

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Kent		
Unit of Assessment: 22: Anthropology and Development Studies		
Title of case study: Preventing Sexual Abuse of Participants in Shamanic Ceremonies in South America through the Establishment of Shared Practices of Care		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2006-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Daniela Peluso	Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology	2006-2020
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2018-2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Dr Peluso's research, conducted over more than a decade in the Peruvian Amazon, has directly enabled the creation of safety guidelines for participants in ceremonies that involve drinking ayahuasca, the traditional spiritual medicine of Amazonia. Peluso's research specifically assisted the Chacruna Institute for Psychedelic Plant Medicines in creating guidelines that mitigate the potential for sexual abuse of female participants, a phenomenon notably accompanied and revealed by recent growth in ayahuasca tourism. The Chacruna Institute's guidelines – the <i>Ayahuasca Community Guide for the Awareness of Sexual Abuse</i> – have had a formative and standard-setting influence on shared understandings of risk globally, promoted awareness and security within key centres of ayahuasca tourism, and strengthened governmental and industry action on risk mitigation.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Ayahuasca is a medicinal plant brew used as a traditional spiritual medicine in ceremonies by the indigenous peoples of the Amazon basin and, more recently, by tourists in the region. Numbers are hard to establish, but it is estimated that, in Brazil alone, over half a million people have used ayahuasca at least once in their life. Dr Peluso's research has revealed that the significant increase in opportunities to participate in ayahuasca ceremonies has inadvertently created contexts in which sexual abuse and misconduct towards female participants – locals as well as foreign – have become prevalent. This has been referred to as a silent 'epidemic' [f].</p> <p>Peluso's work on ayahuasca practices [R1, R2] is informed by a larger and sustained body of research focused on personhood, perspectivism, ethnohistory [R5], indigenous urbanisation [R4], and corruption [R3]. Based on over 65 months of fieldwork in the Amazon, this body of research reflects the expertise that led to Dr Peluso's current impact. These studies collectively attend to the cultural context and sensitivities at play in indigenous ways of life and cross-cultural encounters in Amazonia, particularly within shamanic ceremonies.</p> <p>The core impact stems directly from a study, published in 2014, in which Peluso analyses shaman-participant seduction in the context of ayahuasca ceremonies [R1]. Her research explores how shamans and participants partake in shamanic rituals in which the ayahuasca brew is consumed with the aim of producing hallucinogenic visions deemed to be personally beneficial to all participants. She reveals what happens when you bring together various belief systems within transnational ritual contexts, by examining the relationship between sex, seduction, and gendered power relations in the context of ayahuasca rituals in historical, symbolic, and practical terms [R1, R2]. The research addresses cross-cultural interactions and the ways in which modernity is negotiated in the Peruvian Amazon. Peluso's anthropological fieldwork spans the period from when</p>		

ayahuasca practices with foreigners were unusual to a situation where they are not only commonplace but an 'industry' [R2]. Peluso was able to provide first-hand accounts of how local people responded to the growing demands of ayahuasca tourism, and how such changes created a context in which sexual abuse not only became possible but commonplace [R1].

Peluso's research also engages with Amerindian epistemologies and theories of perspectivism, countertransference, and 'the male gaze', to examine local concerns and interactions between shamans, their apprentices, and ayahuasca participants, and how they variably position themselves as authorities, intermediaries, and gendered individuals. As she demonstrates, the adoption and reinvention of ayahuasca rituals in its various forms in new encounters is one of the ongoing challenges faced by ayahuasca usage and practices [R1].

Peluso's research, all of which was published while she was at the University of Kent, also explains how, in areas of extreme poverty, ayahuasca tourism offers a significant income opportunity [R1-R5]. The research examines issues concerning the viability and desirability of recent entrepreneurs, aiming to establish effective measures of transparency, efficacy, and safety with regards to the increasing participation in the ayahuasca sessions [R1, R2]. Her work raises critical questions about the methods through which such initiatives seek to legitimise authorities, actors, voices, and criteria, and also to delegitimise others [R1-R3]. Ayahuasca tourism takes place in environments where there are marked disjunctures between what transpires in the spoken, visible and the unspoken, invisible worlds, particularly in a situation of considerable inequality [R1-R5]. Whereas such enterprises may succeed from a market perspective, they make little sense within the broader social, political, and cultural contexts in which ayahuasca practitioners live and operate [R2].

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

[R1] Peluso, Daniela M. (2014). 'Ayahuasca's attractions and distractions: examining sexual seduction in shaman-participant interactions'. In: Beatriz C. Labate and Clancy Cavnar (eds). *Ayahuasca Shamanism in the Amazon and Beyond*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 231-255. <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/37177/>

In 2018, [R1] was adapted for a general readership:

<https://chacrana.net/sexual-seduction-ayahuasca-shaman-participants-interactions/>

[R2] Peluso, Daniela M. (2016). 'Global Ayahuasca: An Entrepreneurial Ecosystem'. In: B. C. Labate, C. Cavnar, and A. K. Gearin (eds), *The World Ayahuasca Diaspora: Reinventions and Controversies*. London: Routledge, pp. 203-221. <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/45270/>

[R3] Peluso, Daniela M. (2018). 'Traversing the margins of corruption amidst *informal* economies in Amazonia'. *Culture, Theory and Critique*, 59 (4): 400-418; special issue on 'The Social Life of Corruption in Latin America' (guest editors: D. Goldstein and K. Drybread). doi: 10.1080/14735784.2018.1499433.

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/67276/>

[R4] Peluso, Daniela M. (2015). 'Circulating between rural and urban communities: multi-sited dwellings in Amazonian frontiers'. *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 20(1): 57-79; special issue on 'Indigenous Urbanization: The Circulation of Peoples between Rural and Urban Amazonian Spaces' (guest editor: Daniela M. Peluso). doi: 10.1111/jlca.12134. <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/45048/>

[R5] Alexiades, Miguel, and Peluso, Daniela M. (2009). 'Plants "of the Ancestors", Plants "of the Outsiders": Ese Eja History, Migration and Medicinal Plants', in M. N. Alexiades (ed.), *Mobility and Migration in Indigenous Amazonia: Contemporary Ethnoecological Perspectives*. Oxford: Berghahn, 220-248. <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/30044/>

Grants

[G1] British Academy Small Research Grant: 'Urban Ethnogenesis (Peru)', 2007. PI: Daniela M. Peluso. Value: £4,000.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Peluso's research has played a direct and decisive role in the public education mission of the key organisation representing the ayahuasca community globally. In autumn **2018**, Peluso was contacted by the USA-based Chacrana Institute for Psychedelic Plant Medicines, which wished to use her research **[R1]** as 'foundational' **[b]** evidence to inform safety guidelines for participants in ayahuasca ceremonies, in the wake of the MeToo movement and subsequent denunciations of high-profile shamans who had committed sexual misconduct. The Chacrana Institute is a non-profit organisation promoting research on plant medicines and psychedelics, and drawing attention to issues within the ayahuasca community, among others. Peluso was invited to act as an expert advisor on the shaping of the safety guidelines – the *Ayahuasca Community Guide for the Awareness of Sexual Abuse* – on the basis that her research elaborated the varied factors and circumstances that contribute to the occurrence of sexual abuse. The Institute highlights that Peluso's 'deep understanding of the cultural specificities at stake during ayahuasca ceremonies [...] permeates and distinguishes all sections of the *Guide*' **[b]**. Peluso's academic authority in this area more broadly led to her appointment as an Associate Director at the Chacrana Institute in late autumn **2018**.

The *Ayahuasca Community Guide for the Awareness of Sexual Abuse* was published in **November 2018**, and was subsequently translated into multiple languages. Its publication was followed by a social media campaign the following year **[a]**. Between its publication and December 2020, the *Guide* has had over 17,000 views and over 9,000 downloads **[h, i]**. It also received attention on a variety of media platforms, including the BBC, and was shared by the largest retreat booking website, Ayamundo (93 centres in 20 countries), and over 50 international NGOs. Given this significant dissemination and uptake of the *Guide*, Peluso's research led to what the Chacrana Institute considers to be one of its 'most successful initiatives' **[b]**, the specific impact of which is fourfold:

1. Building a shared understanding and awareness of risks across diverse global audiences

The *Ayahuasca Community Guide for the Awareness of Sexual Abuse* is the first of its kind, with significant international reach, meaning that the research has underpinned a process that has had a formative and standard-setting influence on shared understandings and awareness of risk globally. It binds diverse stakeholders in shamanic ceremonies to adopt shared principles of conduct that might otherwise be fragmented and potentially contradictory. As the owner of a large retreat centre explains, the *Guide* 'contributes to the long-term sustainability of a thriving ayahuasca tourism industry [...] introduc[ing] higher standards of practice for lodges and shamans' **[d]**. Beyond the interests of individual lodges, it is the overall tourism industry in places where ayahuasca is sought that benefited most substantially from the *Guide*. In the words of a tourism agency in Iquitos, the *Guide* 'has meant that we can more adequately ensure the safety of our visitors and inspire trust' **[f]**.

2. Protecting the interests and wellbeing of Peruvian citizens and British and other nationals abroad

The *Guide* garnered the interest of the British Embassy in Lima, Peru, resulting in an invitation to participate in a meeting in **November 2019** that brought together stakeholders from government, including the Ministry for Women and Mental Health, organisations working to help victims of sexual abuse, psychologists, GPs, and the police. The Embassy's aim is to create a Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) in Lima for victims of sexual abuse, and the work done on the *Guide* enriched the discussion and is feeding into the Embassy project **[c]**.

3. Creating the conditions for greater awareness and security in centres of ayahuasca tourism

The significant visibility of the *Guide*, most notably in Iquitos – capital of the Peruvian jungle where 36% of lodges are located – has created the conditions for greater awareness and security. In Iquitos, various stakeholders publicised the *Guide* through their own networks. This included the Tourism Police, the Ministry of Tourism, the Peruvian Tourism Agency, NGO Amazon Promise (which brings medical care to local communities), and the Ayahuasca Safety Association (a centre owners' collective), as well as major ayahuasca centres such as El Pulgero and Dreamglade, which receive thousands of participants every year. The *Guide* has imparted a clearer understanding of what constitutes sexual abuse in ayahuasca settings. It has also provided female tourists with a sense of security. As the owner/facilitator of the Dreamglade Shamanic Healing Centre puts it, the *Guide* 'definitely contributes to making female guests to local retreat centres more at ease, knowing what to expect, where boundaries lie, and feeling safer' [d].

4. Effecting behaviour change in participants, including reporting of misconduct and abuse within the ayahuasca community

There is evidence that the *Guide* is effecting changes in behaviour among participants in ayahuasca tourism. As a female shaman explains: 'The *Guide* has responded for the first time to a very pressing need in the ayahuasca community worldwide [...]; they [women] also more readily share their experiences and speak out in case of misconduct, whether experienced or witnessed' [e, b]. This assessment aligns with the results of the Chacruna Institute's 2020 survey, in which 33% of respondents (2,071, but 745 after attrition, the majority of whom were experienced participants) said that the guidelines had changed their behaviour. For instance, they identified being more aware/cautious/vigilant towards themselves and others, talking openly about sexual abuse in ayahuasca settings, and advocating for victims. This is an outstanding result, given that sexual abuse is such a taboo subject. Typically, on subjects related to sexual violence in the field of forensic psychology, even a 5% change in self-reported behaviour is considered to be significant [g].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[a] *Guide: Ayahuasca Community Guide for the Awareness of Sexual Abuse.*

<https://chacruna.net/community/ayahuasca-community-guide-for-the-awareness-of-sexual-abuse/>

[b] Letter from the Executive Director of the Chacruna Institute for Psychedelic Plant Medicines, USA. This letter describes how Peluso's research and expertise provided insight and knowledge, contributed to the development of the *Ayahuasca Community Guide for the Awareness of Sexual Abuse*, and instigated new initiatives and strategies.

[c] Letter from the Vice-Consul of the British Embassy in Lima, Peru. This letter explains how the *Ayahuasca Community Guide for the Awareness of Sexual Abuse* came to the attention of the Embassy and is feeding into their plan to create a Sexual Assault Referral Centre in Lima.

[d] Letter from the owner/facilitator of the Dreamglade Shamanic Healing Centre. This letter describes how the ayahuasca tourism industry was in need of safety guidance to raise its standards and what the impact of the *Ayahuasca Community Guide for the Awareness of Sexual Abuse* has been on female participants and lodges.

[e] Letter from a female shaman, Ayayamama Mystic, Peru. This letter explains the reasons why instances of sexual abuse occur and how the *Ayahuasca Community Guide for the Awareness of Sexual Abuse* has addressed them, creating at the same time more safety and openness in the community of participants.

[f] Letter from the Peruvian Tourism Agency, Peru. Highlighting the special cultural status that ayahuasca has in Peru, the letter explains how the *Ayahuasca Community Guide for the Awareness of Sexual Abuse* has responded to a pressing need to raise standards, ensure safety, and restore the reputation of ayahuasca tourism.

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[g] The Chacruna Institute for Psychedelic Plant Medicines ayahuasca survey results, based on a survey on social media from 18 May 2020 to 11 September 2020. The survey aimed to evaluate the impact of the *Ayahuasca Community Guide for the Awareness of Sexual Abuse* on the survey respondents, a majority of whom were experienced participants to ayahuasca ceremonies.

[h] Email from the Chacruna Institute for Psychedelic Plant Medicines confirming the number of downloads of the *Ayahuasca Community Guide for the Awareness of Sexual Abuse* for all languages.

[i] Email from the Chacruna Institute for Psychedelic Plant Medicines confirming the number of visits on the *Ayahuasca Community Guide for the Awareness of Sexual Abuse* webpage.