How Coke taught the world to sing its tune

A CBC documentary examines how an American soft drink became an internationally recognized icon

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In the lobby of Coca-Cola's Atlanta headquarters hangs a large medallion on which the Earth and a Coke bottle are superimposed, surrounded by a spray of planets, constellations and galaxies, which presumably have not yet been taught to sing in perfect harmony.

Not for the moment, at least. For the million people around the world who are employed by this enormous secular church, it is only a matter of time before the brown beverage colonizes the stars. After all, this planet is pretty much saturated. "People in remote corners of the world who don't even know the names of their own capital cities know the name Coca-Cola," the company's head of marketing boasted in 1986. "We've been able to infiltrate Coca-Cola into the minds and hearts of everyone everywhere."

Such cosmic sentiments spring easily from the mouths of Coke executives. "Eventually," the late Coke CEO Roberto Guizueta once said, "the number-one beverage on Earth will not be tea or coffee or wine or beer. It will be soft drinks — *our* soft drinks." This is not empty bragging, since pop producers claim that North Americans already consume more soft drinks than any other liquid, including water. "Perhaps coming years will see a time," Guizueta mused 10 years ago, "when consumers will have Coca-Cola taps in their homes."

Until that glorious day arrives, we'll have to settle for the Coca-Cola taps in our brains. This is, after all, a substance that is one part herb-infused sugar water to nine parts marketing and image, and that image is one of the most ubiquitous motifs of the 20th century. Coke executives have boasted that the "global Coca-Cola system," as they call it, could be up and running again a few weeks after a global nuclear war, since all it entails is a recipe and a universally known name.

To understand Coke fully, then, one must examine it not as a beverage or a company but as some kind of sovereign entity with all the might and influence of a nation, a religion or a language. This is the goal of *The Cola Conquest*, a sprawling three-part history that begins Monday on the CBC, after premiering last week at the Montreal film festival.

"Coca-Cola is the perfect vehicle to look at a century of change and influence around the world, because Coke was invented just before the turn of the century, in 1886 in Atlanta, and it's everywhere — you can't come out of the jungle without seeing Coca-Cola in front of you." So says Irene Angelico, a Montreal director who has spent the greater part of this decade working on the history of Coke.

Angelico's project is as expansive as her subject. Three years of shooting and $1.9-million (provided by Britain's Channel 4 and the CBC) have taken her cameras to Mexico, Russia, France and China, where "Coca-colonization" is greeted with a mixture of dumb glee and heavy-handed alarm. It includes a startling sequence shot in Papua New Guinea, where Coke sends a travelling minstrel show through the bush to teach illiterate natives how to properly consume the Real Thing.

The film had its genesis in the early 1990s, when Angelico's friend Mark Pendergrast, an Atlanta-based journalist, decided to quit his reporting job and write a book. Angelico and her husband, producer Abbey Neidik, urged Pendergrast to write a history of Coca-Cola, which they wanted to develop as a film. Pendergrast's 1992 book *For God, Country and Coca-Cola* was a sensational success (not the least for printing Coke's "secret" formula in its appendix), and became the film's backbone.

While it is elegantly edited and often very funny, this is a documentary that Coke's Atlanta masters would probably rather not see. Like all religions, Coke has a few corpses buried under the altar, and Angelico unearths a few of them: the company's hesitancy to embrace civil rights and racial equality until the 1970s; its disregard for unpleasant labour conditions at its plantations and bottling plants; its ruthless efforts to blot out local beverage industries and government critics.

"Our intention was not to attack the company; our intention was to take a fair look at Coca-Cola because it has become an icon and because it's so powerful," Angelico said. Still, she concedes that she is motivated by a sense of social activism: "A lot of the responsibility for what Coke and Pepsi do is in our hands as consumers and citizens, so it's kind of to make us aware of our power to influence them, to do the right thing."

To her credit, the resulting film is neither strident nor dogmatic; in fact, viewers are likely to find themselves rooting for Coke, perhaps even wanting to be Coke as it creates the modern-day image of Santa Claus, faces down Hitler (refusing his requests to remove Jews from their board) and sends entire platoons of cola "technicians" along with troops in the Second World War (three of them actually died in combat). And perhaps this is the success of the film's theme: We naturally think of Coke's victories as our victories.

Which is just as well, since by the end of the film Coke has achieved what Napoleon could never have imagined: "In every country in the world, cola dominates," a Coca-Cola executive intones at the beginning of each installment. "We feel that we have to plant our flag everywhere, even before the Christians arrive. Cola's destiny is to inherit the Earth."

The Cola Conquest *begins Monday at 9 p.m. on CBC.*

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