
*From Indigenous Staple to
Colonial Commodity*

IN 1667, DIEGO DE ZEVALLOS, a lawyer living in Peru's capital city of Lima, published a treatise describing *yerba del Paraguay* as a wonder drug capable of curing a wide array of maladies. Based on a seventeenth-century understanding of "humors," de Zevallos explained that the consumption of yerba addressed a wide array of health problems.¹ Little is known about de Zevallos, or how it was he came to be writing a treatise about *yerba del Paraguay*. But his book became one of the first to directly discuss yerba mate, and it was widely cited by others in the years after its publication. One of those authors was the official Jesuit historian of Paraguay, who, a little less than a century later, recounted de Zevallos's claims and reiterated, "I believe that as virtues continue to be attributed to said yerba, it will soon be called in vulgar terms the cure-all (*sánalo todo*) and universal medicine for all types of ailments."²

At the time of publication, only the small portion of the Spanish-speaking population that was literate could read these works. For historians today, however, they provide important clues about colonial perceptions of yerba mate as it evolved from an Indigenous consumable that initially disgusted Europeans to a substance prized for its health benefits and a daily ritual for people throughout much of South America. Much as with chocolate and tobacco, during the seventeenth century Europeans in South America consumed yerba mate following Indigenous practices, but unlike those other stimulants native to the Americas, the custom spread primarily due to racial mixing, as Spaniards and their mixed-race offspring adopted native cultural practices including drinking yerba mate and speaking Guaraní.³ Tracing yerba mate's evolution from an Indigenous good to a colonial beverage reveals the long-enduring influence of native practices and how such associations came to be obscured. Most Argentines today believe that their country is

white or culturally Creole (mixed race) and has few Indigenous peoples (*pueblos originarios*). While military campaigns did decimate native peoples, especially during the “Conquest of the Desert” in the 1870s, *pueblos originarios* and native influences continue to exist in Argentina, as is shown here through yerba mate.

INDIGENOUS ORIGINS

Today, the Ca’a Yari origin story of yerba mate from Guaraní mythology has become part of popular folklore in Argentina. In his compilation of vignettes about the history of the Americas, the celebrated Uruguayan author Eduardo Galeano tells how one day the moon came down to earth. Twice an old peasant rescued her, and when the moon got hungry, he took her to the hut where he lived with his wife and daughter. The next night, the moon looked down from the sky at her friends’ home and saw that the impoverished family had nothing to eat. They had given their last bread to her. In gratitude, the moon shone her brightest light and asked the clouds to shed a very special drizzle around the hut. In the morning, some unknown trees with dark green leaves and white flowers appeared. The daughter became the queen of yerba mate, offering it to others and never dying.⁴

While popular today, Guaraní origin stories only began to widely circulate in the twentieth century as a part of a growing interest in Indigenous culture. During the colonial era, yerba mate origin stories did not refer to the goddess of yerba. Instead, they attributed the discovery of yerba mate to either the devil or Saint Thomas. While the fact that yerba mate originated among the native peoples of the Americas seems obvious to us today, it was not always so. A number of people, even into the twentieth century, attributed its discovery to Spaniards, and especially to the Jesuits.⁵

Among scholars working today, yerba mate consumption is generally thought to have originated with the Guaraní, who descend from the Tupian linguistic family with origins in southern Amazonia. But there is also strong evidence that suggests it might have originated with the Kaingang of the Jê linguistic family, a people from the northeastern area of what is now Brazil. Some 2000 to 3000 years ago, Jê-speaking people moved south into what is today the triple frontier region of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, and approximately 1,800 years ago the Guaraní split from the Tupi and migrated from Amazonia to the same region.⁶ Both groups encountered the yerba

tree growing there, and by the time the Spaniards arrived in the seventeenth century, they had integrated yerba into their cultural practices.

Jesuit missionaries intent on converting Indigenous peoples to Catholicism established missions among both groups in the first decades of the seventeenth century and wrote a number of ethnographic descriptions of both the Guaraní and the Kaingang. These Jesuit missionaries were struck by the common practice of consuming yerba mate among both peoples and they left many written accounts and descriptions of yerba mate. Although important information can be gleaned from these accounts about the presence and practice of mate consumption at the time, these accounts also reveal the authors' biases. For example, one of the first Jesuit missionaries to Paraguay, the Lima-born Antonio Ruíz de Montoya (1585–1652), wrote a lot on the subject, but he also acknowledged that he had never tried yerba and claimed that “it deserves condemnation” for a number of reasons, including “the abuses made of it,” and “its superstitious employment in sorcery.”⁷ Ruíz de Montoya's bias against yerba was representative of the general viewpoint held by Catholic priests who encountered the substance early on.

Despite their views, the Jesuits did leave behind valuable written sources about yerba mate's role in native culture. Two of the most important are a Guaraní-Spanish dictionary and a Spanish-Guaraní dictionary. These reference works were compiled by Jesuits at the beginning of the seventeenth century and published by Antonio Ruíz de Montoya in Madrid in 1639 and 1640. Both provide important linguistic clues about the practices of yerba mate consumption among the Kaingang and Guaraní peoples. For example, both dictionaries include two words for “yerba that is drunk:” *caá* and *côgôî*.⁸ The first is a Guaraní word. The second appears to be a Kaingang term. Not only does *côgôî* not follow Tupi Guaraní phonetic norms,⁹ variations of the term appear widely in documents about the Kaingang.¹⁰ As mentioned in the introduction, the Kaingang continue to use variations of *côgôî* for yerba mate. Spanish sources from the colonial period sometimes described *caá* as the Guaraní word for yerba, but they never referred to *côgôî*. While *côgôî* disappeared entirely from Spanish colonial sources, *congonha* (the Portuguese form of *côgôî*) continued to be widely used in southern Brazil through the early twentieth century.¹¹

It is plausible that the Kaingang people were the first to transform yerba mate into a consumable item. The fact that Ruíz de Montoya included this Kaingang word in the dictionaries when he was known to be very reluctant about incorporating any non-Tupi-Guaraní words speaks to the term's importance, as it suggests a wide usage of the Kaingang word for yerba mate even among the

Guaraní.¹² It also suggests a close association between the Kaingang and yerba. In the 1620s and 1630s, Ruíz de Montoya and other Jesuits drew attention to ceremonial uses of yerba in Kaingang religious practices. In a letter written in 1630, a missionary wrote that Kaingang shamans (*hechizeros*) “speak with the devil by way of yerba, and he tells them unknown things, like when Spaniards will come to rescue them, and they regularly say the yerba says this, etc.”¹³ Because the Jesuits associated such activity with the devil, they vehemently tried to stop it.

According to Ruíz de Montoya, the Kaingang did not have idols, but they used yerba to communicate with the supernatural.

They have *hechizeros* whose science is nothing more than divining and telling lies. They consult the oracle with a gourd of yerba. They speak with them; they blow on it; they belch; they move their eyes around; they raise their head; they move it to one side and the other; they pay close attention; and do other ceremonies in this manner.¹⁴

A century later, the Jesuit historian and chronicler Pedro Lozano clarified that shaman drank the yerba. “*Hechiceros* have much esteem among this people, that they deceive them with their lies. To hear the false oracles of the father of lies, they use the Paraguayan yerba, which they drink ground in powders.”¹⁵ According to another source, Kaingang *hechiceros* used yerba powder as a narcotic. By inhaling the powder, they entered into a trance.¹⁶ Notably, the Jesuits described about as many instances of yerba mate use by Kaingang shamans as by Guaraní shamans, even though they only established one mission among the Kaingang and many more among the Guaraní.

After asking Guaraní elders about the origin of yerba mate, Ruíz de Montoya concluded that the devil taught Guaraní shamans to use yerba in order to commune with him.

I learned as a certain fact that in their youth the herb was not drunk or even known except by a great sorcerer or magician who trafficked with the devil. The devil showed him the herb and told him to drink it whenever he wanted to consult him. He did so, and under his tutelage, so did others whom we have known in our own days. The witchcraft they perform commonly derives from this herb.¹⁷

As with the Kaingang, yerba played an important role in Guaraní religious practices. Historian Shawn Austin describes how Juan Cuaraçí (a baptized

Guaraní shaman) combined Guaraní and Catholic religious symbols and practices to build an impressive following and undermine the missions in the 1620s. Curaçí's yerba-induced vision inspired him to call for native peoples to abandon the missions. After fasting, consuming large quantities of yerba mate, and vomiting, Curaçí picked the yerba-bile mixture off the ground and threw it into the air while saying, "yerba be calm." With another shaman, Curaçí repeated this process several times; then they had a vision of demons who told them that all Indians should leave the Spaniards. As Curaçí subsequently circulated in the region, he continued to employ yerba mate in ceremonies. In one ritual, Curaçí drew the sign of the cross into the dirt and poured yerba into the marks.¹⁸ Catholic priests opposed such activities and did everything they could to disassociate yerba mate from Indigenous religion. Even so, they could not fully squash native religious practices. Over three decades after Crown officials condemned Curaçí to death, another Guaraní shaman (Rodrigo Yaguariguay) admitted to consuming yerba so that he could make prophecies and gain spiritual knowledge.¹⁹

Yerba mate not only facilitated communication with the divine, it also helped Guaraní and Kaingang shamans in their roles as healers. One Jesuit author described the Kaingang *hichizeros* who used yerba mate in their ceremonies as "*chupadores* (drunkards) and *curanderos* (healers)."²⁰ The Guaraní used yerba as a medicine. According to Pedro Montenegro, a Jesuit priest who wrote a treatise about Guaraní medicinal plants, yerba was their only remedy for stomach ailments and diarrhea.²¹ Years later, a Jesuit chronicler and historian claimed that the Guaraní consumed it upon the outbreak of any pestilent illness.²² The Guaraní understood yerba mate to have a variety of health benefits, including energizing properties. According to Ruíz de Montoya, "[Guaraní elders] claim that it has the following effects: it lightens work; it sustains them (we have daily experience that an Indian can row for a whole day with no sustenance beyond drinking the herb every three hours); it purges their stomach of phlegm; it makes the senses alert; it dispels drowsiness when one wants to stay up at night without sleepiness."²³

Prior to European contact, yerba mate may have also served as a status symbol for shamans and *caciques* (native leaders). Most references to yerba consumption by non-aculturated Guaraní involved either a shaman or a cacique. For example, in two letters from 1628 and 1629, Ruíz de Montoya and Simón Masseta repeatedly wrote about "the great shaman" and "principal

cacique” Pablo Guirabera, who “gave himself the name Creator of Heaven and earth.” As Masseta described, Guirabara left his home once or twice each day with assorted plumage on his head, his face and legs painted, carrying different weapons, and always wearing new clothing. “With these various gestures and appearances, the Indians mainly fear him, speaking to them with superiority and arrogance, having all of them as his vassals and that he is the King of all and governor as some call him.” Masseta also described Guirabara constantly drinking yerba. “I have never seen an Indian that was such a yerba-drinker (*tan yerbatero*) and friend of tobacco, as he is having yerba all day, drinking yerba and water. And I do not know how he does not burst.”²⁴ In Masseta’s description, Guirabara cultivated his image as a respected and powerful leader in part by drinking yerba all day long.

Guaraní leaders also used yerba mate to facilitate relationships and to mark special events. For example, a Jesuit recounted that when a cacique named TabacanVi learned that a missionary was nearby, he sent his nephew with “a good number of armed Indians and a large refreshing drink of yerba to receive the priest, telling him by invitation from the cacique, to stop for a while.”²⁵ The Guaraní also used yerba in marriage ceremonies.

The male and female that want to marry go in the early morning to the house of the cacique or main shaman who puts and mixes the yerba that they drink in a gourd with water, and he gives the two who are marrying the yerba to drink from the same gourd, and then the husband and the woman have to spit together the yerba in the same hole, and this is the public sign of marriage, or better said, concubinage.²⁶

Native peoples consumed yerba in different ways. According to Pau Navajas, more than ten different ways of using yerba mate were recorded, including chewing fresh leaves, breathing its powder, burning it for smoke, and soaking oneself in a bath of macerated leaves.²⁷ Most early accounts describe native peoples drinking yerba mate.²⁸ As mentioned earlier, both *caá* and *côgôî* referred to “yerba that is drunk,” and drinking it with water was the only method of consuming yerba mentioned in both the Guaraní-Spanish and the Spanish-Guaraní dictionaries.

The dictionaries make clear that drinking yerba was a part of daily life, especially before eating. Ruíz de Montoya translated various phrases about drinking yerba, many of which were listed under terms that initially seem unrelated to yerba, such as “head,” “weaving,” and “acidic.” The fact that drinking yerba before eating was mentioned various times and was often associated

with terms unrelated to yerba, eating, or drinking, emphasizes its importance in the daily life of the Guaraní. For example, the phrase “I am going to make yerba,” which they also say it for politeness or modesty when they do their vital necessities” points to the centrality of yerba mate in daily life.²⁹

Ruíz de Montoya included phrases that communicated feelings toward yerba: “I desire yerba” (*caa uheí*) and “I don’t drink yerba” (*ndache caáguári*). One could imagine a missionary declining an offer of yerba using the latter phrase. Ruíz de Montoya also included phrases that might have been relevant to the Jesuits’ mission work. For example, a Jesuit who felt the need to drink yerba as a way to connect with and gain acceptance from Guaraní, but did not want to drink it, might ask his Guaraní host “to put very little yerba in the gourd to drink.” A missionary also might use such a phrase to try to moderate yerba drinking. Two entries suggest that mission Guaraní sometimes spent extended periods of time drinking yerba. Under the heading “crazy,” Ruíz de Montoya included “the yerba has made me crazy”—suggesting that the person had drunk so much yerba as to affect his or her behavior. And with phrases related to “morning,” Ruíz de Montoya included “all this morning you have been drinking yerba.”³⁰ One could easily imagine a priest making this accusation to a person who failed to attend the morning’s religious activities or did not do something that the priest expected. Such phrases underscore Ruíz de Montoya’s distaste for yerba.

While he did not like yerba mate, Ruíz de Montoya’s repeated mention of caá in the dictionaries demonstrates that yerba permeated Guaraní life. *Caá* meant yerba, but it also meant *monte* (forest or wilderness in general) and all wild plants. Over a page and a half of the dictionary was dedicated exclusively to terms and phrases related to *caá*.³¹ The Guaraní relied on the forests for food, medicines, and raw materials. Recent research suggests that the Guaraní actively managed forest resources and modified biodiversity.³² Phrases related to *caá/monte* in the dictionaries support such a conclusion: for example, “clean below the forests so that it is clear” and “unused forest from which wood has not been taken.”³³ It is probable that they actively tended to the yerbales.

One of the most interesting pieces of information in the early Jesuit dictionaries is that the methods for processing yerba mate were strikingly similar to what it is done today. Ruíz de Montoya included six different verbs about processing yerba. First, the Guaraní passed the yerba leaves over flames (without burning them) to remove humidity and stop the degradation process (*sapecar*), and then they dried the leaves for a longer period at lower temperatures before crushing them. These descriptions highlight not only



FIGURE 2. Nineteenth-century depiction of yerba production. Mary Hield, *Glimpses of South America; or, The Land of the Pampas* (London: Cassell & Company, Lmtd., 1883), 189.

different technologies used by the Guaraní, but also the complex and nuanced approaches which continue to be foundational to yerba processing today. Ruíz de Montoya even identified a tool specifically for chopping yerba.³⁴ Through the twentieth century, some rural producers also continued to use the *barbacuá* (an arched structure constructed of branches tied with vines that held the yerba over a subterranean fire) for drying the yerba (see figure 2). A few small-scale artisanal producers in southern Brazil still use the *barbacuá* and *carijo* (a flat structure similar to the *barbacuá* except that the fire is directly under the yerba).³⁵ Both of these structures are built entirely out of forest materials and are either Indigenous or hybrid technologies.

In addition to the similarities between the way that the Guaraní processed yerba and the way that it is produced today, the unique manner of consuming mate also appears to have a direct lineage to Guaraní tradition. The Guaraní appear to have used a variety of vessels (both ceramic and gourds) to drink yerba. In the Jesuit dictionaries, the phrase “With which yerba is drunk” was translated as *caguába* and referred to the vessel (*vaso*) from which both yerba and alcohol were drunk. Guaraní archeological sites contain a number of small, semi-open ceramic vessels called *caguába* (the same term that Ruíz de

Montoya translated both as “vessel for drinking wine” and “with which yerba is drunk”) that were used for drinking the alcoholic beverage *cauim*.³⁶

The dictionaries do not provide explicit evidence of the bombilla (the drinking straw with a sieve at the end to filter out the yerba) that is known to have been a key part of yerba consumption in South America during the colonial period. *Tacuapí* (the most common Guaraní translation of bombilla) is not in either of Ruíz de Montoya’s dictionaries and early documents about yerba mate do not mention anything like it. Scholars are torn about whether the bombilla was an Indigenous or hybrid technology.³⁷ While straws and straining tools were observed in ancient Egypt and among native peoples in Africa and the Arctic, they weren’t commonly used in Europe until the twentieth century.³⁸ In terms of the use of the bombilla for drinking yerba mate, the first explicit reference is from an early eighteenth-century French traveler to Chile and Peru, who described:

To avoid drinking the Herb which swims at the Top, they make use of a Silver Pipe, at the End wherof is a Bowl, full of little Holes; so that the Liquor suck’d in at the other End is clear from the Herb. They drink round with the same Pipe, pouring hot Water on the same Herb as it is drank off. Instead of a Pipe, which they call *Bombilla* some part the Herb with a Silver Separation, called *Apartador*, full of little Holes.³⁹

Made of silver from Peru, such a bombilla was clearly a colonial utensil. Later sources describe Indians using bombillas made of *takuara* (bamboo).⁴⁰ Whether native peoples came up with the idea of a bombilla (made of bamboo) or modified a colonial invention (the silver bombilla), the development entailed significant technological innovation and entanglement.⁴¹ Furthermore, only people with financial resources could afford to purchase bombillas made of silver. But for this to have happened, Spaniards and other non-native peoples had to have first found a way to overcome their aversion to yerba mate, something which had been particularly true of those in positions of power who often saw it as an abhorrent, degenerate activity.

EUROPEAN CONTACT WITH YERBA

While Jesuit missionaries in the early seventeenth century were among the first Europeans to record descriptions of yerba mate, the Spanish Crown had already begun a broader imperial conquest of that region of South America

nearly a century before the publication of Ruíz de Montoya's dictionaries. From the records that have come down to us, all evidence suggests that many of the early Spaniards in the region considered the consumption of yerba mate to be a somewhat gross, even diabolical practice. Like with chocolate and tobacco, Spaniards were suspicious of the strange Indigenous substance and Church officials feared that it threatened Catholic piety. There were many efforts by local officials to prohibit its use altogether. These efforts were unsuccessful, however, and yerba consumption spread as Spanish people on the ground adopted Guaraní cultural practices, primarily as a result of the early unions between Spanish men and Guaraní women.

Europeans initially came to the New World in search of items that they could take back to the Old World for a good profit, and yerba mate did not fit this criterion. Mineral wealth, primarily from gold and silver, was the main target. But spices, furs, dyewood, and other trade goods were also sought.⁴² New and foreign foodstuffs did not interest Spaniards, given that an Old World diet was integral to Spanish identity. They believed that Spanish food and drink made them Spanish and kept them healthy. The American foodstuffs (such as chocolate, tropical fruits, and chili peppers) that they did adopt were incorporated as supplements and not as a mainstay of the Spanish diet.⁴³ And early conquistadors were too concerned with their own survival in the region to pay much attention to a strange drink like yerba mate. The first written description of the region (Ulrich Schmidt's account of Pedro de Mendoza's 1535 expedition) repeatedly mentioned food but made no reference to yerba mate. It was an understandable omission. For most of the trip, Schmidt and his companions were on the verge of starvation. They focused on satiating their hunger, and yerba mate did not resemble a familiar foodstuff or a recognizable alcoholic beverage.⁴⁴

Early Spaniards in the region had never encountered anything like yerba mate. Wine was their beverage of choice. It is highly unlikely that any of the conquistadors or early settlers had previously tried a caffeinated beverage. A small number of Spaniards had recently encountered chocolate in Mesoamerica, but European texts did not even mention coffee or tea until the second half of the sixteenth century.⁴⁵ When Europeans first tried caffeinated beverages, they almost never liked them. Caffeinated drinks were different and strange. Coffee, tea, chocolate, and yerba mate are naturally bitter, and thus, an acquired taste. Moreover, they are typically drunk hot and their color was unappealing to the European eye. Caffeinated beverages are learned habits. Chocolate, coffee, and tea were first consumed in Europe

by elites who were attracted to the status, fashion, and exclusivity that these exotic beverages represented, in part because they were initially expensive luxury goods.⁴⁶ But yerba mate never caught on in this way. Not only did yerba mate consumption not spread in Europe, the many Europeans in South America who became avid yerba consumers considered it a cheap basic necessity rather than a luxury good or status symbol.

Early Spanish references to the drinking of yerba mate described it as a barbaric practice. The first known author to explicitly discuss yerba consumption, by both non-Indians and Indians, was Father Martín González in 1556, less than two decades after the founding of Asunción.⁴⁷ Over forty years later, the superior of the Jesuits in Paraguay, Juan Romero, alluded to his distaste for the substance when he described how the habit resulted in yerba mate consumers wasting half of their day.

And also even Spaniards picked up the habit, and not a few, the custom of the barbarous Indians of drinking the juice of some roots many times a day, and a bunch mixed with a yerba called of Paraguay, and of which they drink the quantity of a medium-sized jug until they slurp and then they pass it around. And drinking and vomiting, they spend half of the day.⁴⁸

In addition to highlighting the disdain that many Spanish elites felt for yerba at this time, these early mentions of the drinking practice also provide evidence that the Spanish did, as Romero explained, learn about how to consume yerba from native peoples. Two years later, Alonso de la Madrid (a member of the Asunción town council) similarly described the practice as learned from Indigenous people, but he also added that Spaniards distorted and abused it. He called yerba consumption, as practiced by Indians who contented themselves with drinking it once a day, a “vice and bad habit.” In contrast, he claimed Spaniards had made yerba consumption “more barbarity than vice” by drinking it all day. De la Madrid was concerned that by consuming so much yerba, Asunción’s Spanish population was becoming more Indian than the Indians. And he complained that the social order was under threat because native peoples had lost respect for Spaniards due to their excessive yerba consumption. “Lost is the pride and self-respect of the Spaniards and their sons; even the Indians hold them in low regard. Because of this it is advisable to extirpate this vice, even if it is for no more than the self-respect that the Spaniards should have.”⁴⁹

De la Madrid’s opposition to yerba led him to lobby for a prohibition on its production. In addition to asserting that yerba consumption damaged

people's reputations, de la Madrid also claimed that it was a threat to economic well-being, peaceful social relations, the Catholic faith, and personal health. In total, de la Madrid made five separate objections to yerba consumption, portraying it as a destructive and addictive practice. He concluded his letter with an appeal to the soon-to-be-governor of Río de la Plata and Paraguay, Hernando Arias de Saavedra (Hernandarias) "to take whatever means possible to put a permanent ban on the said yerba."⁵⁰

Hernandarias agreed with de la Madrid, and in the same year of 1596, he took serious steps to end the production and consumption of yerba. He prohibited sending Indians to yerbales to produce yerba and ordered that any illicit yerba be burned in the public plaza; he ordered a fine of 100 pesos to be levied on anyone who either violated this mandate or who bought or sold yerba; and he mandated that, regardless of status, anyone found drinking yerba in public or private be charged a 10-peso fine and spend fifteen days in jail for the first violation, with more serious punishment for any further violations.⁵¹ Despite these laws and fines, Hernandarias's efforts were ineffective in stopping the production and consumption yerba, and in 1603, he was forced to again issue prohibitions and burn yerba in the public plaza.⁵²

Other Spanish elites concurred with Hernandarias and de la Madrid on the evils of yerba mate. For instance, Diego de Torres Bollo, the Jesuit provincial of Paraguay, supported Hernandarias's actions. In letters to the Jesuit hierarchy in Europe, Torres complained that the population of Paraguay learned the "vice" of consuming yerba in their youth and that it made them lazy, even though he also acknowledged that they got up before sunrise each morning. Torres bemoaned that they had corrupted this "old custom of the Indians" to such an extent that even the Indians now refused to do any work without receiving a daily ration of yerba and tobacco. On a more positive note, he reported that with the threat of excommunication, the Jesuits had effectively stopped anyone in their college in Asunción from possessing or consuming "that wicked yerba."⁵³

Torres not only wanted to root out yerba consumption in Jesuit-run colleges and missions, in 1610 he also tried to get the Inquisition of Peru to prohibit all consumption and production of yerba. Like de la Madrid, Torres made a multifaceted argument about why yerba had to be stopped. One of his main points was that yerba threatened Catholicism in the region. On the one hand, the beverage had diabolical origins (the Indians learned about

yerba through a pact with the devil who appeared to them in the form of a pig) and magical superstitions remained implicitly connected to yerba. On the other hand, yerba consumption negatively affected Catholic practices. As Torres described,

... the worst is that it keeps them from the Holy Sacrament because before sunrise they begin these vices, and it is very difficult for them to wait to take communion during the mass and not later vomit. And thus, it is very rare the person, male or female, who frequents the Holy Sacrament, and even fewer are those who attend the sermons or confessions and do not give an excuse why they cannot finish with it.⁵⁴

Elsewhere in the Americas, church officials also made similar complaints about how tobacco and chocolate threatened Catholicism.⁵⁵

In his appeal to the Inquisition in Peru, Torres described how yerba undermined society in general. Torres pointed out that Indians, Spaniards, and even priests used yerba, and that almost all consumers admit that it is a vice, but that truly, they cannot give it up. Torres alluded to health concerns that resulted from drinking yerba and the dangerous working conditions associated with producing it. He concluded his litany of complaints by asserting that yerba had degenerative effects on consumers. “[Yerba] makes them vagabonds and lazy. And those that come from Spain and the Spaniards born in the Americas are losing not only the use of reason, but also affection for things of the faith.” After describing all of these negative outcomes, Torres declared that there was an easy remedy: attentive that many Indians had died in producing yerba, the King should prohibit the gathering of it and issue grave penalties for anyone who violated the prohibition.⁵⁶

Despite these diatribes against yerba by a number of colonial officials, there is evidence that some Spaniards at this time did embrace a more positive view of yerba mate. In 1602, when Hernandarias was issuing prohibitions on yerba, the Asunción *cabildo* (town council) wrote a long and detailed appeal to the king in support of yerba production. They framed their appeal in financial terms. They began by reminding the king that he was already well acquainted with Asunción’s poverty. They then stated that it was a known fact that within the confines of the city’s territory there was a certain tree with leaves that produced yerba sold in Asunción and other regions. Anyone who wanted could go and harvest it. They proposed the creation of a government monopoly (*estanco*) whereby only people with government-issued

licenses could produce and sell yerba. The sale of these licenses would generate revenue for the government. To further facilitate yerba production, the cabildo members also requested confirmation that all Indians could freely go to the yerbales to produce yerba and transport it.⁵⁷

It would take Spain almost another two decades to issue a ruling about yerba production. But it was already clear, based on the ineffectiveness of Hernandarias's local prohibitions against it in Paraguay, that yerba consumption would be an unstoppable cultural practice. One notable reason for this was the exceptionally high rates of *mestizaje*. In general, there were far more Spanish men than women in Paraguay, and Spanish men actively took advantage of Guaraní marriage practices. The Guaraní used marriages to build political alliances, and they initially tried to use this practice to build alliances with Spaniards, whom they saw as potential allies against their enemies in the Chaco and as a source for iron tools and other useful items. Wanting to incorporate Spaniards into their society as kin, they offered Spaniards their women. The Spaniards had a different vision of this interaction. They did not see the relationships as building kinship connections among equals. Rather, they saw the women as laborers and concubines and they used Guaraní kinship networks to build their labor force, especially since according to Guaraní practices, women were the ones who did most of the agricultural work.⁵⁸ These relationships often entailed sex, and within a short time, mestizos outnumbered Spaniards. The Governor of Paraguay, Domingo Martínez de Irala, estimated that thirteen years after the founding of Asunción, there were three thousand mestizos while Spaniards numbered less than four hundred. Over time, the proportion of mestizos continued to grow.⁵⁹

These intimate relationships between the Spanish and Guaraní facilitated the spread of yerba mate. Mestizo offspring learned to drink yerba from their Guaraní mothers. Mixed-race children spent more time, and generally developed closer relationships, with their Guaraní mothers than with their Spanish fathers. Such contact meant that they adopted more of their mothers' beliefs and cultural practices, as well.⁶⁰ As the bishop of Paraguay observed in 1608, the population of Asunción "was raised without many Christian customs and most [are] offspring of Spaniards and Indians whose customs are like those of the Indians."⁶¹ Consuming yerba was one of these customs, and one that rendered Hernandarias's prohibitions ineffective. Indeed, in 1618, Hernandarias complained again to the king that he had punished merchants and others who trafficked in yerba, but to no avail. Moreover, the merchants protested and other Spanish officials (in this case,

the Audiencia of la Plata) sided against him. Thus, Hernandarias appealed to the king to confirm his prohibition of yerba.⁶²

The status of yerba mate was finally resolved later in 1618. The king and the Council of Indies (the administrative body that oversaw Spanish territory in the Americas and the Philippines) permitted Indian labor in the yerbales except during the times of the year that were dangerous and harmful to their health.⁶³ This ruling gave royal approval to yerba production. Two years later, in 1620, an anonymous Jesuit confirmed that efforts to prohibit yerba had failed and that great quantities were being produced.⁶⁴ Even though some still found yerba distasteful, there were no longer any proposals to prohibit it. Some Europeans remained skeptical, but people in southern South America realized that it could not be stopped. In 1628, the head of the Jesuit province of Paraguay claimed that people would do anything to get their fix. "And when they do not have anything with which to buy it, they give their undergarments and blankets, and there was a woman who removed the tiles from the roof for yerba."⁶⁵

A century later, the Jesuit superior general, Francisco Retz, vehemently forbade any Jesuit to consume yerba mate (and also tobacco) at a time when the Jesuit missions produced hundreds of thousands of kilos of yerba and the Jesuits sold large quantities through their trade offices in Alto Peru.⁶⁶ In response, the head of the Jesuit province of Paraguay, Jaime Aguilar, obediently wrote, "*I will not overlook any possible way to root out the use [of yerba mate] in this province*" (emphasis in the original), but he also gave himself some leeway in enforcing the prohibition. Aguilar added the caveat that a Jesuit could get permission to drink yerba in an austere manner like a medicine: one time a day without adding any sugar or other condiment, and the Jesuit had to be alone and nobody could witness him drinking yerba.⁶⁷ Some five years after Aguilar's response, his successor, Antonio Machoni, wrote to his superiors in Europe that he could not restrict yerba mate to the degree they desired. In defense of yerba, Machoni compared it to the chocolate, tea, and coffee that many European priests who came to Paraguay were accustomed to drinking and he asserted that it was not something that should be stopped. In the end, Machoni did little to reverse Aguilar's order that no Jesuit would be allowed to use yerba without the provincial's consent, and he added that a doctor also had to conclude that the person needed yerba mate. Unlike Aguilar, however, Machoni did not specify that the person had to consume yerba mate alone and in secret.⁶⁸ Such repeated medical exceptions by Jesuit leaders on the ground confirmed that prohibitions from the highest levels of church hierarchy were ineffective.

SPANISH SOUTH AMERICAN STAPLE

Despite occasional attempts at prohibition, yerba mate consumption rapidly spread in the seventeenth century to become a southern Spanish American staple. While an undercurrent of opposition continued, it was eventually considered a foodstuff. In fact, proponents enumerated a long list of medicinal attributes and it became a basic necessity for people of both genders and all ethnic, social, and economic classes. Its consumption unified people from Paraguay to Buenos Aires, Santiago, Potosí, Lima, and Quito, with only minor social distinctions based on mate accoutrements and additives. Yerba consumption became a shared social practice and a marker of Creole identity.

Once it was determined that yerba could not be stopped, Church officials sanitized the drink by obfuscating the diabolic connections that they had initially complained about. Within two decades of the Crown's definitive ruling on yerba production, stories about how the devil had taught the Indians about yerba were transformed into the claim that Saint Thomas (one of Jesus's twelve apostles and a famous missionary to the ends of the earth) had introduced yerba to the Guaraní.⁶⁹ By reinterpreting the story through a positive Christian lens, yerba became an acceptable, and even estimable, substance. Moreover, claiming that yerba was a gift from one of Jesus's disciples created a sense of obligation to utilize that gift.

Well before Church officials turned to Saint Thomas to justify yerba, others rationalized its use medicinally. As Antonio Ruíz de Montoya wrote in the 1630s, "The Spaniards have found it a remedy against all ills and claim that it is a well-proven remedy against urinary illness, and for this reason they use it in those regions without any moderation or restraint."⁷⁰ Some thirty years later, Diego de Zavallos published "Treatise on the Correct Use of the Yerba from Paraguay," as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. In this document, Zavallos elucidated numerous health benefits associated with yerba consumption, implying that the substance was a veritable wonder drug that cured almost every ailment.⁷¹ Similarly, scholars have claimed that other caffeinated beverages were popularized in Europe because of purported medicinal benefits, especially an association with sobriety, health and respectability.⁷²

Many of the earliest medicinal descriptions of yerba mate referred to how it caused vomiting, which possibly occurred due to mold or additives. While people today would generally avoid something that made them vomit, this was not the case in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Purging was seen as