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Nothing Like the Reel Thing

BY SUSAN GREEN

Consumption has replaced an older ideology," suggests anthropologist Sidney Mintz in *The Cola Conquest*, Irene Angelico's remarkable documentary about the history and clout of Coke and, to a lesser extent, Pepsi. "It is, in a sense, a new religion."

Accordingly, the most startling footage is a sequence from the Chiapas region of Mexico, where indigenous communities incorporate both brands of soda into Mayan holy-water rituals. "Coke and Pepsi are part of the social, religious and cultural fabric there," Angelico says of the grip those beverages have in many Third World countries.

Inspiration for the 138-minute picture — screening Sunday as part of this weekend's Vermont International Film Festival in Burlington — came from a 1995 book by Mark Pendergrast, *For God, Country and Coca-Cola*. The Essex Junction author also appears as an authoritative talking head.

"I try to place Coke in the proper societal perspective," he says about his commentary in the film. "It was a patent medicine at a time [the 1880s] when a huge number of them were being invented. One major ingredient was the coca leaf. The inventor, John Pemberton, was a morphine addict and he was interested in seeing if cocaine could get him off morphine."

Initially billed as "the ideal brain tonic," Coke went from headache and hangover remedy to a symbol of the new century. Although coca extract was dropped from the formula in 1903, its reputation as a narcotic lingered as sales soared. "The idea that Coke had this mysterious, sinful quality helped," Pendergrast adds.

He points out that "every culture has drug drinks that mean something to them, whether it's tea, coffee, wine or soda. My question has always been, 'How can a non-essential product that's basically sugar water with flavoring have so much influence in the world?'"

When *The Cola Conquest* premiered at this summer's World Film Festival in Montreal, where Angelico lives, some moviegoers from the Green Mountain State left the theater looking stunned. "People may think they under-



stand the power of international corporations," said Mark Furnari of South Burlington. "But this shakes you to your core."

He found the arc of Coke's shifting allegiances completely mind-boggling:

Robert Woodruff, who headed the company for more than 60 years, befriended the Nazi elite until the attack on Pearl Harbor. During World War II, however, he promised General Dwight Eisenhower that our GIs would be supplied with the carbonated drink while fighting overseas.

In the 1960s, Martin Luther King advocated a successful Coke boycott to protest the company's all-white employment practices at the time. Yet, when the civil rights leader was assassinated, a company plane flew Coretta Scott King back to Atlanta.

Coke's chief competitor shoulders its share of political machinations. Angelico includes scenes of a Queen City protest that targets Pepsi's decision, finally reversed in 1997, to ignore human rights abuses in Burma for the sake of business.

The *Cola Conquest* attempts to maintain objectivity. "Our idea was not to attack Coke.

We didn't want to take a *Roger & Me* approach," Angelico says, referring to Michael Moore's 1989 ambush-journalism documentary.

Despite this even-handedness, Coca-Cola would not cooperate during the four years it took to complete the \$1.97 million (Canadian) project. "With corporations that are so powerful, you have to be able to scrutinize them and know what they're up to. They don't even have the checks and balances of a government," observes Angelico, who directed five earlier films.

Pendergrast and Angelico, both now 50, met in the mid-1980s when she showed her film about children of Holocaust survivors, *Dark Lullabies*, at Trinity College. He worked there as a librarian to subsidize his freelance writing career.

"I was very moved by her documentary," he recalls. "At the beginning and end, there were quotes from a manuscript by her father [Henry Lilienheim], written just after the war while she was still in a crib. She told me he'd never