

Media Narratives, Ayahuasca and Western Migrations: Critical analysis of Olivia Arévalo's murder

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Abstract

This study examines the Peruvian media's coverage of Olivia Arévalo's murder in 2018, a Shipibo wise woman known for her Ayahuasca healing rituals. The perpetrator, a Canadian man seeking to learn healing rituals for addiction treatment, was subsequently executed by the indigenous community. Media monitoring identified a total of 574 global news articles, with just 7.66% originating from Peruvian sources. Critical discourse analysis revealed significant shortcomings, particularly in Peruvian media outlets, characterized by stark neutrality and an omission of crucial socio-historical, cultural, and political contexts. This highlights the absence of comprehensive media discussions on migration, emphasizing a gap in journalistic coverage and underscoring the need for further examination of migration narratives in the media landscape.

Keywords: *Ayahuasca, Media Coverage, Migration Narratives, Critical discourse analysis, Cultural appropriation.*

Introduction

This study delves into the case involving the murder of an 81-year-old Shipibo wise woman, Olivia Arevalo Lomas, which unfolded in the remote town of Victoria Gracia in the Ucayali department of the Peruvian Amazon. The perpetrator was a Canadian named Sebastian Woodroffe, who was in turn lynched to death by the indigenous community. His journey to Peru was motivated by a quest for psychotropic experiences to aid in addiction treatment.

Woodroffe's unique narrative unfolded through his social media profiles, where he shared the personal story of his venture into the Peruvian jungle. His mission was to explore the potential healing properties of Ayahuasca, a powerful plant-based brew, in the context of his own health improvement. To fund his stay in the Peruvian jungle and support his personal initiative, Woodroffe turned to crowdfunding (2014). This endeavor also carried the expectation that upon completing his health transformation, he would be equipped to share his experience with those seeking alternative paths to better health, bypassing the costly conventional treatments offered by Western medicine. The subsequent events, including Woodroffe's involvement in Olivia Arevalo Lomas' murder, shed light on the complex intersections of indigenous traditions, western migrations and the evolving landscape of psychotropic exploration.

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Ayahuasca in the 21st Century

Yage, Chacrana, or Ayahuasca are some of the names used to refer to the mixture of psychoactive plants (traditionally *Banisteriopsis caapi* and *Psychotria viridis*) used ceremonially, and its use has spread in the Western Amazon and globally in recent decades. Its popularity among Western tourists traveling to the Peruvian Amazon has exponentially increased due to the promotion of its transformative and healing properties. Tourists arrive in search of this experience, which begins with a ritual diet involving fasting and the ingestion of non-psychoactive plants aimed at energizing and cleansing the body, typically through purges or ritual baths. This use constitutes a technology connected to Amazonian conceptions of the body and its local cosmologies that enrich the understanding of human-nature relationships and promote various integration logics and sustainability efforts in the areas that host these ecological tourists (Fotiou, 2019).

In the 1970s, Yage was considered a last-resort medicine for incurable diseases by modern medicine or for psychological cases to resolve the condition of critically ill patients. Its use was limited to a few patients and their families, especially considering that these experts had primary activities such as agriculture or commerce, and their healing sessions took place outside their working hours (Nazakawa, 2014). In the 21st century, this ritual has gained prominence as a tourism driver for Amazonian economies, with hundreds of Western tourists visiting South America to experience what was once a medicinal therapy or a ritual practiced by indigenous populations.

This boom in medicinal or religious tourism is possible today due to the acceptance of this ritual after years of political and religious debates about its use. In 1985, the Federal Drug Council (CONFEN) of Brazil banned its use, and after two decades of public policy debates, the federal government consolidated the regulation of its consumption for religious purposes, recognizing Ayahuasca consumer groups as legitimate religions that are part of the cultural heritage of the Amazon region (Antunes, 2019). Meanwhile, the Peruvian National Institute of Culture (INC) declared it Cultural Heritage of the Nation under Resolution 836 of 2008, arguing that it is used in complex cultural rituals that go beyond mere hallucinogenic substance ingestion. The ritual accompanying its consumption is protected as long as it serves therapeutic, religious, or cultural affirmation purposes, distinct from Western uses that tend towards its commercialization as a psychotropic consumption experience (Andina, 2008).

This traditional Amazonian brew has garnered significant global attention in recent years, eliciting complex and multifaceted discussions. The expanding interest has prompted a range of studies and publications that delve into various aspects of ayahuasca, from its cultural appropriation and globalization to its spiritual significance, ethical dilemmas, and effects on indigenous communities and tourism. For example, Petersen, Feldes, and Cova (2022) research the emergence of shamanic vocations related to ayahuasca in both Denmark and Peru, providing cross-cultural perspectives on its significance. Wasson's (2020) phenomenological study offers an in-depth exploration of tourists' subjective experiences during ayahuasca ceremonies in Iquitos, Peru, contributing depth to our understanding of ayahuasca tourism. Turning to the context of ayahuasca tourism in Peru, Gearin (2022) critically analyzes the intersections of primitivist medicine and capitalist concerns, examining the tensions arising from the commodification of ayahuasca experiences. On the other hand, Marcus (2022) takes a closer look at ethical dilemmas within the globalized ayahuasca movement, exploring the challenges faced by individuals and groups involved in ayahuasca shamanism and its integration into therapeutic contexts. Additionally, Almendro (2023) provides a comprehensive examination of various dimensions of the ayahuasca phenomenon, encompassing cultural, spiritual, and legal aspects. Salibová's research (2020) delves into the consequences of ayahuasca ethno-tourism for both the indigenous Shuar community in Ecuador and Western participants, shedding light on the interactions, impacts, and challenges that emerge in the context of cross-cultural engagements within ayahuasca tourism. These works help in discussing how

individuals like Sebastian Woodroffe, coming from different cultural backgrounds, migrated to the Amazon region in search of traditional practices and how their presence and impacted indigenous communities and their traditions.

Media Coverage and the Migration to Colonized Rituals and Plastic Shamans

There is a colonization of this ancestral practice since the 1980s and 1990s, specifically by creating a niche focused on exotic tourism in countries considered part of the Third World. Critics of these trends highlight the rise in the number of “Plastic Shamans” (Arregui-Orue, 2011). These individuals self-proclaim themselves as spiritual leaders and monetize ancestral practices and rituals at the expense of the interest of Western tourists. They charge a minimum of \$70 for a session, up to \$500 for a series of sessions, often offered in tourist packages with stays at locations known as spiritual retreats, where the brew is typically consumed at night (Russia Today, 2019).

The consequences of the lack of state supervision of such establishments have resulted in emergencies involving the deaths of Western tourists. Among the most notable cases, four stand out: The first occurred in 2012 when the police found the body of an 18-year-old American buried on the property of the shaman José Pineda Vargas, who confessed that the young man died after consuming the brew (Reuters, 2012). In 2015, the British citizen Unais Gómez was killed with a knife during an ayahuasca ritual by the Canadian Joshua Freeman Stevens. Witnesses claim that the Canadian acted in self-defense because the Briton sought the murder weapon after ingesting the brew and, in a psychotic episode, attempted to attack him (BBC, 2015). Another occurred in 2016 when the American Leslie Allison died in the Ecuadorian Amazon after consuming the brew, guided by the shaman Miguel Chiriap, whose website claimed he had 30 years of experience using the brew in healing rituals (Latin America Current Events, 2016).

The media coverage of these incidents resonated internationally, sparking historic debates that criticized the beginnings of these tourist trends (Grunwell, 1998), the dangers posed by the lack of medical knowledge and appropriate dosages by the Plastic Shamans (Dobkin de Rios & Rumrill, 2009), and the consequences for the environment and health when ayahuasca is consumed in ways that deviate from tradition, disrespecting indigenous culture (Franczyk et al., 2019). This highlights the uniqueness of the fourth case, which is relevant to the present study. The murder of the Peruvian Olivia Arévalo at the hands of the Canadian Sebastián Woodroffe in 2018 received less international news coverage than the previous cases, especially in Peruvian media outlets.

The Media often depicts migrants who abuse drugs as belonging to minority communities, perpetuating stigmatization and negative stereotypes. This portrayal frequently associates drug-related issues with marginalized populations, contributing to their further marginalization. For example, Melo et al. (2018) emphasize the importance of understanding the injection drug use trajectories among migrant populations, shedding light on their unique experiences.

However, a stark contrast emerges when examining cases like that of Sebastian Woodroffe, a Western man who migrated to South America and committed a crime related to psychotropic plants. Woodroffe, who killed the indigenous Shipibo wise woman Olivia Arevalo Lomas, exemplifies a different narrative treatment. While media narratives and research often focus on migrants from marginalized backgrounds, the case of Woodroffe highlights the different lens through which crimes committed by Western migrants are viewed.

This differential treatment in media and research narratives raises questions about the biases and assumptions that shape our perceptions of drug-related issues and migrants. The need to explore stigma associated with mental health conditions and substance use among migrant and ethnic minority backgrounds (Douglass et al., 2022) becomes evident. Furthermore, it underscores the importance of responding to drug-related problems among

migrants, refugees, and ethnic minorities in Europe (De Kock, 2022) without reinforcing negative stereotypes.

Understanding the lived experiences of migrants and ethnic minorities in recovery from problem substance use, such as recovery capital, becomes essential (Pouille et al., 2021). It is crucial to address alcohol and other drug use among young people from these backgrounds, as viewed from the perspectives of service providers (Douglass et al., 2021). Additionally, examining the criminalization of South-South migration and the experiences of migrants, as seen in the context of Venezuelan forced migrants in Peru, provides valuable insights into nationality-based criminalization, since the Venezuelan migrant women are hyper sexualized, which demonstrates how stereotypes can intersect and compound vulnerabilities (Pérez & Freier, 2023). This, coupled with the compounding of drug war disparities in the United States deportation regime and its impact on immigrants highlight the urgent need for more nuanced narratives and research (Tosh, 2021).

This particular news event stands out in a broader context where the death of an indigenous tradition bearer has seemingly received less attention compared to tragedies involving Western tourists, despite all occurrences taking place within the same international framework. The former observation raises questions about whether the deaths of Anglo-Saxon individuals are perceived as more significant than those of Peruvian citizens or if incidents involving perpetrators who do not belong to racial minorities are considered less newsworthy. In the context of migration narratives, this situation provides an opportunity to discuss how the migration of Western tourists and individuals often referred to as "Plastic Shamans" into the Amazon region has disrupted the traditional practices of indigenous communities. It has also led to the commercialization of Ayahuasca rituals, impacting the local economy and cultural dynamics in the process. This dichotomy in media attention and the differential treatment of such incidents underscore the complex dynamics at play within the realm of migration, indigenous traditions, and cultural appropriation in the Amazon region.

Method

An online media analysis was conducted to examine Peruvian media coverage related to the murder of Olivia Arévalo, a traditional healer and member of the Shipibo-Conibo Xeteba ethnic group. Arévalo held the highest rank as an indigenous sage within her community. The initial step involved media monitoring, a method designed for the independent observation of mass media, particularly in electoral contexts. The objective was to analyze the discourse presented by Peruvian media regarding this case. To achieve this, news articles were collected starting from the initial date of the incident in April 2018. On a weekly basis, statements and images from each news piece were systematically recorded until production ceased. By November 2018, no new related news articles were reported, leading to the organization and systematization of the already collected corpus.

A total of 574 news articles were recorded globally, encompassing both English and Spanish sources. Subsequently, the corpus underwent refinement using content analysis principles. The initially gathered information was transformed into variables, initially ordinal (including the month and day of the article) and subsequently nominal (classifying the language of the news). Bibliometric systematic review principles were employed to determine the proportion of Spanish-speaking news versus English-speaking news. Utilizing Word Frequency Counter software simultaneously on headlines and text from the corpus, the most frequently occurring words in both English (e.g., Canadian, killed, murder, indigenous, Peruvian) and Spanish (e.g., peruana, asesinato, sabiduría, indígena, homicidio) were identified as keywords. These keywords were then employed to conduct independent online news searches to confirm that the number of news articles aligned with the previously collected corpus. The verification process revealed that 193 news articles originated from Spanish-speaking media, constituting 33.62% of the corpus.

Following this verification, the information was further refined, this time under a dichotomous variable, distinguishing between Peruvian and non-Peruvian media outlets. It was ascertained that out of all the news articles, 44 originated from Peruvian media, accounting for 22.79% of the Spanish-speaking results and a mere 7.66% of the overall news articles. Only three Peruvian media outlets covered the news: Perú 21 (30 articles), El Comercio (13 articles), and La República (11 articles). These news articles constituted the sample for subsequent analysis.

This study applied the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) outlined by Teun Van Dijk (1999). CDA is a method that scrutinizes how social inequality and dominance manifest through speech and text, with the aim of influencing the actions and beliefs of the public in favor of dominant societal groups. It is essential to contextualize the analysis within the social, political, and cultural context, establishing connections between linguistic features in texts and immediate cultural and social structures (Pilleux, 2000). The primary concepts under examination correspond to Van Dijk's formal and meaningful aspects (2003), encompassing the Meaning/Text level and the Formal/Text-Context level. The former includes a thematic level of global meanings and a level of local meanings (both implicit and explicit), while the latter encompasses formal and subtle structures, along with the contextual level of the news.

These concepts have been previously operationalized in a discourse analysis project within the field of news conducted by the doctoral program in Communication at the Universities of La Frontera and Austral in Chile. Their analysis matrix was adopted for implementation in this study (Browne-Sartori et al., 2011; Inzunza-Moraga, Browne-Sartori, Perceval-Verde, 2013). This facilitated the examination of terminology employed in news related to the incident, as well as the underlying implicit contexts. The matrix utilized in this study is a reference to the original authors' work:

News outlet:	Date:
Section:	Page (if applicable):
Title:	
1. Plane of Significance at the Thematic level	
1.1 Global Significances	1.2.1 Implicit or Direct
	What indirect resources are utilized to explain
1.2 Local Significances	1.2.2 Explicit or Direct
	What direct resources are utilized to explain
2. Formal Plane at the textual-contextual level	
2.1 Subtle Formal Structures	Subtle discourses are elaborated using resources such as fallacies, misinformation, omission. The message is obscured.
2.2 Contextual level	The historical, political, socio-cultural context in which the news is inserted into

Figure 1. Critical Discourse Analysis Matrix in News (Inzunza-Moraga, Browne-Sartori, Perceval-Verde, 2013).

Results and Discussion

The application of the employed methodology unveiled a conspicuous tendency characterized by a lack of implicit discourse within all the scrutinized news articles. These articles prominently featured direct meanings, systematically presenting information obtained from official sources without recourse to primary sources. Employing secondary

data gleaned from interviews with law enforcement and government officials, the events were reconstructed in accordance with official narratives, following a structured pattern. The standard narrative template commenced with a description of the incident, sought contextual information regarding the indigenous leader, and listed the investigation findings sequentially, devoid of contextualization. While all the news articles adhered to the levels of global meaning, they exhibited a notable inadequacy in addressing the levels of local meanings, as they refrained from referencing indirect resources to narrate the events.

Conspicuous at this juncture is the absence of formal structures and, more significantly, contextual information—a fundamental component within discourses (Van Dijk, 1999). Of particular significance is the omission of data concerning historical contexts (omitting the linkage to prior cases associated with the consumption of the brew), political contexts (neglecting the questions and political tensions entwined with the practice), and socio-cultural contexts (eschewing references to the rationales behind the community's performance of the ritual and its cultural significance). This analysis lays bare the discursive acts of omission by the Peruvian press, which align more closely with a constraining filter and gatekeeping of news (Vos, 2015). Within this context, the dominant discourse conspicuously exhibits a disinterest in exploring the intricate web of cultural, racial, economic, and political tensions that attended an event marked by aggravated homicides within ancestral communities, which are safeguarded by the customary law of ancient societies.

Transposing this discourse analysis to the sphere of journalism studies, it becomes evident that the examined news articles subscribe to a reductive mode of information presentation, exclusively concentrating on the reporting of factual details. While the conventional journalistic elements encompassing who, what, how, and when were adequately addressed (Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch, 2009), the absence of the "why" dimension within the narrative underscores the inherent informational limitations surrounding the events. At the heart of this narrative rests the essence of the murder—a Canadian ex-combatant's journey to Peru, propelled by a quest not solely for healing but also for the establishment of an economic venture. Central to this endeavor was his aspiration to acquire the techniques of the Ayahuasca ritual, with the intention of offering a novel cultural and medicinal product via social media, thus positioning himself as another practitioner of the Plastic Shaman archetype.

¿Quién era Olivia Arévalo, lideresa shipibo-konibo asesinada en Ucayali?

Arévalo, sabia indígena, fue acrobillada este jueves en la comunidad intercultural Victoria Gracia



Figure 2. The press focuses on the "who" of the news (El Comercio, 2018)

The aforementioned depiction encapsulates a specific portrayal of the illicit appropriation of ancestral knowledge (Báez, 2008) and the emergence of a form of plunder that often goes underrecognized in nations steeped in ancient cultures, particularly in the context of a millennia-old ritual like the consumption of Ayahuasca (Tupper, 2009). Journalists hailing from third-world countries frequently grapple with a lack of education concerning their indigenous populations, which, regrettably, hinders their capacity to address information pertaining to indigenous communities and accord them their rightful status as bearers of rights.

In their coverage of both murders, the subject of customary law was conspicuously absent. This omission stemmed from the inherent complexity of the legal framework, as the news, while acknowledging the Canadian individual's role in the indigenous leader's death, could not propose a legal recourse for her demise, which resulted from a lynching by indigenous individuals. This paradox persisted, despite the fact that the incident had been documented through cellphone recordings. It becomes evident that Peruvian journalists refrained from delving into the intricacies and challenges of the judicial system when it came to prosecuting the perpetrators, given that their customary law ran counter to the positive legal framework in force within the Peruvian state.

Fiscalía confirma que canadiense disparó y asesinó a Olivia Arévalo

Ricardo Jiménez señaló que todas las pruebas reunidas apuntan a que Sebastian Woodroffe disparó contra líderes shi-pibo-konibo.



REDACCIÓN PERÚ21
redaccion21@peru21.pe

Actualizado el 03/05/2018 a las 21:09

Figure 3. News about the murder of Olivia Arévalo (Peru21, 2018)

Journalistic enterprises in third-world countries have undergone drastic transformations in their media convergence processes without understanding how these transformations have weakened them as media references for the dissemination of local news agendas. We observe how in Peruvian journalism, when covering topics related to indigenous communities, there are few references from the perspective of opinion journalism. Expressing an opinion in the era of digital journalism implies taking a position of observance when enunciating the multiple “othernesses” that have gained space in the public sphere. In these times of social inclusion, we are called upon to examine how our “ideological biases” (Mullainathan and Shleifer, 2002) are reflected in discourse. In the specific case of the murder of Olivia Arévalo Lomas, it was not addressed by political analysts, renowned columnists, or opinion journalists.

Media outlets in third-world countries have undergone profound transformations in their processes of media convergence. However, an understanding of how these transformations have inadvertently weakened their status as media authorities for disseminating local news agendas is notably lacking. Within the realm of Peruvian journalism, an analysis of coverage concerning indigenous communities reveals a conspicuous dearth of opinion journalism perspectives. The act of expressing an opinion in the digital journalism era necessitates assuming a position of scrutiny, wherein the articulation of multiple forms of alterity within the public sphere is acknowledged. In an era characterized by an emphasis on social inclusion, there arises an imperative need to scrutinize the reflection of our “ideological biases” (Mullainathan and Shleifer, 2002) within discourse. Remarkably, in the specific context of Olivia Arévalo Lomas's murder, the absence of engagement from political analysts, esteemed columnists, or opinion journalists is glaring.

Conclusion

This research undertook a critical discourse analysis of Peruvian media coverage concerning the murder of Olivia Arévalo, an indigenous sage renowned for safeguarding

ancestral wisdom. This analysis aligned with roles established in journalism studies and revealed notable shortcomings within prominent media outlets in Peru, namely Peru 21, El Comercio, and La República. These outlets predominantly presented content characterized by a pronounced neutrality that downplayed the socio-historical, cultural, and political dimensions of the conflict.

In addition to this analysis, it is crucial to extend our reflections to the broader journalistic approach to migration in third-world countries. The examination of journalism's handling of migration issues reveals parallels with its treatment of the case of Olivia Arévalo. Just as the indigenous sage's murder was reported with a stark neutrality that omitted essential contextual information, media representations of migration often fall short in providing comprehensive coverage.

This case study prompts an argument suggesting that the journalism profession in third-world countries is undergoing a crisis, particularly evident in its handling of migration topics. The dynamics of journalistic convergence are unfolding in an environment marked by improvisation and exploration. Designations like interactive journalism, citizen journalism, and crowdsourcing journalism remain in a state of transition and refinement. Media companies in various socio-economic contexts tend to adopt journalistic strategies that maximize profitability. Consequently, individuals aiming to bring socially significant issues to the public agenda must present information from a multitude of sources, emphasizing the diverse events that cumulatively constitute the news "events".

We propose that journalism schools in third-world nations should prioritize the development of journalistic competencies among their graduates. This would enable them to produce high-quality informational content utilizing available digital tools for big data analysis and content curation. Such competencies empower journalists to engage in investigative journalism and discern reliable information sources from the increasing prevalence of fake news in the global information landscape.

The murder of the indigenous sage examined in this study should have engendered critical questions challenging the status quo of indigenous affirmation policies and the growing phenomena of cultural appropriation and exploitation of ancient Amazonian cultures. These questions encompass inquiries into whether the incorporation of multicultural principles into constitutional reforms in Latin American countries has resulted in meaningful social change for indigenous communities. Additionally, it raises legal and ethical questions concerning the recognition of indigenous legal norms, even when they deviate from state-sanctioned principles of justice. It further prompts inquiries into the progress of indigenous social movements in improving the living conditions of marginalized indigenous populations across social, political, economic, and cultural dimensions. Lastly, it prompts reflection on the stance Latin American states should adopt regarding cultural exploitation practices that profit from the ancestral knowledge of indigenous communities.

Although this study constitutes a limited sample of news articles focused on a specific case of media representation related to cultural appropriation and violence surrounding ancestral practices, it contributes to the understanding of a relatively overlooked phenomenon in Latin American mainstream media. This research invites future investigations to delve into the discursive practices of journalists with the aim of fostering enhanced content production practices that offer a more comprehensive representation of ancient cultures and a nuanced approach to migration issues.

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