

SCIENCE NEWS®

The Weekly Newsmagazine of Science

A Science Service Publication
Volume 141, No. 9, February 29, 1992

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SCIENCE NEWS (ISSN 0036-8423) is published weekly on Saturday, except the last week in December, for \$39.50 for 1 year or \$68.00 for 2 years (foreign postage \$6.00 additional per year) by Science Service, Inc., 1719 N Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20036. Second-class postage paid at Washington, DC, and additional mailing office. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to SCIENCE NEWS, 231 West Center Street, Marion, OH 43305. Change of address: Four to six weeks' notice is required — old and new addresses, including zip codes, must be provided.

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Editorial and Business Offices:
1719 N St., N.W., Washington, DC 20036
(202-785-2255)
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Subscription Department:
231 West Center Street, Marion, OH 43305
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Letters

Emetic symbolism

The use of a caffeine-containing herbal tea by the Jivaro tribe of Ecuador and Peru ("And you thought *you* hated mornings," SN: 1/11/92, p.28) continues a centuries-old Native American cultural practice that once extended as far north as the American Southeast. In *The Southeastern Indians* (1976), Charles Hudson describes a ritual beverage, called "black drink" by Europeans and "white drink" by Indians, made from the leaves of an indigenous holly plant, *Ilex vomitoria*, the main ingredient of which is caffeine. He reproduces a 16th-century engraving by Theodore de Bry illustrating drinking and vomiting by the Timucuan of Florida.

You state that the Jivaro "vomit to rid themselves of the excess caffeine." Hudson says that the Indians of the Southeast "sometimes used it as an emetic," drinking repeatedly and vomiting each time. But he also remarks that "Southeastern Indians were

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Cover: Situated only a few kilometers from the San Andreas fault, the town of Los Gatos, Calif., suffered heavy damage during the Loma Prieta earthquake of October 1989. While residents of this community and nearby ones might now breathe a little easier, two seismologists argue that an equally strong jolt could strike the region in the near future. (Photo: John K. Nakata/U.S. Geological Survey Open File Report 90-547)



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Science Service, a nonprofit corporation founded in 1921, gratefully accepts tax-deductible contributions and bequests to assist its efforts to increase the public understanding of science, with special emphasis on young people. More recently, it has included in its mission increasing scientific literacy among members of disadvantaged groups.

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greatly concerned with purity" and that the drink "was a necessary part of all important council meetings" because it "purified men of pollution" and "served as a symbolic social cement." In short, in the American Southeast, emesis was ritual symbolic action.

Leonard B. Glick
Professor of Anthropology
Hampshire College
Amherst, Mass.

Educated guessers?

Dr. Conway's claim that students can recall cognitive psychology a decade after studying it ("School memories endure as time goes by," SN: 1/11/92, p.21) suggests that he has forgotten a bit of it himself.

His claim rests on the fact that former students score better than chance on recall tests — but *not* necessarily better than control subjects, whose cleverness or outside learning might outperform a mere coin-flip.

Even people (like myself) without benefit of

psychology lessons might notice that good science emerges from comparing one's test subjects with control subjects, rather than comparing them with hypothetical models of maximum ignorance. Such a controlled study might show whether university students remember well, or just guess well.

William Softky
Los Angeles, Calif.

True enough, but before you dismiss Conway's findings or those of psychologist Harry Bahrick, consult Conway's journal article for examples of the highly specific psychology items used in his memory tests.
— B. Bower

As a former high-achieving "A" student, I'll chip in three comments on school memories. First, after 20 years out of academia, I still retain an unholy amount of trivia ("specific detailed facts"), whether or not I ever devel-

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