Buying their piece of heaven

Coca-Cola is the miraculous drink of the new *conquista*

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En nombre de Dios
las conquistas
En nombre de Dios
las banderas
Aun cuando los Dioses
cambiaron de apariencia
Diosa Tecnologia
de punta entre las piernas
Diosa Democracia
de barnices en la lengua
Diosa Coca Cola
de gas en la cabeza
Dioses conquistando
goma y diferencias

- José Muchnik, *100 años de libertad & Coca Cola*

Far from the lofty boardrooms of Madison Avenue where America's elite product-pushers reign ascendant, a wizened woman kneels on the floor of an indigenous church with a chicken she has sacrificed and a bottle of Coca-Cola. Most likely she's never seen a skyscraper, but she lives at an even higher altitude in the isolated mountains of Chiapas, Mexico. It's a Mexican state generally associated with Indian groups of Mayan descent and a modern-day revolutionary movement led by rebels in black ski masks fighting for indigenous self-determination. In the past decade, it has also become fairly well-known among tourists for something else: Coca-Cola.

The Tzotzil Indian woman kneels with her family in a church that hums and squawks with activity. Gray light admitted by a row of southern-facing windows is blotted by clouds of pungent incense called *copal.* Thousands of glimmering candles of many colors melt into wax puddles on a floor laced with paths of pine needles. Long vines of white flowers, called *orquidia,* drape from crosses, but there are no pews. Half a

dozen families huddle in the shadows, sipping Coca-Cola and a locally-brewed sugar cane liquor called *posh*. Some women have babies hidden away in their dark scarves, others clutch eggs that they will use in religious ceremonies. They murmur in their native tongue to statues of Catholic saints, bedecked in garlands and colorful robes of satin. Many of the saints have strange names.

From the outside, this place has the trappings of a Catholic church, its white façade topped with a small cross. But inside, there are the dead chickens placed carefully among the bottles of Coca-Cola and other sodas. The sight is unsettling in this secular era in which many Westerners are cautious about the objects they consecrate or even cynical about religion in general. That an American soda export, sold in Mexico since the late 19th century, is used by Tzotzil Indians in religious ceremonies that combine Catholic symbolism with indigenous ritual, ceremonies that include sipping and blessing the soft drink, is jarring. To learn that some Tzotzil Indians have died in violent conflicts over these beliefs is downright disturbing.

These internecine struggles may seem to be far away from the corporate world of The Coca-Cola Company, based in Atlanta. But they are not. Coca-Cola, according to the company's web site, takes pride in being able "to conduct business on a worldwide scale while maintaining a local approach." The corporation has historically given franchises and funding to local bottlers in foreign countries who use local resources – bottles, machinery, labor and some ingredients. In countries like Guatemala and Colombia, that has led to violent conflicts over unionizing and assassinations of union leaders. The same corporate strategy has played out in an even more unusual way in San Juan Chamula, a pueblo of about 60,000 people in Chiapas, the state with the largest

indigenous population in Mexico. There, one man received the Coca-Cola concession more than 45 years ago, and since then, his family has become part of a local power structure composed of faithful adherents to Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party. That party, with the help of a hefty indigenous voting bloc, had a 71-year lock on the Mexican presidency until 2000, when, in a strange twist, a former Coca-Cola executive won the presidential election. The local elite in San Juan Chamula, with its strong ties to state government, controls sales of soft drinks, candles and posh, transportation services and local lending. These *patrones* have nurtured, and even shaped, the Tzotzil religious beliefs so zealously that more than one-third of San Juan Chamula has been expelled, beaten or killed for dabbling in alternate religions like Protestantism – which doesn't use candles, cane alcohol or soft drinks – or for simply challenging community leaders. In the name of retaining power and profits, as many as 40,000 people have been exiled from San Juan Chamula since the 1970s and now live in shantytowns on the outskirts of the nearby city, San Cristóbal de las Casas.

Yet far from being a ghost town, San Juan Chamula bustles with activity, especially during the festival of San Sebastián, one of dozens held each year. Coca-Cola wholesaler Luís Mendez stands in white-hot sunlight overseeing laborers transport soda crates from his truck into his wholesale soft drink outlet on the *zócalo,* or the plaza in the center of the city. He says he is the son of the original Coca-Cola concessionaire, Salvador López Tuxum, who brought the soda to the pueblo. Mendez looks strikingly modern in faded blue jeans, denim shirt and baseball cap instead of the traditional fuzzy poncho of white or black wool cinched with a belt of deer skin worn by many of his townsmen. He also owns the Restaurant Bar Central in the zócalo, though his sister

manages the business. It sits opposite the white church and has a large patio with tables, chairs and umbrellas, all sporting the red Coca-Cola logo. The restaurant is a beacon to foreigners who, during the brutal heat of midday, huddle in the shadows slurping icy soft drinks from glass bottles. Plenty of other small stores in San Juan Chamula stock Coca-Cola along with the company's other brands, Fanta, Manzana Lift, Sprite, Fresca and Agua Ciel, but none are on the town square.

Asked where the affinity for Coca-Cola in San Juan Chamula comes from, Mendez smiles enigmatically.

"It's tradition," he says. "Why don't you ask an old timer?"

The story of the arrival of Coca-Cola in San Juan Chamula in the mid-1950s has spun itself into a bit of a legend. Among those who tell it – mostly the non-Indian guides who lead tours through San Juan Chamula – there are hints of preternatural health benefits and an almost religious conversion, much like the story of Coca-Cola in this country, where it was first mixed by John Pemberton in 1886 as a headache cure. The legend goes that Salvador López Tuxum headed to the big city, San Cristóbal de las Casas, one day almost a half-century ago with stomach pains. For the first time ever, he sipped a Coke; miraculously, his ailment was cured. He went on to become the devoted vendor of Coca-Cola in his pueblo – also, to be sure, building up a small business empire. With the infusion of cash provided by his association with Coca-Cola, he was able to buy one of the first trucks in the pueblo and then begin a loan business, charging sharecroppers interest rates of five to 10 percent a month. As López Tuxum's empire grew, so did the legend of Coca-Cola. The tour guides say the indigenous residents began calling the soft drink *"la bebida milagrosa,"* the miraculous beverage. Soon after

López's healing experience, the sight of Tzotzil farmers trudging up the mountain roads and bent over double with cases of Coca-Cola on their backs became commonplace. In later decades, it would be bright red Coca-Cola trucks with pyramids of soda bottles stacked up in their truckbeds snaking up the winding mountain roads past billboards hawking "The Friendly Face of Chiapas" in the form of Coca-Cola. Some guides, for instance, Pepe Santiago of the indigenous resource center Na Balom, claim that the children of López Tuxum have relayed the legend themselves, but family members are apparently loathe to admit it to tourists and reporters.

What is known is that the people of San Juan Chamula somehow incorporated Coca-Cola into their religious ceremonies, which even 45 years ago bore little resemblance to anything practiced in the Catholic Church. Some traditions may have had little to do with ancient Mayan customs either. For instance, the acts of imbibing and offering of posh to the gods didn't find their way into Chamulan religious ceremonies until the 19th century. Still, guides play up the romantic qualities of these customs, claiming that the Tzotzil drink fizzy beverages like soda or beer to provoke belching, which, they say, the Indians believe is a way of exorcising evil spirits. The tiny Mayan Medicine Museum in San Cristóbal displays a bottle of Fersan Cola, which has a similar bright red label to Coca-Cola, and explains that the soda helps local *curanderos,* or traditional healers, to burp and then blow on sick people. Jan Rus, a professor with the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies at the University of California-San Diego and perhaps this country's leading academic on San Juan Chamula, said Coca-Cola may be a sort of ice-breaker for members of the indigenous group. He remembers accompanying an older man on a trip to visit a civil official 25 years ago, and the man insisted on bringing Coca-

Cola. Rus asked why the man didn't bring posh – wasn't that the official "door opener?" The man replied that Coca-Cola was better because when people burp, their hearts open up and a request can enter more easily.

There are stories of local healers using Coca-Cola as a restorative balm on their patients. Also, during important fiestas, including the Day of the Dead, the Tzotzil place beverages along with other favored items on the graves or tombs of their forebears, as does much of Mexico. Since Coca-Cola was apparently the preferred beverage of many ancestors who died in the past five decades in San Juan Chamula, gravesites in the cemeteries are typically lined with the glittering ribbed bottles that are so recognizable to Americans. They accompany, and in sheer number outweigh, the more traditional funerary artifacts, such as marigold flowers, banana leaves, oranges and bowls of a corn drink called *atole.*

This reverential attitude toward soda pop is fascinating to American and European tourists. Wherever they travel, there is a sort of resigned acceptance of American products like Coca-Cola or McDonald's hamburgers, a fond tolerance as though these consumer items are a sort of astral trash that will continue to circulate and turn up in the oddest places in their global solar system. It is totally outside of their control. They wander with knowing and cynical smiles among the blatant commercialism, the ubiquitous Coca-Cola slogans that cover whole walls of convenience stores in Mexico and insist in Spanish that "Life has Flavor," or that it will be "Always Better." But the sight of a shaman passing a Coca-Cola back and forth over the candles, just as he does a chicken or its eggs, as he clutches the wrist of a patient, catches their attention. Like the

Botswana tribesmen in the movie "The Gods Must Be Crazy," they begin to see Coca-Cola through the eyes of the uninitiated.

"They bite the bottle caps off with their teeth," says a German tourist, her forehead furled into a question mark, her voice hushed with wonder, as she wanders through the church of San Juan Chamula, gingerly stepping around families with freshly strangled chickens and Coke bottles.

Mendez, at least a generation removed from the Coke "miracle," denies that his father was ever cured of anything by the soft drink. He shakes his head and laughs at the suggestion that Coca-Cola has any religious significance to the Tzotzil Indians. Of a more pressing nature to Mendez than religious tradition is the fact that more than 70 percent of San Juan Chamula drinks Coca-Cola. The rest drink Pepsi-Cola, which does not appear to bother Mendez, and indeed, a distant branch of his family holds the Pepsi concession. Things were different in the mid-1990s, when reports circulated of a small-time "cola war" that raged in the highlands region of Chiapas, this one with real casualties. As the Tzotzil in San Juan Chamula guzzled Coca-Cola, the residents of Tenejapa, a village of Tzeltal Indians only 15 miles away, revered Pepsi. Agustín López Girón, a bespectacled municipal authority in Tenejapa, said his father was once the sole vendor of Pepsi, as well as Tenejapa's mayor. He was known as "Don Pepsi," López says with obvious pride. And, unlike San Juan Chamula's leaders, Don Pepsi allowed Protestants into his Pepsi-drinking community.

"I know a woman in Chamula who was shot in the head during a massacre of Protestants," López Girón says. "She lived, but still has bullets in her skull. Now, she's going slowly mad due to those bullets."

Several years ago, Don Pepsi sold his Pepsi concession, and, according to López Girón, Tenejapa residents decided they were tired of sodas in glass refillable bottles that must be consumed in the store or poured into a plastic bag with a straw, a common practice in Mexico. They switched to sodas in disposable bottles, including Mexican brands like Fersan Cola and Gugar. Still, the official literature of Tenejapa handed out at the town hall continues to display a photo of traditional musicians with a clutter of Pepsi bottles at their feet.

Mendez claims that Coca-Cola, after doing a lot of promotion, has now captured at least 50 percent of the soft drink market in Tenejapa. He wasn't as familiar with the American market.

"Is Coca-Cola number one in the United States?" he asked.

His question might give the impression that there is a large disconnect between Coca-Cola's corporate headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia, and the fringes of its distribution network in places like Chiapas. And, indeed, the apparent independence of its subsidiaries has benefited The Coca-Cola Company. Recently, a federal judge dismissed the company from a lawsuit over anti-union violence in Colombia, though the suit will go forward against two of Coca-Cola's bottlers in that country. Still, the practice of fancy evasive maneuvers in legal defense doesn't necessarily mean Coca-Cola headquarters hasn't had a hand in guiding local plant activities. New employees at the Coca-Cola bottling plant, Embotelladora Sin Rival, in San Cristóbal de las Casas are fully initiated in Coca-Cola lore with a video narrated in Spanish by a bouncing Coca-Cola bottle that gives the triumphant history of the Coca-Cola brand and asserts that the soft drink is distributed in 86 languages and made in 195 countries. They also are given a tour of the

plant's efficient-looking bottling lines. Liliana Pérez Jiménez, the plant's doctor, sometimes gives the tours, and as she leads workers past shiny silver tanks of secret formula, she urges them to "notice how the tanks are all covered, so it's not possible for someone to fall into them, and these stories about finding a finger in a bottle of Coke – it's not possible." She also explains that the plant uses water from a large underground spring, called Cerro Huitepec, which is treated with reverse osmosis and chlorination, processes used by none of the competition in Chiapas.

"We treat the water that we use to clean the bottles," she says, an activity that has raised eyebrows here, where people are unsure of how the plant has gained access to the spring and clean drinking water is in short demand. (Coca-Cola has an answer to that as well: Its bottled water brands, along with those of other companies, are the fastest growing segment of the international beverage business.) Eventually, the San Cristóbal plant wants to recycle the water used to clean bottles for local farmers to use in irrigationi, Pérez Jiménez adds.

In the plant's administrative offices, portraits of stern indigenous men and women in traditional dress, some in the colorful beribboned hats of certain pueblos in the Chiapan highlands, hang among the slick company posters pushing inspirational messages and formulas for esprit de corps.

To grasp the hold Coca-Cola has on San Juan Chamula, one must understand the importance of the beverage in Mexico as a whole. The country has been soaked through by Coca-Cola; the soft drink has made its way to the farthest outposts. That's not surprising, considering that Coca-Cola has been sold for over a century in Mexico, the only country in the world with that track record besides the United States and Canada. In

1926, the first bottling plant was set up in northern Mexico, and within a quarter century a small soft drink empire consisting of 49 bottlers was created. Nowadays, Coca-Cola and the company's various brands have captured 71 percent of the soft drink market in Mexico, where Coca-Cola's biggest competitor is PepsiCo. Coca-Cola's market share in the United States is 44 percent. Currently, each Mexican on average consumes 130 liters of Coca-Cola beverages annually, while each American consumes about 200 liters, according to JP Morgan Research. That's a shocking contrast when one considers that the per capita gross domestic product in the United States in 2001 was $35,200, while in Mexico it was only about $6,200, according to figures from the National Accounts of OECD countries. In 2002, Mexicans consumed more soft drinks per capita than any other country in the world, which would seem to follow in a country where Coca-Cola is easier to find than potable water. It may be a popular joke that the first word Mexican children speak is "*Coca,*" but it's no joke that mothers in impoverished areas have filled their infants' bottles with Coca-Cola instead of milk often enough to draw the attention of government bureaucrats worried about diet and nutrition.

Recently, the largest Coca-Cola bottler in Mexico, Coca-Cola FEMSA, acquired another Latin American bottler to make the company the largest bottler of Coca-Cola in the world outside of the United States. Perhaps the upstart presidency of the National Action Party's Vicente Fox Quesada, the former head of Latin American sales for Coca-Cola, has had an influence on the soft drink company's recent success in Mexico. A history of similar triumphs has made Coca-Cola a cultural phenomenon in Mexico. Coca-Cola has a strong background of associating itself with sporting events. For instance, a giant inflatable Coca-Cola bottle has danced above spectators before bull

fights in Mexico City. In Chiapas, indigenous children toss basketballs at backboards, which are really small billboards for Coca-Cola and other soft drinks. Each holiday season, Christmas trees decorated in Coca-Cola bottle caps tower in the zócalos, which are the important social hubs of Mexico's larger cities.

Still, of late, sales of Coca-Cola have leveled off, even as its competitors, such Gugar and Fersan Cola and the Wal-Mex store brand, have become more popular with Mexican consumers. Also, Pepsi-Cola's largest bottler announced last fall that it will be entering Mexico. All of this may have something to do with the spunkiness of Mexico's five-member Federal Competition Commission, a body formed in 1993 that in recent months has taken Mexican and foreign monopolies in Mexico to task. Last year, the commission found Coca-Cola and 89 of its Mexican bottlers guilty of trying to keep competitors out of the market by using exclusive contracts. In exchange for trademark red paint jobs and branded refrigerators, thousands of small convenience stores have agreed not to stock products made by PepsiCo and local beverage makers. More than three years ago, PepsiCo filed its complaint with the commission about the monopolistic tactics – tactics it uses as well. Still, regulators did not fine Coca-Cola, confining their penalties to banning the exclusive contracts and certain discounts. Coca-Cola has appealed the ruling, and its representatives in Mexico do not appear to be worried.

"The effect on our business is almost nil," said Coca-Cola spokesman Rodrigo Calderon, quoted in *Freedom Magazines International, Inc.* Coca-Cola representatives did not respond to requests for interviews for this article.

Mendez admits he cannot sell other brands like Pepsi in his stores, which may help to explain Coca-Cola's dominance in San Juan Chamula. As for the importance of

soft drinks in general and what was used before Coca-Cola arrived, he says he doesn't have a clue. Like Mendez, most older people in the pueblo are apt to give a one-word answer to the question about Coca-Cola's importance: *tradición.* That's most likely due to a successful brainwashing job on the part of local patrones, who have managed to convince residents that certain consumer products, for which the leaders hold the monopoly on distribution, are holy. But why, specifically, Coca-Cola? One expert on the religion of the Tzotzil Indians believes that, in their culture, Coca-Cola may serve as a substitute for a beverage called *chicha.* Raul García, a tour guide from San Cristóbal de las Casas, has spent more than 15 years studying the San Juan Chamula community. He speculates that the affinity for Coca-Cola in San Juan Chamula developed from this taste for chicha, a popular fermented beverage sometimes used to clean wounds.

"In this way, the Chamulans have assimilated yet another aspect of modern life without really changing a tradition," he explains.

Chicha is made by chewing on corn, spitting it into a hollowed-out gourd and letting it ferment for about three months. To aid in the process, sugars such as cane are added. The final product is a fermented, runny, sugary sap of dark brown, typically covered in a layer of dust when served at the market. A version of chicha also is made by descendents of the Inca in Peru, Ecuador and Colombia.

Still, it is not certain that chicha ever had the significance that contemporary soft drinks have in the Tzotzil religion. The massive popularity of Coca-Cola in Chiapas has even helped to wipe out a local soft drink. Back when García first came to San Juan Chamula in 1970, San Cristóbal de las Casas had its own local soda called Gaseosa.

García says the beverage came in lots of flavors like nectarine, strawberry, lemon, rose and orange.

"Back then, the Indians coordinated the candles they used with the color of the drink," he says, which would seem to indicate that bubbly beverages were popular even before the arrival of Coca-Cola.

In fact, understanding the affinity of San Juan Chamula for Coca-Cola may have more to do with the conquest of the Mayan people by the Spanish *conquistadores* hundreds of years ago than with chicha. It may have more to do with cultural imperialism and how the Mayans react to it. When the Spaniards arrived in central Chiapas around 1528, the well-established Mayan religion was intimately intertwined with the indigenous political structure. The Mayans offered constant tributes to their gods to maintain the equilibrium of their world. There was a sort of parallel in the Catholic Church, which sold indulgences to sinners hoping to buy their piece of heaven. The Spaniards realized that controlling the Mayans politically and getting on the receiving end of these tributes would entail subjugating the indigenous gods.

"In the war between the gods, the Spanish saints won," explains Alejandro Valdivieso Ocampo, another of the guides into the world of Chamulan spirituality who operates in San Cristóbal de las Casas.

The Spaniards won this battle of the gods with an intricate propaganda campaign that involved directing a barrage of images of Catholic saints at the Mayan people. These saints, eventually adopted by the Mayans as superficial substitutes for their own gods of the harvest, rain and health, were heavily promoted by the Spaniards in the late 16th and early 17th centuries through the *cofradía* system. This brilliant marketing tool entailed

enlisting groups of zealous native converts to push new Catholic saints among the members of their own communities. Some speculate that the miracle of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico's version of the Virgin Mary, may have been a product of this early mass marketing on the part of the Catholic Church.

Historians believe that the cofradía system may have evolved into what is known as *caciquismo.* The word *cacique* was originally defined by indigenous people of the Caribbean as the greatest, most responsible leader, and the word arrived in Mexico with the Spanish conquistadors. In Mexico, however, it came to mean a despotic authority and connote domination and control. In the native communities of Mexico, those promoting the latest Catholic incarnations of the traditional Mayan gods quickly became leaders, or caciques, of the rest. Though cofradías were phased out in the mid-19th century, another form of local leadership took their place. No longer at the behest of the Catholic Church, indigenous groups in Chiapas continued to care for the saints under a system of charges called *cargos.* Wealthier and more ambitious leaders of the community would volunteer at their own expense to care for one of the community's saints for a year. Though the new religious structure began as a way of redistributing wealth, it may have ended up enhancing economic inequality, especially with the introduction of consumer products into religious rituals.

A form of caciquismo still exists today in communities such as San Juan Chamula where local leaders of indigenous groups often act in a ruthless fashion to maintain their economic control, which may be over markets for candles, sugar cane liquor or even Coca-Cola. So what may appear to be a contemporary religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants on the surface may not be all that simple; it has as much to do

with power and profits as religious beliefs. Catholics as well as Protestants have been expelled for displaying an inappropriate lack of reverence for *tradición.* Evangelical exiles have not hesitated to accuse the power-brokers of San Juan Chamula, the soft drink and alcohol vendors along with the political officials, of orchestrating a decades-long bloody inquisition and reign of terror. They've even initiated their own propaganda war, producing a film under the Christian label Armagedon on the struggle called *"Tierra de Sangre,"* or "Land of Blood."

"One has to wonder what kind of culture it is that urges everyone to get drunk and worship soft drinks," says Domingo López Angel, a Tzotzil preacher from Chamula who left the pueblo in 1974 to join expelled Protestants. After serving as a state legislator during the Zapatista revolution of 1994, and then becoming a Muslim, López Angel was attacked in the shantytown where he resides outside San Cristóbal and incarcerated on dubious charges by Chamulan caciques. He was recently released from prison. He continues to rail against abuses committed by the pueblo's leaders.

Still, despite a certain level of resistance to the soft drink honchos in San Juan Chamula, the marketing tactics used by Coca-Cola have been stunningly successful in Chiapas, as they have been elsewhere, due in part to the role that local and regional executives play in designing soft drink promotions and tailoring them to local consumers.

"The indigenous people were bombarded with religious images by the Spaniards," says Juan José Cruz Gutiérrez, a historian with the indigenous resource center Na Balom. "They were bombarded with the Church's saints. Now, they're bombarded with the new modern images of Coca-Cola. It may be another product, but it's still an image being marketed toward them."

Coca-Cola offered a promotion in 2002 that encouraged consumers to trade in 15 bottle caps for a kilogram of beans, explains Gildardo Bonifaz, coordinator of sales for the Coca-Cola bottling plant in San Cristóbal de las Casas. In another promotion, consumers would receive a liter of cooking oil for three bottle caps and 10 pesos. This year, Coca-Cola is offering a bag of *chicharrones* (deep-fried pork rinds) free with the purchase of a Coca-Cola, Bonifaz said. Besides distributing the soft drink at most events that draw a crowd and holding promotional parades, Coca-Cola marketers also offer to paint its logo on grocery and convenience stores and provide a Coca-Cola awning.

"We want to do what will help the community," says Bonifaz.

The Coca-Cola Foundation, in which Marta Sahagún de Fox, the wife of the Mexican president, is involved, was established to promote the soft drink through philanthropic deeds. The foundation helped to build a secondary school in Oxchuc, another indigenous community in central Chiapas.

"Coca-Cola is involved in many of the cultural events and also in the indigenous communities here," Cruz Gutiérrez says. "It's a way that Coca-Cola does marketing. For instance, the Mexican government is interested in neither culture nor sports, because it doesn't have the money. So companies like Coca-Cola step in. Because basketball is the most popular sport among the indigenous groups, it makes backboards with giant Coke logos."

But those marketing tactics sometimes miss their mark. Cruz Gutiérrez points out that the Christmas tree, a U.S. export, has been a marketing tool of dubious distinction for Coca-Cola in Chiapas. San Cristóbal de las Casas is perhaps the only Mexican city in which agitators have burned the tree down – more than once, residents say. The symbol

hasn't caught on in Chiapas for one very good reason, says Cruz Gutiérrez: The Christmas tree has nothing to do with Mexican culture.

"The Mexican tradition is the manger," he says. "In fact, when we see a Christmas tree with the strong influence of Coca-Cola, it's almost an insult to the city."

The reaction against Coca-Cola hit its peak after the Zapatista guerrilla uprising in 1994, says Rus, the expert with the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies. The forces crusading against capitalism and globalization found a convenient emissary of American culture to combat in the soft drink. At the same time, the Tzotzil, most likely oblivious to this aspect of the guerrilla movement, continued to sprinkle Coca-Cola during their holy ceremonies.

"The growth of this kind of apocryphal story about Coca-Cola making people healthier, or even better – that it became sacred to the Indians somehow – led to a funny sort of counter-reaction after the 1994 rebellion," says Rus, who has studied the Tzotzil of San Juan Chamula since 1968. "I'm not even sure the Indians really knew about it."

Rus suggests that, for many Indians, the availability of soft drinks has had benefits in reducing their communities' dependence on cane alcohol. At their ceremonies, full of color and incense and tradition, they will drink soft drinks instead of posh, often pretending to sip the cane alcohol, but actually slipping the beverage into a receptacle carried around their waists. Though one is still likely to spot a couple of men, dead drunk and lying in a deep stupor, in the town square on festival days, one is unlikely to encounter a dozen or more such men, as might have occurred a decade ago. And some Protestant groups have been willing to embrace Coca-Cola as a substitute for alcohol in religious ceremonies – one that is less damaging to the health.

Still, some observers, such as Cruz Gutiérrez, believe Coca-Cola has been particularly insidious, as opposed to successful, as the first multinational company ever to promote not just a retail product, but the American lifestyle and values. The company was founded by religious Protestant men, who even sponsored missionary work in the name of Coca-Cola at the dawn of the 20th century, so it followed that promotion was done with a religious fervor in search of first-time soft drink converts. The reaction against this soft drink evangelism has been predictable and the debate continues unendingly; but only in San Juan Chamula, Chiapas, can one witness such a perfect panorama of the successful elevation of a soft drink from an unneeded consumer item to the beverage of the new *conquista,* which encourages its adherents to find meaning and gratification in the consumption of soda.

Day-to-day life in San Juan Chamula has little or no meaning outside of the context of religion, and day-to-day life is heavily suffused with Coca-Cola. During the feast day of San Sebastián this year, residents were dressed in their finest clothing to play their part in the festival, which is a re-enactment of an indigenous legend. On a small grassy hillock, bordered on two sides by buildings and overlooking the zócalo, a line of about a dozen ugly, bearded men in jackets reminiscent of 18th-century French soldiers with tall cone-shaped hats draped with red and green ribbons are called the monkey-men. They are meant to represent us, those of us who are not Indians, those of us who speak Spanish or some other foreign tongue. They stand rigidly in a swirling cloud of incense and mountain mist before the elders of the pueblo, as a handful of women in headdresses squatting above this scene on the hill laugh and pat out tortillas and tamales. Children, barefoot and skinny, scramble past the scene, one with half of a bull carcass draped over

him. Line after line of villagers solemnly present themselves to a sitting group of elders in traditional dress, touching the ribbons on each others hats as a form of greeting. The focal point of the ceremony should be a large green Mayan cross, carved with esoteric symbols and draped in pine branches, erected in front of one building. But even more striking is the brilliant red wall looming behind the cross, painted with a giant Coca-Cola bottle, its cap erupting with a splash of foam, and commanding words, which, in this day and age, have become decipherable to just about everyone: "Live It!"

SOURCE LIST

Coca-cola web site: http://www2.coca-cola.com/ourcompany/aboutbottling.html

Juan Jose Cruz Hernandez, Historian, Na Balom

Pepe Santiago, guide, Na Balom

Raul García, guide, San Juan Chamula

Agustin Lopez Giron, municipal authority, Tenejapa

Alejandro Valdiviezo Ocampo, guide, San Juan Chamula

Victoria, guide, Na Balom

Sebastian Lopez Gomez, mayordomo, San Juan Chamula

Luis Mendez, Coca-Cola concessionaire, San Juan Chamula

Chamula: Tierra de Sangre, video

Las Palabras y Visiones de los Ancianos de las Comunidades Tzotziles y Tzeltales, video

Los Chamulas en el Mundo del Sol, book

Juan Perez Jolote, A Chamulan Man, book

Julio Cesar Trujillo, author, "Mecanismos de Organizacion de Una Empresa Oligopolica: El Caso de Coca-Cola" and Coca-Cola sales, Embotelladora Sin Rival

Gildardo Bonifaz, coordinator of sales, Coca-Cola, Embotelladora Sin Rival

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FEMSA & Panamco investor relations

Domingo Lopez Angel, Muslim activist, San Cristóbal de las Casas

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