Hayo* leaves with canvases, tools, and other small items the Indians have a liking for. They take the *Hayo* across the *Río de la Hacha*, or to other towns and *reducciones*<sup>2</sup> of Guajiros converted to Christianity, where savages also come and do their trading, with the Guajiros giving so many ounces of Pearls for so many bushels of *Hayo* leaves. In the past there was always a commerce for this herb in the interior of the New Kingdom, for aside from its use by savage nations, such as the Guajiros, the *Hayo* was widely sought after as food and sustenance for the Priests of their Idols, who were required to remain isolated, abstinent, chaste, and withdrawn, speaking and sleeping little.

I feel great disbelief that Europe does not make any use of the *Hayo*, given the great consumption of tea and coffee. I attribute this to three causes. The first is ignorance about the excellent qualities of *Hayo*, and there has not been a clever man to ascertain these for the public good. The second is that the Spanish nation has not been ambitious in introducing new fashions to other countries, even as we are willing to accept alien ones. The third is that foreign nations have more profit and advantages in promoting the use of tea and coffee, and not *Hayo*, fruit of the domains of the Spanish King. The fourth, which we can also add here, is that the news has not spread, and the time has not yet come to make taking *Hayo* a fashion. It may be that *Hayo*, like all things, will arrive in due time, and with the news that I provide of its admirable virtues and effects it would be introduced not as an idle, or useless, or destructive fashion to households and people, like others that arrive from overseas, but, rather, one that is healthy, useful, and beneficial to

the well-being, vigor, and strength of the body, and that promotes long and prosperous maintenance of the individual.

*Translated by Ana María Gómez López and Ann Farnsworth-Alvear*

*Notes*

1. Jorge Orlando Melo, "La coca, planta del futuro: Un texto del siglo XVIII," *Revista Credencial Historia* 158 (2003): n.p., available at <http://www.lablaa.org/blaavirtual/revistas/credencial/febrero2003/lacoca.htm>.

2. *Reducciones* were settlements of forced relocation for indigenous people.