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Representation and discourses of otherness: Coca leaf and mambear in the Museum of America. (De)colonial thought and Indigenous perspectives

Master's Thesis

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Tartu 2025

Field of Studies: Education in Museums and Heritage Studies (EDUMaH)

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of:

International Master (IntM) in Education in Museums and Heritage: University of Glasgow, UK

Master of Arts in Humanities (MA) in Folkloristics and Applied Heritage Studies: University of Tartu, Estonia

Master of Arts (MA) in Arts and Culture: Radboud University, Netherlands

Authorship Declaration: I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

María Camila Pérez Mora, 20 August 2025

Abstract

This dissertation investigates how the Museum of America in Madrid represents the Indigenous practice of *mambear*, often reducing it to stereotypes of drug use and exoticism rooted in colonial narratives. Such portrayals obscure its cultural, spiritual, and social meanings, reinforcing the marginalisation of Indigenous voices. The study pursues two aims: to critically analyse the museum's discursive construction of *mambear*, and to explore alternative frameworks that support decolonial understandings of the practice. Grounded in postcolonial and decolonial theory and museum studies, it calls for more inclusive and critical representations that challenge the colonial legacies embedded in institutional discourse.

Keywords

Mambear, coca leaf, representation, discourse, decoloniality of knowledge, decoloniality of being.

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Preface

While writing this dissertation I became increasingly aware that, throughout my life, I have heard the term ‘Indian’ used in a derogatory way to suggest opportunism, ignorance, lack of manners, or improper conduct. I have also heard people claim that Indigenous peoples are lazy and unwilling to work, since many are forced to ask for money on the streets of major cities as a result of displacement from their ancestral lands and persistent social inequality. And more recently, I have seen them being attacked on social media for explaining the spiritual significance of *mambear* and the *poporo,* accused of drug use and of engaging in immoral or unethical practices that are incompatible with Christian values.

The cycle of marginalisation persists—even by those who have themselves been historically subjugated. This thesis is a humble attempt to contribute to a form of *epistemic justice.*

Acknowledgements

I am profoundly grateful to Dr Nino Vallen, Dr Rebeka Põldsam, and Dr Dennis Francis, whose guidance, thoughtful feedback, and generous insights, pushed me to think deeper and strive for better at every stage of this work.

My heartfelt thanks go to Sebastián, for reading me with care and encouraging me unfailingly.

To my parents, Fernando and Hermelinda, for their unwavering support; and to my loyal companions through the long hours of writing, Tango and Renata.

And to Simona, who left us on August 1st, yet whose unconditional love remains with me.

Notes

On terminology

Throughout this thesis, the term *mambear* is used to refer to the practice of chewing coca leaves. In Spanish, *mambear* is the infinitive form of the verb; its conjugated forms are not used here for the sake of clarity. The related nouns *mambe* or *mambeo* are also avoided in order to prevent potential confusion.

On translation

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Spanish to English are my own. In such cases, I have sought to preserve both the original meaning and, where relevant, the style and tone of the source text.

1. Introduction

The representation of Indigenous practices within museum contexts often reveals deeper narratives rooted in colonial histories and enduring stereotypes of otherness (Pitman, 2021; MacDonald, 2022, Kassim, 2024). At the Museum of America in Madrid, the practice of *mambear*—an ancestral Andean tradition involving coca leaf chewing—is predominantly portrayed through a reductive lens that conflates it with drug use and exoticism, thereby overlooking its rich cultural, spiritual, and social significance. Such representation not only distorts the true nature of *mambear* but also contributes to the ongoing marginalisation of Indigenous voices within institutional narratives. Therefore, this dissertation has two interrelated objectives: firstly, to examine how the Museum of America has discursively constructed the representation of the Indigenous practice of *mambear*, and secondly, to explore how alternative discourses can foster a decolonial understanding of this ancestral tradition. Built on museum studies, post-colonial and decolonial theory, this research delves into the need for a more inclusive, critical, and comprehensive approach to represent Indigenous cultures, emphasising the importance of confronting the colonial legacies embedded in museums and their discourses.

1.1 Description of the problem: *Mambear* and the 'Indigenous other'

Entre el mito y la realidad 'Between myth and reality' is one of the titles featured at the beginning of the permanent exhibition at the Museum of America in Madrid, Spain. It describes how the symbolic representation of the New World was influenced by early reports, diaries and observations written by the first European expeditioners. America was mostly depicted as a land occupied by acephalous creatures, hybrid monsters, and naked individuals adorned with feathers or covered in hair from neck to ankles, possessing unnatural body size and proportions. During centuries, these illustrations —currently exhibited in the Museum of America— such as 'giants from Patagonia' (Byron, 1767), or 'the monster from Buenos Aires' (Feuillée, 1707), shaped a generalised image of the inhabitants of the Americas as savages, constructing a dehumanising discourse of racial hierarchy that ultimately justified the colonisers' 'civilising mission' (Brulon Soares, 2023: 11). While these representations may seem unrealistic and far

removed from contemporary perspectives, new and modified representations of 'otherness' continue to propagate an exoticised image of Indigenous communities within museum contexts (Lonetree, 2012)

This construction of 'the other' is particularly evident in the case of the Indigenous tradition of *mambear* at the Museum of America. *Mambear* is an Andean tradition that involves chewing coca leaves, often combined with ashes from seashells or other plants. It has been practiced by numerous Indigenous communities, primarily in Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia, but also in parts of Ecuador, Venezuela and Brazil (Conzelman, and White, 2016). The importance of *mambear* goes beyond its ritualistic and social functions; it embodies a rich tapestry of cultural identity, spirituality, alternative worldviews, and Indigenous knowledge, playing a vital role in Andean and Amazonian cultural heritage (Castro Blanco and Mora Gonzalez, 2014). Yet, its representation at the Museum of America primarily associates this ancestral practice with drug use, considerably undermining its cultural significance.

When I visited the Museum of America at the beginning of 2025 with the purpose of seeing the Quimbaya collection[1], the first thing that caught my attention was the absence of information about the objects on display, as the exhibition fails to place them in their historical or cultural context. The only description repeated in the available labels, referred to the gold vases as containers of lime that 'potentiated the effects of coca leaves'. Further in the permanent exhibition, I noticed a set of nineteen artefacts, including ceramic and gold figures, wooden instruments, dry coca leaves, and photographs of Indigenous people displayed in a showcase under the title of 'hallucinogens'. These representations elicited strong reactions among visitors, many of whom questioned and commented on an indistinctive connection between coca leaves and cocaine, mistaking one for the other.

The way the museum presents and draws a relationship between Indigenous communities and drug consumption particularly intrigued and motivated me to pursue this research topic. Not only because this portrayal misrepresents and alienates Indigenous practices—reducing their complex cultural traditions to curiosities inaccurately associated with hallucinogens—but also

[1] The Quimbaya Collection is one of the most remarkable pre-Columbian assemblages, consisting of 122 gold artefacts crafted by the extinct Quimbaya Indigenous community of Colombia. It is currently the subject of a repatriation request submitted by the Colombian government to the Spanish government (Dos Santos Acerbi, 2023).

because it reproduces the historical stigmatisation of the Indigenous 'Other', silencing their agency, perspectives, and epistemologies. This framing is particularly troubling, as it highlights an ongoing debate within museum practice: while museums proclaim their role as educational institutions in the service of society—spaces for dialogue, inclusion, and participation— (Hein, 2006; Hooper-Greenhill, 2007; ICOM, Online), they continue to reproduce practices that reduce them to mere repositories of artefacts, deeply entangled with present-day colonial dynamics (Domínguez et. al, 2024). Within this contradiction, museums bear an ethical responsibility to foster nuanced understandings of cultural heritage—particularly in the collection, interpretation, and display of Indigenous cultures, which have been shaped by colonial histories and their enduring legacies (Harris, 2018).

As articulated in the museum's exhibition, the boundary between myth and reality remains perilously thin, and the legacy of colonial narratives continues to shape distorted images of Indigenous communities (Withington, 2021). The reductive representation of *mambear* in the Museum of America contributes to a broader discourse of 'otherness' that perpetuates harmful stereotypes and thus marginalises the voices of the Indigenous communities who continue to be bearers of their historic cultural traditions. This issue is compounded by a lack of scholarship investigating how the Museum of America navigates the complex interplay between representation, discourse, and colonial history.

Therefore, this research aims to identify and analyse the dominant discourses existent in the representation of the Indigenous practice of *mambear* in the Museum of America, and how it can adopt a more inclusive and respectful approach to Indigenous cultural practices. By engaging with postcolonial and decolonial thought, this thesis seeks to understand the discursive construction of the 'other' and to include new perspectives about *mambear*, ultimately contributing to a broader discussion on decolonisation of curatorial practices within museums.

1.2 Research background

Museums have played a central role in shaping dominant narratives of history and culture, often reflecting and reinforcing the ideological frameworks of the societies in which they operate. As scholars of Nordic studies and linguistics Marie Maegaard and Kristine Mortensen (2022) argue, museums possess considerable power in constructing worldviews, serving as active

agents in the production and legitimisation of knowledge. American art historian Donald Preziosi (2011: 55) further characterises museums as 'epistemological instruments', emphasising their strategic role in shaping public understanding. This influence is particularly evident in the representation of non-Western cultures, which have frequently been portrayed as static, exotic, or primitive 'others' (Brulon Soares, 2023: 2). Such depictions have long supported colonial and imperialist ideologies by employing classificatory systems that reinforce racial and cultural hierarchies grounded in positivist and evolutionist paradigms (Manderson, 2018; Falcucci, 2021).

As researcher of material culture and critical heritage Wayne Modest and cultural anthropologist Claudia Augustat (2023) demonstrate, ethnographic museums in particular continue to perpetuate exclusionary narratives and stereotypes through representations of cultural 'otherness'. These institutions remain burdened by the legacy of unacknowledged colonial exploitation, further complicated by scientific and historical frameworks that obscure the complex, entangled histories of colonisation and cultural representation (Ticktin, 2023). In this context, rethinking how history is constructed and communicated through a decolonial lens is not only a complex intellectual endeavour but also an urgent ethical imperative.

In response to these critiques, contemporary scholarship increasingly calls for museums to be reimagined as spaces of inclusion, social justice, and epistemic equity. This transformation requires a critical interrogation of entrenched power structures, the diversification of representational practices, and the active engagement of communities through participatory and decolonial methodologies (Ariese and Wróblewska, 2021; Flores et. al, 2023). A central concern in these efforts is the representation of Indigenous cultures. There is a growing consensus on the need to move beyond portrayals of Indigenous peoples as inferior and toward models that prioritise Indigenous agency, reflect contemporary realities, and embrace relational epistemologies (Varutti and Gowland, 2025). Key strategies include Indigenous-led curation, respectful treatment of cultural artefacts, and participatory practices that critically confront colonial histories. Likewise, decolonising museum education entails cultivating inclusive, dialogic learning environments that incorporate Indigenous perspectives and challenge Eurocentric narratives (Ng, et. al, 2022).

Importantly, scholar of decolonial theories and literatures Orlando Vázquez (2022:23) stresses that decolonisation is neither a linear nor a universal process; each museum must navigate its own historical, cultural, and geopolitical particularities. While considerable scholarship has

addressed the decolonisation of cultural institutions in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, South Africa, and Brazil, Spanish museums have attracted comparatively little attention—partly because the topic remains highly contentious within the national context (El País, 2024a). Institutions such as the Museum of America, the National Museum of Archaeology, and the National Museum of Anthropology in Madrid—housing extensive collections acquired during the colonial era through the so-called scientific expeditions (Robledo, 2017: 1772)—have been the subject of limited critical inquiry. Existing studies have largely prioritised the historical and artistic value of artefacts (Zabía de la Mata, 2024; Estebaranz, 2017; Rovira, 2017), devoting far less attention to the ways in which coloniality—understood as the enduring patterns of domination persisting beyond formal colonial rule (Quijano, 2000)—may continue to shape their representational frameworks.

To address these omissions, it is essential to reframe how Indigenous practices are interpreted and exhibited, as well as to interrogate the broader discursive influences that shape museum discourse. This dissertation seeks to fill this gap by examining the representation of *mambear* in the Museum of America, underscoring the need for epistemic justice and more ethical portrayals of Indigenous culture that foreground historically marginalised narratives. This approach not only advances critical museology in Spain but also contributes to global efforts to decolonise cultural institutions and to foster inclusive and respectful representations of pre-Columbian traditions and material culture.

1.3 Research objectives and questions

This dissertation examines how the Museum of America constructs the representation of *mambear* and explores alternative narratives that might reframe this ancestral practice. By delving into the museum's permanent exhibition and analysing a variety of multimodal materials like texts, images, and audio recordings, this study seeks to uncover the dominant discourses that shape the representation of Indigenous people in the museum, while also identifying opportunities for more inclusive, nuanced, and respectful narratives.

To guide this inquiry, the following questions will be addressed:

1. How is the representation of the Indigenous practice of *mambear* discursively constructed in the Museum of America?

2. What kind of alternative perspectives would challenge and reframe dominant narratives surrounding coca leaves and *mambear*?

The findings of this dissertation foreground diverse Indigenous narratives about the coca leaf and the practice of *mambear*, offering an alternative view to its current representation in the Museum of America. It comes as a particularly timely contribution given that this institution, alongside the National Museum of Anthropology, is undergoing a decolonisation process led by the Spanish Ministry of Culture since 2024 (El País, 2024b). At the same time, the study sheds light on the persistence and influence of discourses of 'otherness'.

1.4 Method

The research methodology for this study adopts a qualitative approach, specifically employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). It is structured into three scales corresponding to Norman Fairclough's (2013) three-dimensional CDA framework: 1) Text, which involves collecting and analysing the multimodal elements present in the museum's representations of *mambear*, including labels, descriptions, the audio guide, objects, and images; 2) Discourse practice, which examines how these representations are informed by and relate to broader discourses, involving the analysis of archival documents referenced in the Museum of America's permanent exhibition like letters, memoirs and books, and also international treaties; 3) Sociocultural practice, which situates the dominant discourses within its wider social, cultural, and political context by analysing policy documents and academic research. This methodological approach enables an understanding of how the practice of *mambear* is represented and discursively constructed within the Museum of America in Madrid.

For exploring alternative narratives about the coca leaf and the practice of *mambear*, this study also incorporated research-based documents produced by Indigenous individuals, as well as media sources where Indigenous perspectives are presented.

1.5 Structure of the dissertation

This dissertation is structured into four main chapters, alongside the introduction and conclusion, each addressing the study's rationale and research questions. Chapter two, the literature review, examines relevant scholarship and identifies the gap this study addresses. Chapter three sets out the theoretical framework, focusing on key concepts such as

representation and discourse, as well as the contributions of postcolonial and decolonial theory. Chapter four outlines the methodology and research design, detailing the methods of data collection and analysis. Chapter five presents the findings in two subchapters: (1) Decoloniality of power, which foregrounds Indigenous perspectives on the coca leaf and the practice of *mambear*; and (2) Coloniality of power, which analyses the representations and discursive formations surrounding *mambear* and their implications for sociocultural practice within the framework of coloniality of power.

2. Literature review

2.1 Museums and coloniality

Since the 1970s, the New Museology movement —and, from the late 1990s onward, the influence of decolonial thought— have drawn significant scholarly attention to the enduring legacies of coloniality embedded in museums (Boast, 2011; Brown and Mairesse, 2018). This expanding body of work calls for a reimagining of museum practices, grounded in principles of inclusion, equity, and social justice in order to dismantle asymmetric power relations that shape the representation of diverse cultures.

While museums are often perceived by the public as authoritative, trustworthy, and objective institutions (Knell, 2011: 4–5), this image has been challenged by scholars who expose the political and ideological work they perform. Preziosi (2011: 55–56) argues that museum narratives are far from neutral, being shaped by historical, philosophical, political, and religious contexts that embed implicit hierarchies. Curator Shimrit Lee (2022) extends this critique by showing that museums have long been entangled with imperialist ideologies, exercising epistemic authority, thus privileging certain knowledge systems over others.

Different analyses reinforce these concerns. Historian Beatrice Falcucci (2021) traces European museums' origins to cabinets of curiosities in the eighteenth century, revealing how collection and classification practices—shaped by the positivist thought and racial evolutionism characteristic of the Enlightenment—constructed colonised peoples and their material culture as inferior and exotic. Similarly, writer and museum professional Brandie Macdonald (2022: 10) underscores that museums have their historic roots in the colonial enterprise, with the appropriation of objects from colonised peoples and lands to be exhibited as evidence of European superiority in private collections. In turn, museologist and anthropologist Bruno Brulon Soares (2023) underscores the persistence of such biases in contemporary museum practice, with museums continuing to shape understandings of race, cultural difference, and identity, often through omissions and selective framing, which further complicates their role as sites of knowledge and representation.

For some critics, this is not simply a matter of outdated practices but of entrenched exclusion. Curator and writer Sumaya Kassim (2024) draws on her own experiences to describe museums as 'temples of whiteness', ostensibly public spaces fractured along racial and historical lines that marginalise the histories of colonised peoples, who often experience museums as sites of trauma. This critique resonates with Lynn Maranda's (2021) argument that museums continue to privilege Western frameworks, despite sustained critiques of the universalist scientific approach that denies the validity of other worldviews and epistemologies. Both emphasise that dismantling such hegemonic perspectives—rather than limiting action to the restitution of looted artefacts—is central to the project of decolonisation.

The question of how to integrate decolonial practices within museum institutions and to confront the lingering effects of colonialism has been addressed by different scholars. Museologist Csilla Ariese and art historian Magdalena Wróblewska (2021) argue that strategies such as enhancing visibility, fostering inclusion, diversifying museum staff, and decentring dominant narratives are crucial to this process. Drawing on a range of case studies in their edited volume, they call for structural transformations within museum institutions. Researcher of Latin American art history, Ana María Reyes (2023) advocates for dialogical encounters that amplify marginalised voices—echoing Clifford's (1999) influential notion of museums as 'contact zones' where meaning is co-constructed through negotiation and collaboration.

Yet even initiatives framed as collaborative risk reproducing old asymmetries if institutional power is left intact. Cultural studies scholar Laura Phillips (2020) stresses that without institutional willingness, decolonisation risks becoming rhetorical rather than structural. Scholar Robin Boast (2011) warns that without organisational redistribution of authority, museums will remain within neo-colonial frameworks. He notes that partnerships with source communities are often tokenistic, with control over narratives and resources retained by the institution (Boast, 2011: 66–67). Domínguez, Weffer-Elizondo, and Embrick (2024: 2–3), make an important distinction between the colonial museum, which openly depicted 'the other' as inferior and subjugated, and the neo-colonial museum, which offers sanitised versions of alterity that ultimately upholds historical hierarchies.

Taken together, these perspectives reveal a central tension: museums occupy a paradoxical space as both potential platforms for decolonial engagement and as enduring sites of epistemic and cultural domination. Addressing this tension in the Museum of America requires not only revising the exhibition itself but also interrogating how its narratives might reproduce particular

ideologies that shape the construction of ‘the other,’ determine which histories are foregrounded, whose voices are heard, and which epistemologies are legitimised or silenced.

2.2 The exhibition of Indigenous cultures

The representation of Indigenous cultures in museums is a particularly complex and evolving practice that aims to shift from portraying Indigenous peoples as ‘others’ to actively integrating their voices and perspectives. The representation of different cultures is shaped by an ongoing tension between colonial legacies in museums and emerging efforts toward Indigenous agency and self-representation. Recent initiatives have sought to transform museums into spaces of Indigenous revitalisation and empowerment, requiring a ‘decentring’ approach that involves moving away from hierarchical norms and narratives to foster inclusivity (Ariese, 2022: 51).

A persistent critique in the exhibition of non-Western cultures is the endurance of what scholar Laura Osorio Sunnuks (2022) terms the ‘allochronic gaze’—the tendency to situate Indigenous cultures in a distant past, severed from their contemporary realities. She notes that, exhibitions of Maya archaeological collections, such as ‘Mayas: Revelation of an endless time’ which opened at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris in 2014, exemplify this problem, presenting Maya communities as static civilisations while excluding their living descendants (Osorio Sunnuks, 2022: 118). Similarly, Brulon Soarez (2023: 34) advocates for a re-evaluation of museum exhibitions to reflect contemporary realities and Indigenous voices. He questions the way in which the Danish National Museum used to exhibit the Tupinambá cloak, a customary garment of the Tupinambá community from Brazil, repatriated in 2024. He argues that ethnographic displays, devoid of present-day context, transform living culture into colonial curiosities, overlooking urgent Indigenous struggles such as land reclamation, cultural repatriation, and territorial rights. Therefore, examining how exhibitions frame the contemporary relevance of Indigenous practices and communities —either by highlighting or obscuring it— constitutes a crucial aspect to examine in this research.

One way museums have sought to acknowledge the present-day significance of Indigenous communities is by repositioning themselves as platforms for revitalisation. Scholars Varutti and Gowlland (2025) describe Taiwanese museums integrating Indigenous artistic practices in ways that affirm contemporary identity while negotiating state nationalism. Although such exhibitions provide visibility to Indigenous creators, they also operate within national

frameworks that can limit radical change. Similar patterns emerge in Ragazzi and Nerici's (2019) comparative study of Sámi exhibitions. While more recent displays attempt to foreground Sámi political agency and activism, these efforts remain partial.

Case studies from South America further reveal how national contexts shape institutional openness. Fiore and Butto (2019) contrast two museums at the southern tip of the continent: Argentina's Museo del Fin del Mundo, which privileges archaeological narratives and evolutionary framings that side-line Indigenous voices, and Chile's Museo Antropológico Martín Gusinde, which incorporates Indigenous perspectives as part of living heritage. These differences highlight how sovereignty politics and identity narratives influence what is deemed legitimate and valid for display. Hence, deep-seated institutional habits and curatorial authority often constrain Indigenous-led narratives.

Such limitations stem from museums' dual nature: They function both as sites of cultural display and as bureaucratic institutions whose structures are shaped by colonial legacies and ideologies. Researcher in critical heritage studies Vanessa Whittington (2021: 246–247) observes that decolonising museums entails navigating dilemmas such as organisational hierarchies dominated by non-Indigenous authorities, which complicates efforts to represent Indigenous cultures ethically or to grant Indigenous communities meaningful decision-making power.

Some Indigenous communities circumvent conventional institutional frameworks, asserting forms of epistemic autonomy that challenge the dominance of Western museological frameworks. Anthropologist Wilhem Londoño Díaz (2023) examines the self-organised museographic practices of the Kogui community in Colombia, wherein colonial artefacts are reinterpreted as emblems of resistance and situated within Indigenous cosmologies. By doing so, the Kogui community enact a pluriversal approach—affirming the coexistence of multiple ontologies and ways of knowing. These practices reclaim sacred spaces and knowledge systems as part of an ongoing cultural continuum, demonstrating that decolonisation involves more than reforming existing museums; it also entails creating alternative epistemic spaces.

In consequence, the struggle over Indigenous representation in museums is an ongoing negotiation shaped by institutional power, national politics, and competing epistemologies. Moving from portraying Indigenous peoples as 'the other' to centring Indigenous agency requires not only curatorial innovation but also structural transformation—changes many

museums, bound by their histories and governance systems, resist. This context is crucial: it reveals the persistence of colonial frameworks and the challenges of incorporating Indigenous epistemologies within museums. These tensions frame the analysis of how Indigenous practices are represented, negotiated, or marginalised, and raise questions about the extent to which the Museum of America's narratives remain confined within colonial or/and nationalistic frameworks.

2.3 Museum education and decoloniality

Education is currently considered as one of the central objectives of museums, with the potential to shape public understandings of history, identity, and culture through diverse learning experiences (Hein, 2006: 34). The 2022 definition of museums adopted by the International Council of Museums (ICOM, Online), further describes museums as institutions that 'operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing'. In this context, education emerges as a central component of museum practice, particularly in supporting decolonial and community-based approaches. Heather Cateau (2022: 32–33) argues that museums, as sites of non-formal education, play a pivotal role in developing decolonial curricula by including source communities in knowledge production and interpretation processes. These efforts represent a critical move away from Eurocentric and hierarchical knowledge systems toward more inclusive models of learning.

Some case studies exemplify these shifts. For instance, researcher Emmy Côté (2024) documents a collaborative initiative between the McCord Stewart Museum and an undergraduate history course at UQÀM University in Canada, which sought to decolonise historical education by integrating Indigenous perspectives into formal learning environments. Similarly, curator Ulrike Al-Khamis (2024) examines how the Aga Khan Museum in Canada leverages its collection to amplify marginalised voices and promote intercultural dialogue. Her analysis reveals how objects—such as a sixteenth century tulip ceramic plate—are reinterpreted not merely as decorative artefacts but as conduits of cross-cultural knowledge exchange.

In Southern Africa, museum education is also being reshaped through localised and community-driven interventions. McGregor, Lekhutile, and Kediseng (2025) analyse the

Khama III Memorial Museum in Botswana and its exhibition *Then We Were Bechuana*. This display recontextualises colonial-era artefacts to disrupt racialised and essentialist narratives. While the authors are cautious about broad claims of decolonisation, they advocate for pragmatic strategies, such as provenance research and participatory curation, that can support local heritage education. They argue that meaningful progress requires institutional reform and sustained community involvement, rather than symbolic gestures or superficial display changes (McGregor et. al, 2025: 44).

Researcher Nicholas G. Cragoe (2017) highlights the central role of storytelling in decolonial education through the analysis of two contrasting narratives from the Anishinaabe community in northern Minnesota. The first is the biography of Shaynowishkung, a respected Ojibwe elder who collaborated closely with settler communities, a biography appropriated to reinforce colonial narratives. In contrast, the traditional Wenabozho flood story—recounting the creation of a new world on the back of a turtle—functions as a distinctly decolonial narrative, affirming a shared Indigenous identity that transcends colonial thought (Cragoe, 2017: 184). Together, these examples demonstrate how storytelling can operate as a form of educational resistance, sustaining cultural continuity while challenging settler-colonial frameworks.

In conclusion, Indigenous perspectives are not merely corrective to dominant histories; they serve as pedagogical instruments in decolonial museum education. Within the present research this approach is crucial: centring marginalised voices, lived experiences, and plural epistemologies that unsettle Eurocentric authority and promote a critical engagement with the objects and exhibitions, considering the processes through which knowledge is produced, legitimised, and shared.

2.5 Colonial legacies in Spanish museums

As the former coloniser of most of the Latin American countries, Spain holds a vast collection of Latin American artefacts, many of which were acquired during so-called scientific expeditions and are now exhibited in various national and regional museums. Even with the extensive colonial legacy on display in Spanish museums, scholarship critically engaging with the representation and interpretation within these institutions remains scarce. According to Jesús Carrillo Castillo (2024: 110) Spanish culture and the institutions that frame it are biased by a foundational denial and a lack of accountability of colonial violence.

For instance, Celeste Muñoz Martínez and Martín López (2025) explain how current decolonial claims highlight the Spain's slow progress toward historical justice, noting legislative hesitations and the lack of memorials or educational reforms addressing colonial violent events, which reflects a pattern of denial and oblivion. They examine the evolving discourse in Spain surrounding its colonial history, highlighting a 'memorial conflict' that challenges traditional narratives and reveals a resurgence of imperial nostalgia (Muñoz and López, 2025: 17). They discuss the ignored demands from countries like Mexico for Spain to acknowledge and apologise for colonial abuses, as well as the role of anti-colonial movements and diasporic communities advocating for reparations and recognition of ongoing colonial impacts such as racial discrimination and economic disparities.

Within the museum context, Isidora Sáez-Rosenkranz, María Carballo López, José Sánchez García, and José Romero Losacco (2024) critically examine the challenges of decolonising Spanish museum spaces, particularly museums of social and cultural anthropology in Catalonia. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in three institutions, they trace the historical trajectory of these museums back to the sixteenth-century collecting practices. Their research shows how these institutions have historically reinforced colonial ideologies by centring Europe as the locus of culture and knowledge (Sáez-Rosenkranz et al., 2024: 172). The study reveals a persistent tendency to celebrate colonial 'achievements' while silencing the violence and harm they produced, thereby underscoring the urgent need for narrative revision that incorporates critical and decolonial perspectives.

2.5.1 The Museum of America

The Museum of America has been studied from multiple disciplinary perspectives, yet most literature focuses on its historical development and collections rather than offering a critical examination of its museological dynamics. From a historical perspective, Paz Cabello (1993) traces its origins to early initiatives disrupted by the Spanish Civil War in late 1930s, noting that its eventual establishment sought to centralise and promote the study of American collections in Spain, with a focus on artefacts from archaeological expeditions dating back to the sixteenth century. Similarly, Beatriz Robledo (2017) outlines the museum's institutional evolution, highlighting renovations and the acquisition of significant Andean pieces through excavations, donations, and purchases. Both present the Museum of America as an

international reference for colonial and pre-Columbian art, and as an educational space connecting America and Europe—while largely overlooking its colonial entanglements.

Beyond institutional history, object-focused studies—often rooted in art history—have examined the cultural, technological, and aesthetic value of specific works. Ana Zabía de la Mata (2024) analyses the 'barniz de Pasto', a pre-Hispanic decorative varnish technique from Colombia that blends Indigenous and European aesthetics. Ángel Estebaranz (2017) situates an eighteenth-century Quito painting in its religious and socio-political context, underlining the museum's role in cultural preservation, while Salvador Rovira (2017) applies scientific methods to study Inca metallurgy and Andean copper alloys. The Quimbaya collection, in particular, has generated extensive scholarship (Gamboa Hinestrosa, 1998; Plazas, 1998; Langebaek, 2000; Botero, 2001; Perea et al., 2013; Casanova, 2016), with consensus on the pieces' high cultural, aesthetic, and technical value, especially their refined goldsmithing and symbolic complexity.

A smaller but critical body of scholarship—primarily led by social history scholar Marisa González de Oleaga (2007; 2011; 2016)—has interrogated the ideological underpinnings of the Museum of America's narratives and spatial arrangements. In collaboration with Fernando Monge (2007), they examined the thematic organisation of the permanent exhibition, concluding that it offers a monovocal narrative privileging the perspectives of navigators, religious figures, military personnel, and scientists, while silencing other voices and experiences. This framing, they argue, positions the museum as an ideological instrument of the Spanish state (González de Oleaga and Monge, 2007: 284). Building on this critique, González de Oleaga, Bohoslavsky, and Di Liscia (2011) contend that the museum not only excludes alternative narratives but also omits any acknowledgment of cultural or religious imposition and violence—effectively erasing historical realities and cultural differences under a universalist guise. In her later work, González de Oleaga (2016) synthesises these arguments, concluding that every aspect of the museum—from its architecture to its spatial semantics—reinforces Spain's self-image as the 'Mother of Nations' and portrays America as indebted to the metropolis's civilising mission. She also notes, pointedly, the inaccurate representation of the coca leaf as a hallucinogen (2016: 136).

Aligned with the thesis of the Museum of America as a political instrument, Débora Betrisey Nadali (2015) studied how, during the early Francoist period, historians and anthropologists crafted a dominant ideological framework portraying Spain's role in the Americas as a

benevolent civilising mission based on cultural unity, while deliberately omitting themes of domination and exploitation. Rooted in conservative *Hispanidad* ideals, these narratives legitimised imperial ambitions through Christian values and notions of fraternal ties with Hispano-American peoples. The Museum of America became a central site for merging academic inquiry with state propaganda, glorifying conquest and racial mixing to construct idealised imperial identities.

2.6 Coca leaf and *mambear*

Coca leaves have been studied from diverse perspectives —historical, sociological, and pharmacological— while more recent scholarship increasingly highlights their social, medicinal, and ritual significance. From a historical standpoint, Ana Sánchez (1997) analysed the role of coca during the Spanish colonial period in Lima, highlighting its dual status as both a sacred Indigenous plant and a substance demonised by colonial authorities, who regarded *mambear* as a deviant behaviour. Similarly, Ángel Muñoz García (2006) explored coca's cultural and economic functions under colonial rule, noting that while colonisers expressed moral objections to its use, they simultaneously engaged in its large-scale commercialisation. Both studies reveal the enduring tension between coca's economic value and its stigmatisation long before the German chemist Albert Niemann isolated one of its alkaloids in 1860, naming it cocaine (Adriaense, 2023a).

Sociologists Fernando Sarmiento and Ciro Krauthausen (1990) conducted a critical analysis of the origins of cocaine's illegality, showing that the substance was widely socially accepted until mid-twentieth century prohibitionist campaigns—also targeting substances like opium—succeeded. Within these prohibitionist discourses, coca leaves became increasingly stigmatised, often conflated with cocaine despite their distinct properties. In contrast, Dr. Andrew Weil (1978; 1981) examined the therapeutic potential of coca leaves, identifying their efficacy in treating gastrointestinal disorders and motion sickness, as well as their mild stimulant effect comparable to coffee. Weil underscored the clear distinction between coca leaf and cocaine, arguing that chewing coca leaves do not cause toxicity or dependence; instead, it provides valuable nutrients and health benefits.

Historian Paul Gootenberg (2002) offers a comprehensive historical survey of cocaine, tracing its trajectory from a legitimate medical product to a globally prohibited and stigmatised substance, and later its re-emergence as a mass-consumed drug in the mid-1970s, with

important implications for Latin American countries affected by drug trafficking. In later work, Gootenberg and Liliana Dávalos (2018) conclude in their edited book that cocaine cultivation in the Amazon Andes arose from the collapse of unsustainable development projects, enabling illicit economies to fill the void. They argue for replacing short-term, repressive measures with long-term, structural strategies that address the underlying socio-economic and environmental conditions of the region. This dynamic, they note, has been particularly acute in Colombia, which political scientist María Clara Torres in chapter six, characterises as a country with limited Indigenous traditions of coca use (2018: 133).

Conversely, Elías Castro Blanco and Juan Carlos Mora González (2014) analyse the cultural and political significance of coca for the Nasa Indigenous community in Colombia's Cauca region. They contend that coca leaf is a vital component of the community's tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Yet, despite constitutional protections, national and international drug control laws continue to erode Indigenous rights. The authors further observe that community-led efforts to legally commercialise coca-derived products, particularly those taking advantage of its medicinal properties, face enduring regulatory obstacles (Blanco and Mora González, 2014: 84). Similarly, Irmgard Bauer (2019) explores coca's cultural, historical, and medicinal dimensions, highlighting its traditional role in alleviating altitude sickness and its enduring cultural value, in stark contrast to the stigma associated with narcotics. Taken together, both studies underscore the need to reframe coca policy and research in ways that acknowledge its cultural significance, dismantle the conflation with illicit drug narratives, and ensure that legal frameworks uphold, rather than erode, Indigenous rights and heritage.

Furthermore, Conzelman and White (2016: 2) emphasise that coca remains a sacred plant for millions in the Andes, valued for its nutritional, medicinal, and spiritual significance. Although once defamed, such views have lost scientific credibility. According to them, coca retains economic potential —particularly in Bolivia— and serves as a powerful symbol of Indigenous solidarity and resistance, closely tied to the resilience of Andean culture. More recently, scholar Brigitte Adriaense (2023b) has argued that the coca leaf and cocaine are closely intertwined substances, holding both spiritual and cultural significance in Indigenous contexts as well as in global patterns of drug use. She cautions against framing them in a strict dichotomy, noting that beyond their economic value, they carry complex cultural meanings and biases that shape laws, trade, and power relations.

Despite this growing body of research, coca remains largely absent from museum discourse, even though a great amount of ethnographic objects —particularly ceramics— depicting its use are exhibited globally, as noted by Plutarco Naranjo in 1974. The closest engagement comes from anthropologist Michael Taussig's 'My Cocaine Museum' (2009), a symbolic rather than physical museum that explores the entwined histories of cocaine and gold in Colombia. Beginning with the Gold Museum in Bogota and the use of coca leaf, Taussig critiques the erasure of colonial exploitation in museum narratives. As Brigitte Adriaense (2023a) notes, the work uncovers the historical connections between extractivism, violence, and Indigenous marginalisation, reimagining these spaces as sites of both trauma and potential renewal.

2.7 Research gap

Despite an expanding body of scholarship critically addressing the colonial legacies embedded in museum practices—especially concerning Indigenous representation—there remains a gap in exploring how museums can progress beyond symbolic inclusion toward epistemic justice that centres Indigenous agency. In the context of Spanish museums, research on institutions like the Museum of America predominantly focuses on the materiality of objects and the colonial heritage of permanent exhibitions, yet offers limited critical analysis of how specific narratives and displays engage with Indigenous epistemologies or contribute to the construction of otherness and racial alterity.

A notably underexplored aspect is the representation of Indigenous cultural practices such as the practice of *mambear*. Although there is scholarship about coca's cultural, medicinal, and ritual significance, these perspectives have yet to be incorporated into museum exhibitions. There is a lack of research investigating how museums might approach coca's representation through decolonial frameworks. Moreover, curatorial practices, narrative framing, and institutional engagement with colonial legacies—particularly regarding the reproduction of discourses of otherness—remain largely unexamined, highlighting the need for a critical decolonial inquiry into exhibition representation.

In summary, this review identifies a research gap at the intersection of decolonial theory, representation, discourse, and Spanish cultural institutions. The Museum of America, in particular, has not been thoroughly analysed regarding how its exhibitions, display strategies, and narrative constructions operate within broader epistemic and social contexts. Employing

decolonial theory and critical discourse analysis could illuminate how the museum's interpretative choices potentially perpetuate colonial epistemologies.

3. Theoretical framework

In this chapter I discuss the theoretical framework that serves as the foundational lens through which the analysis is developed, providing a structured context for understanding the key concepts and the ways they are interwoven within this research. It draws upon postcolonial and decolonial theories, placing the concepts of representation and discourse in relation with the coloniality of knowledge and being.

3.1 Postcolonial and decolonial theory

Postcolonial and decolonial theories are frameworks that analyse, critique, and challenge, the persistent legacies of colonialism in societies, cultures, and knowledge systems. Sociologist Gurminder Bhambra (2014), explains how these theoretical frameworks are interconnected with the broader process of knowledge production, arisen from political struggles against the colonial world order established by European empires. While they share common concerns in criticising asymmetric power dynamics, they differ in their origins and focus.

Postcolonial theory emerged as a significant intellectual movement in the 1980s, according to global studies scholar Richard Georgi (2024). He argues that its development was rooted in the historical and geopolitical settings of the British Empire and its enduring legacies, with a particular focus on the struggles in the Middle East and Asia during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Pablo Quintero, Patricia Figueira, and Paz Elizalde (2019: 4) note that postcolonial studies were originated from important centres of academic production, heavily influenced by French post-structuralism. Hence, this body of scholarship is mostly emphasised in the analysis of discourse and textuality. The core objective of postcolonial scholarship is to critically examine the assumptions of underlying discourses through which we interpret the world, where the use of language is particularly relevant (Bhambra, 2014: 117).

Decolonial theory, as described by scholars Ana Cristina Pandolfo and Jaisson Teixeira Lino (2024), emerged later in the 1990s as an alternative to postcolonial studies. It has a more extensive historical scope, beginning with European incursions into the Americas in the fifteenth century (Bhambra, 2014a:115). Olimpia Rosenthal (2022) discussed the way Latin

American scholars extensively criticised postcolonial theory for neglecting and marginalising unique contexts and regional knowledge. In response, they advocated for what philosopher and semiotician Walter Mignolo later termed as the 'decolonial turn'[2] (2007: 452). This theoretical movement seeks to understand modernity as necessarily linked to coloniality, highlighting the ongoing influence of colonial structures that continue to organise global power relations (Mignolo, 2009: 66–68). Decolonial thinkers support for a break from European modernity and encourage the inclusion of alternative epistemologies—such as Indigenous epistemologies—to understand and make sense of the world, a dynamic referred to as *border thinking* (Mignolo, 2011). In sum, the decolonial turn is characterised by its proponents as radical, rooted in activism, aimed to dismantle the coloniality of power, and oppose to the dominance of the Western canon (Mignolo, 2007: 461).

Although both postcolonial and decolonial frameworks have faced criticism from various perspectives prompting ongoing theoretical debates, their differences do not necessarily impede their potential for integration (Quintero et al., 2019; Georgi, 2024). While postcolonial theory has been deemed as depoliticised, overly philosophical, and with limited relevance beyond academia for prioritising thought over action (Mignolo, 2009: 91), the decolonial approach has been questioned for its heavy emphasis on academic positionality, pursuing a radical and contradictive de-link from Western epistemologies (Rosenthal, 2022; Temin, 2024). However, they both offer analytical tools and critical focuses that can help understand the dynamics of coloniality within museum studies. In some cases, the combined use of these approaches, far from hindering the analysis of coloniality, potentially enhances it (Quintero et al, 2019: 4), affording a productive way forward to address colonial legacies within cultural institutions

3.2 Representation and discourse

To address the research question of how the representation of the Indigenous practice of *mambear* is discursively constructed in the Museum of America, it is essential to first clarify the concepts of representation and discourse, and the way they are used within this dissertation as connected ideas yet distinct in their scope of analysis and theoretical underpinnings. Cultural

[2] In Spanish *giro decolonial*

theorist Stuart Hall (2009: 28) mentions the difference between these concepts. He explains that, from a semiotic perspective, representation pertains to how language produces meaning by signifying ideas and concepts through images, texts, or symbols. In contrast, discourse refers to the broader effects and implications of representation, particularly in how it relates to power dynamics, influencing behaviour and shaping identities and subjectivities (Hall, 2009: 17,44). In other words, while meaning is the main concern of representation, power is the primary focus in discourse.

Within the field of museum studies, Henrietta Lidchi (2009) illustrates how these concepts function in relation to the display of ethnographic artefacts. Exhibitions, akin language, work as systems of representation, where the internal classification and organisation of different components like images, texts, labels, and specially objects, work to construct meaning, a practice referred to as the *poetics of representation* (Lidchi, 2009: 168). Nevertheless, as conceptualised by Michel Foucault (1972), meaning only exists within the structure of discourse (Hall, 2013: 45). Therefore, how we represent and understand reality is always mediated by discursive frameworks. Here, discourse is concerned with the ways meaning is produced, extending beyond mere linguistic expressions to encompass embedded systems of power relations that influence how subjects are constructed within an exhibition (Lidchi, 2009: 168), a process described as *the politics of representation.*

Building upon this foundation, it is relevant to delve deeper into discourse and how it works related to knowledge and power. Foucault (1972: 117) posits that discourse refers to a group of statements that are interconnected as part of the same 'discursive formation'. As explained by Sara Mills (2004:145) a discursive formation occurs when different statements, even if independent, share similarities and are related in some way 'whether through their content or purpose'. They create a structured field that has the capacity of shaping the understanding of a particular subject or area, defining what counts as knowledge (Foucault, 1972: 61–63). This interconnectedness implies that discourses are instrumental in establishing what can be said, who can speak, and what is considered valid, normal, or socially acceptable (Hall, 2009: 44). Hence, representations are not neutral; they are produced within discursive formations that influence identities and social realities. As explained by Foucault through Jean Carabine (2001: 273), this means that discourses 'produce the objects of which they speak' constructing a particular version of a topic or a subject in a determined historical context.

For example, Edward Said (1979) in his work *Orientalism*, applied Foucauldian theory to analyse how certain discourses have created systematic representations of colonised lands and peoples (Mills, 2004: 96). He sustains that the ideas, images, and attitudes about the 'Orient' were not random but part of a consistent pattern that served to construct the colonised people as fundamentally different from the West, as exotic or inferior. This justified and reinforced colonial control, and systematically excluded different phenomena from recognition (Mills, 2004: 114). In this context, Sayyed Moosavina, Karlis Racevskis, and Sasan Talebi (2019: 190), discussing Foucault and Said's notions of discourse, emphasise that discourse is not simply a reflection of reality but an active mechanism that shapes it by influencing our perceptions of truth. This dynamic ultimately regulates the conduct of others and upholds the distribution and maintenance of power (Carabine, 2001: 275).

However, Said's work has been criticised for silencing counterhegemonic voices. Moosavina et al. (2019) argue that while Said critiques Orientalist discourse for marginalising the Orient, his own analysis unintentionally reinforces this by portraying power as monolithic and leaving little room for resistance or self-representation (Porter, 1993 in Moosavina et al., 2019: 195), which highlights the importance of considering alternative discourses and the way they resist dominant discourses. As Carabine (2001: 272) points out, asserting that discourses produce knowledge, shape versions of reality, and influence behaviour does not imply they are omnipotent, nor that subjects are merely passive entities of discursive practices. Instead, discourses must be understood as continuously contested and challenged. This explains that power does not function in a linear, simplistic way, but circulates among subjects and institutions, operating at all levels of social life (Foucault, 1980 in Hall, 2009: 49–50). Therefore, within discourse, various perspectives are in continuous conflict, competing and opposing one another.

3.3 Coloniality of power

The concept of coloniality, first articulated by Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano (2000), refers to the enduring legacy of colonial power structures, ideas, and practices that continue to influence societies long after the formal end of colonial rule (Quijano, 2000: 777). Unlike colonisation, which involves the conquest and control of territories, coloniality emphasises the persistent systems of racial, epistemic, and social domination embedded within modern institutions, cultural norms, and knowledge systems, as explained by Vázquez (2022: 22).

Quijano's notion of the coloniality of power highlights how these colonial patterns shape contemporary social hierarchies, revealing that modernity is deeply intertwined with colonial histories (Quintero et al., 2019: 5).

This colonial power structure is sustained and reproduced through the 'coloniality of knowledge' (Mignolo, 2011: 133), a concept that describes how geo-politics have historically shaped and continue to influence the production, validation, and dissemination of knowledge. Such dynamic devalues and marginalises epistemologies and ways of knowing originated outside Western traditions, thereby privileging Eurocentric perspectives (Mignolo, 2009: 165). For instance, the way museums curate and present Indigenous cultures, frequently silences Indigenous voices. Researcher Shahid Vawda highlights how processes such as collecting, classifying, re-contextualising, and displaying artefacts enable museums to dismiss alternative epistemologies, resulting in acts of epistemic violence, fundamental in the coloniality of knowledge.

This epistemic dominance is closely linked to what Nelson Maldonado Torres (2007) describes as the 'coloniality of being', which shapes identities, subjectivities, and individuals' perceptions of their existence and worth. It refers to the persistent hierarchal discourses rooted difference, viewing modernity as an ongoing conquest wherein the construct of 'race' serves to justify the prolongation of non-ethics of war—allowing the complete domination of the other's humanity (Maldonado Torres, 2007: 132–134). Scholar Amy Lonetree (2012: 101) emphasises this issue, stating that museums have been implicated in colonial processes that dehumanise Indigenous peoples and erase their histories.

Together, these dimensions—knowledge and being—form a complex web within the coloniality of power that continues to shape societal structures. This often results in the persistent misrepresentation of Indigenous peoples within museum institutions, where dominant narratives construct and legitimise discourses that support cultural erasure. Such practices reinforce harmful stereotypes and perpetuate cycles of exclusion and the reproduction of colonial logics.

3.4 Alternative narratives as a decolonial pedagogic instruments

In the context of this dissertation, 'alternative narratives' are defined as Indigenous epistemologies that challenge dominant Eurocentric frameworks of knowledge and

representation. As previously discussed, museums are educational institutions and discursive fields where power is negotiated, and as such, they also hold the potential to become transformative spaces for decolonial pedagogies. Alternative narratives can disrupt the colonial matrix embedded in museological practices by making visible suppressed histories, reclaiming Indigenous agency, and validating non-Western epistemologies (Ulrike Al-Khamis, 2024).

Decolonial pedagogy, as conceptualised by scholars such as Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh (2018), calls for an epistemic disobedience that critiques colonial structures and proposes ways of learning, knowing, and teaching that are rooted in the lived experiences of historically oppressed communities. In this regard, alternative narratives are not merely supplementary additions to existing knowledge systems; they act as active instruments of resistance, creating pedagogical strategies to expose the mechanisms of epistemic violence.

This perspective is echoed in the work of Bekithemba Dube and Nathan Moyo (2023), who present the concept of 'historicide'—the erasure and distortion of colonised peoples' histories through colonial education systems. Their study critiques how learners have long been subjected to Eurocentric historical narratives that marginalise Indigenous knowledge. Despite reforms following independence, Dube and Moyo argue that curricula continue to reflect colonial frameworks, failing to centre alternative epistemologies or recognise the multiplicity of perspectives needed for curricular justice. They advocate for a pluriversal approach that validates diverse ways of knowing and fosters fairness by acknowledging the intellectual and cultural agency of colonised peoples.

Within the framework of this dissertation, alternative narratives surrounding the practice of *mambear* act as corrective accounts and pedagogical tools that can challenge stereotypical representations of indigeneity and invite more complex, plural, and dynamic understandings of Indigenous knowledge systems. Their integration into museological discourse has the potential to shift interpretive paradigms from objectification to dialogue.

4. Methodology

4.1 Rationale

In this chapter, I introduce the methodological framework employed in this study, which critically examines how the Indigenous practice of *mambear* is represented and discursively constructed in the permanent exhibition of the Museum of America in Madrid. Building on the theoretical foundations outlined in the previous section, the research draws on postcolonial theory to analyse the exhibition's visual, textual, and spatial elements, and how they shape narratives about indigeneity. Simultaneously, it engages with decolonial theory to contextualise these discursive dynamics within the broader framework of the coloniality of power, while foregrounding Indigenous epistemologies. The integration of these two theoretical perspectives is essential for uncovering power asymmetries and the persistence of colonial legacies in cultural institutions, while also enabling a shift from purely analytical critique toward a propositional approach that incorporates Indigenous voices and embraces knowledge produced 'from the margins'.

To address the research questions—(1) How is the Indigenous practice of *mambear* discursively constructed in the Museum of America? and (2) What kind of alternative perspectives would challenge and reframe dominant narratives surrounding coca leaves and *mambear*?—this analysis seeks to explore the dynamics of the coloniality of power and the possibilities offered by decolonial alternatives. It approaches knowledge and representation, as well as being and discourse, as interrelated dimensions that have tangible effects on sociocultural practices. Accordingly, the analysis focuses on two main aspects as illustrated on Figure 1.

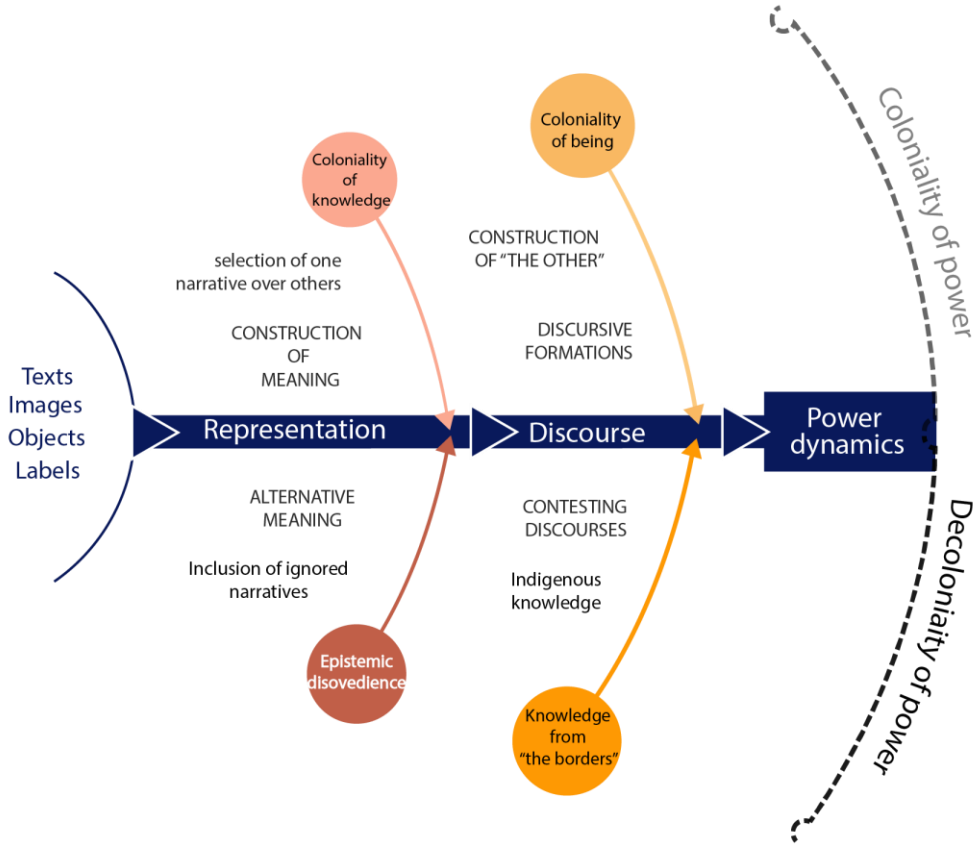


Figure 1. Aspects and scales of Analysis

1. **Representation.** The first level of analysis focuses on the construction of meaning and its entanglement with the coloniality of knowledge. As illustrated in the diagram, museums operate through the display of texts, images, objects, and labels, engaging in a selective process (Lidchi, 2013: 204). This system of representation often privileges certain narratives while marginalising others, operating as a mechanism through which dominant epistemologies assert and legitimise their authority—frequently by centring Western frameworks of knowledge and distorting or erasing Indigenous perspectives (Vawda, 2019: 74).
2. **Discourse.** The second analytical dimension addresses discourse as a force that regulates knowledge and produces identities (Carabine, 2001: 273). This dissertation conceptualises discourse in relation to the coloniality of being, where discursive formations shape how individuals and communities are represented, interpreted, and governed. Under colonial logics, colonised peoples are often constructed as 'the Other', reinforcing racialised hierarchies and forms of exclusion. These discourses have

material consequences, influencing how communities are treated and how they experience social, cultural, and institutional spaces.

Together, representation and discourse form interrelated mechanisms within the larger structure of the coloniality of power, which shapes global systems of meaning and authority, including museological institutions. On the counter-part, there are Indigenous and other subaltern epistemologies that offer decolonial alternatives and resist dominant frameworks, as Walter Mignolo describes it, 'epistemic disobedience' (Mignolo, 2010). These alternative perspectives can function as critical pedagogical tools (Al-Khamis, 2024), exposing the limitations and violence embedded in dominant representations while affirming the legitimacy of other ways of knowing and being.

4.1 Data collection and analysis

The data collection and analysis are organised according to the three-dimensional framework of Critical discourse analysis (CDA) articulated by Norman Fairclough, (2013). CDA supports close examination of language in this thesis —as a key element of the system of representation— and its relation to social power. CDA explores how discourse both shapes and is shaped by social structures, thereby analysing at different scales its function and effects (Janks, 1997; Amoussou and Allagbe, 2018). As highlighted by Leotti et al. (2022: 263), CDA studies how discourse constructs reality by shaping and maintaining meaning through social norms and practices.

Fairclough's three dimensions—text, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice—align with the two analytical aspects introduced earlier, representation and discourse (see Figure 2). At the first level, textual analysis addresses the elements of the permanent exhibition of the Museum of America as a system of representation, where meanings about the coca leaf and *mambear* are constructed. The second dimension, discursive practice, connects these texts to broader discourses, examining how they reproduce or contest dominant narratives. Finally, sociocultural practice situates these discourses within wider power relations, highlighting their material consequences and their entanglement with the coloniality of power.

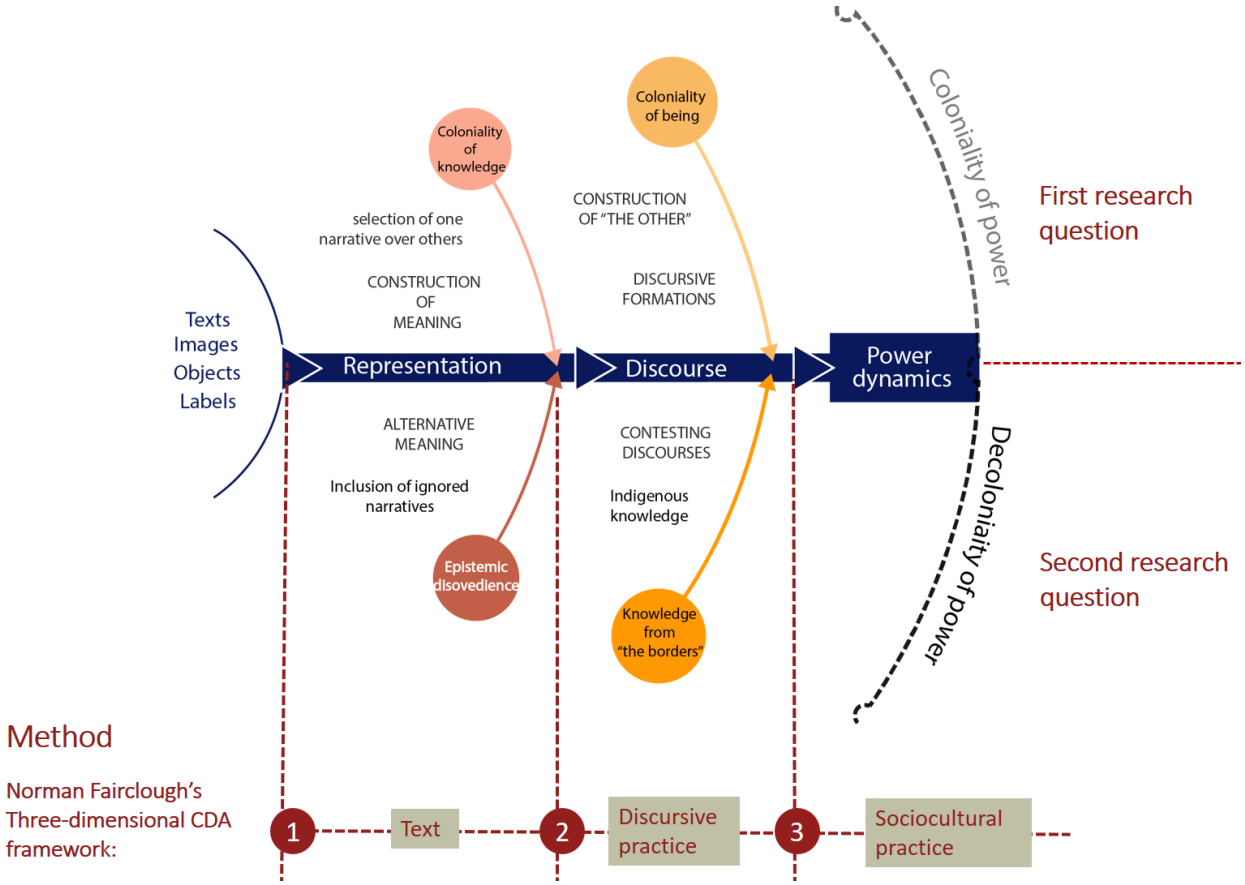


Figure 2. Alignment of Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework with the analytical aspects of representation, discourse and power dynamics.

1. **Text.** The first scale of analysis focuses on the collection and examination of primary data from the permanent exhibition of the Museum of America that relate to the representation of the Indigenous practice of *mambear*. Following Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) concept of multimodality, I will be analysing exhibition labels, textual descriptions, photographs, displayed objects, and the museum's audio guide. The data is analysed to identify key language choices, metaphors, and symbolic representations that shape the meaning around this Indigenous practice. Special attention is given to the ways in which language and visual cues contribute to the construction of Indigenous identity and how these may reflect underlying colonial power structures.

2. **Discourse Practice.** The second stage of analysis examines how the museum's representations of *mambear* are shaped by and connected to broader discursive formations. This involves exploring the intertextual relationships between the

exhibition texts and its sources and references. The data includes historical documents alluded to in the Museum of America's permanent exhibition—particularly under the titles of *General Stories* and *South America*—as well as catalogues of temporary exhibitions, museum guides and publications accessed through the National Library of Spain. This level of analysis reveals how the representation of the Indigenous 'Other' is not isolated but embedded within longstanding discursive traditions that reinforce colonial narratives.

3. **Sociocultural Practice.** The final stage situates the museum's discourse within its broader social, cultural, and political context. This analysis draws on publicly available online sources, including news articles, academic research, historical studies, museum records, and policy documents. It examines how the museum's discursive formations both reflect and perpetuate wider societal power dynamics, with tangible consequences for historically marginalised communities—particularly in relation to their cultural and territorial rights.

It is important to note that addressing the second research question posed a challenge due to the limited availability of written accounts on the coca leaf and the practice of *mambear*. Nevertheless, this study incorporates works produced by Indigenous individuals, such as dissertations, reports, and policy documents, as well as secondary sources where Indigenous perspectives are represented, including publicly available interviews. The analysis aims to go beyond a descriptive inclusion of alternative viewpoints. Instead, it aims to adopt a reflective approach, recognising that Indigenous epistemologies (decoloniality of knowledge) actively contribute to the construction of Indigenous identity (decoloniality of being), situated within a broader framework that acknowledges their material, cultural, and territorial implications (decoloniality of power).

4.2 Ethical considerations and reflexivity

Discourse analysis, by its very nature, is shaped by the positionality and interpretive lens of the researcher (Amoussou and Allagbe, 2018). This means that the data presented in this dissertation is not neutral; it can give rise to multiple, equally plausible interpretations, depending on the cultural, academic, and personal backgrounds of those engaging with it. Reflexivity, therefore, is not simply a methodological consideration, it is an ethical imperative.

As a researcher, I recognise that my own social location and cultural awareness, influence how I engage with the material, the questions I ask, and the meanings I derive.

My positionality as a middle-class Colombian woman without any particular religious affiliation, educated in both Latin American and European institutions, affords me a particular standpoint: I am simultaneously shaped by the colonial histories I study and by the privileges of academic distance. This dual perspective enables a critical lens to colonial discourses and their local impacts, while also presenting the risk of reproducing externalised or academicised readings. Therefore, this interpretive position shapes not only how I see the data but also what I inadvertently may overlook.

Initially, my intention was to focus solely on the exhibition of the Quimbaya collection, a subject marked by ongoing controversy due to the Colombian government's repatriation claims to Spain (Mejía-Lemos, 2019; Losson, 2022; Martínez Garnica and Lleras Pérez, 2023). However, during my visit to the museum, I was struck by the stereotypical and misleading representation of Indigenous practices and, more importantly, of the Indigenous communities from my country. This experience compelled me to change the scope of my research. I felt a responsibility to critically engage with these representations in order to try to vindicate Indigenous worldviews, which are diverse and distinct from the portrayals on display.

Therefore, this work is in part an attempt to contribute to a form of *epistemic justice*, as theorised by philosopher Miranda Fricker (2009), a constitutive condition of non-domination and a political ideal of freedom. Such an approach opens space for contesting reductive constructions of Indigenous identity that continue to marginalise these communities, as they historically have been.

4.3 Limitations

While this research seeks to engage Indigenous knowledge systems, the depth of that engagement might be constrained. Many Indigenous epistemologies are grounded in oral traditions, embodied practices, and community-based transmission—forms of knowledge that are not always accessible through written academic sources. As such, the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in this study may still reflect a limited engagement, shaped by the structure and norms of Western academic research.

Furthermore, due to the scope and limitations of this dissertation, the analysis focuses on a specific form of *mambear* practiced by Indigenous communities in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in northern Colombia: Arhuaco, Kankuamo, Wiwa and Kogui. This focus necessarily excludes the broader spectrum of coca-related practices across the Andes, despite the museum's inclusion of objects from Ecuador, Venezuela, and Peru. While the selected case studies were chosen for their relevance and illustrative value, they do not reflect the full diversity of Indigenous knowledge and coca use. Therefore, the findings should be understood as indicative rather than exhaustive.

5. Analysis

This chapter is organised in two parts, each addressing one of the central research questions. The second research question is about the alternative perspectives that can challenge and reframe dominant narratives surrounding coca leaves and *mambear*, and it is addressed first by foregrounding Indigenous knowledge systems. This section offers a reading that centres the spiritual, relational, and territorial dimensions of the coca leaf as understood through non-Western epistemologies. This deliberate choice aims to shift the analytical gaze beyond interpretive critique, engaging instead with knowledge that has been historically overlooked. The second part then turns to the first research question, interrogating the way in which the Indigenous practice of *mambear* is discursively constructed in the Museum of America. Here, the analysis examines the representation and the discursive formations about *mambear* and the implications they carry within the framework of sociocultural practice and the coloniality of power.

5.1 Decoloniality of power: Indigenous perspectives

This first part of the analysis explores Indigenous narratives surrounding the coca leaf and the practice of *mambear,* drawing primarily on research-based documents produced by Indigenous people—and, to a lesser extent, on publicly available interviews. These sources underscore the sacredness of coca leaf and its entwinement with cosmologies and ways of life that challenge dominant, colonial, and stereotypical representations. While such materials offer crucial insights, the availability of written and media accounts produced by Indigenous peoples remains limited, highlighting ongoing barriers of epistemic visibility and representation.

By engaging with the perspectives of the Arhuaco or Iku,[3] Wiwa, Kogui, and Kankuamo Indigenous communities from the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (SNSM) in northern Colombia, this analysis amplifies ancestral ways of knowing and being that have been marginalised in the representations offered by the Museum of America. In doing so, the reader

[3] Iku is the name by which the Arhuaco Indigenous people refer to themselves. It is also the name of their language.

can consider other possible truths and perspectives that are, in words of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003: 146–147) *reparative,* moving beyond crisis and critique toward reparation, while opening up new ethical and epistemic horizons that transcends, in this particular case, the logics of colonial discourses.

5.1.1 A diverse cultural practice

The coca leaf holds spiritual and social significance for over 115 Indigenous communities across the Andes and Amazon regions, where it has been used for more than 6,000 years (Álvarez Izquierdo, 2023: 71). Revered as a sacred plant, it functions as a conduit for ancestral knowledge and a medium for cultural, spiritual, and communal life. The act of chewing coca leaves—referred to as *mambear* in Colombia, but also known by other names such as *cocar, acullicar,* or *chakkar* in Peru and Bolivia—is deeply embedded in Indigenous cultural heritage, including ritual practices, oral transmission, and intergenerational knowledge sharing (Zuleta and Daza, 2018: 4).

The practice of *mambear* varies across Indigenous communities, each with its own cultural, spiritual, and symbolic interpretations. In the Colombian Amazon, for example, the coca leaf—referred to as *jiibie* by the Uitoto people—is often ground into a fine powder and mixed with other plants such as *yarumo*[4] before being placed in the mouth (Merchán et. al, 2016). In contrast, among the Indigenous communities of the SNSM, the coca leaf is known as *ayu*. In this region, coca leaves are chewed whole, mixed with lime, and consumed through the use of a *poporo*[5] (Confederación Indígena Tairona, 2015). These artefacts, some examples of which are currently on display at the Museum of America, are central to the ritual and epistemological practices of the Arhuaco, Wiwa, Kankuamo and Kogui communities. As such, this analysis focuses on their ancestral knowledge systems, and its relation with their land and territory.

[4] *Yarumo* is a native tree from Latin America *Cecropia peltata* (Universidad EIA, Online)

[5] The *poporo* is a sacred vessel made from dried gourds, used to hold lime produced by crushing seashells.

5.2.2 Decoloniality of knowledge: *Ayu* and the Law of Origin

To understand the significance of *ayu*, the name given to the coca leaf by the Indigenous peoples of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (SNSM), it is important to begin with the Law of Origin, a philosophical framework that guides their way of life. As *mamo*[6] Bwnkwany-Maku of the Arhuaco community explains, the Law of Origin dictates the order, meaning, and interconnectedness of existence, outlining how to live in harmony with the nature, the community, and the spiritual world (Conscious Collective, 2024, 6:35). In this sense, the Law of Origin constitutes a comprehensive ontological and epistemological system, offering ethical principles and practical norms for relating to all forms of life.

According to Uayra Ati Álvarez Izquierdo (2023: 73), an Arhuaco lawyer and author of the dissertation 'The *ayu* as a Subject of Right'—one of the few written works compiling interviews with multiple community members—the Law of Origin constitutes a structure of ancestral governance, codes of teaching and learning transmitted orally through generations. It shapes territorial and social relations, guiding practices in agriculture, architecture, physical and mental healing, rituals, and environmental stewardship (Confederación Indígena Tairona, 2015: 57).

One of the earliest records referencing aspects of the Law of Origin may be found in the writings of Jesuit priest Antonio Julián, dating back to 1722. While documenting the natural resources from the province of Santa Marta, he observed that the Indigenous peoples of this region adhered to strict protocols regarding the cultivation of the coca leaf. They planted it with a specific order and spacing, maintained it with meticulous care, limited its harvest to specific times and individuals, and cooked it in determined clay pots before being chewed (Julián, 1854: 24–27).

In fact, the handling of *ayu* has been governed by norms derived from the Law of Origin. As Álvarez Izquierdo (2023: 73) notes: only the *mamos* may cultivate it, given their spiritual responsibility. Its collection is entrusted to girls known as *seymuke,* chosen for their clarity of thought, or to married women. And, once harvested, the leaves are toasted in a designated clay pot and shared within the family. Furthermore, the Law of Origin stipulates that the sale of *ayu*

[6] Mamo is the name given to the spiritual guides of the Indigenous Communities from the Sierra Nevada de Santa

is strictly forbidden, as it is not a commodity but a sacred medium of spiritual connection; its commercialisation is therefore regarded as a violation of the cosmological order.

According to the Indigenous Confederation of the SNSM, these and all mandates of the Law of Origin, were established when the world existed only in thought, a generative stage envisioned by the spiritual Mothers and Fathers who dwell in sacred sites (Confederación Indígena Tairona, 2015: 56–57). Within this cosmological framework, *ayu* is the primary medium through which the Law of Origin is interpreted and enacted. *Mamo* Zarey Maku explains that chewing *ayu* enables *mamos* to communicate with ancestral forces and to respond to the needs of Mother Earth (Gómez Valencia, 2015: 213). Accordingly, Kankuamo leader Oscar Montero (2023), describes the coca leaf as a feminine sentient being that serves as a conduit for accessing and transmitting ancestral knowledge.

The relationship between *ayu* and the Law of Origin is thus co-constitutive: while the Law prescribes how *ayu* should be cultivated, harvested, and ritually consumed, *ayu* itself is the means through which the Law is interpreted, reaffirmed, and transmitted through generations. In this way, the coca leaf is not merely an object governed by the Law of Origin, but an active agent in the embodiment and continuation of Indigenous epistemologies.

Mignolo's (2013) concept of border thinking offers a useful framework for engaging with alternative epistemologies. He argues that knowledge produced from the perspective of the colonial difference necessitates a delinking from modern/colonial paradigms and the recognition of subaltern loci of enunciation (Mignolo, 2013: 141–142). The Law of Origin, in this light, is not a symbolic cosmology to be deciphered through Western theoretical apparatuses, but an autonomous epistemology that enacts a different logic of knowing.

Therefore, to comprehend the relevance of *ayu*, it is important to relate it to the ancestral narratives that shapes the worldviews of the Indigenous peoples of the SNSM. Such accounts are not categorized in this analysis as myths or legends to be interpreted metaphorically or evaluated through external frameworks of truth. Rather, they are expressions of an epistemic truth, rooted in memory and relational experience that constitute living knowledge, and their validity lies within the cosmological order from which they emerge. With this in mind, the following account narrated by *Mamo* Kwaney Maku Zalabata Mejía in Álvarez Izquierdo's (2023: 88) dissertation offers insight into the origin of *ayu.*

> *Ayu* was first born in Aty Nawowa, a sacred lagoon in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. In the beginning, only the *mamo* used it to *mambear* and to open and close spiritual portals. Then, a hummingbird named Terunna—who served Aty Nawowa—realised the immense spiritual power of the *ayu* as he was chewing it. He felt a light within… awakening the belief that he could attain great wisdom. Then, he decided to steal its seed. From that moment, the *ayu* began to spread. The first seed took root in Cherwa, followed by the creation of a seedbed in Makutama, and finally in Takina.

Cherwa, Makutama, and Takina are sacred natural sites for the four Indigenous communities of the SNSM, located in the departments of Cesar and Magdalena in northern Colombia (Álvarez Izquierdo, 2023: 88). These sites form an integral part of the communities' territorial constitution and governance (Consejo Territorial de Cabildos Indígenas de la SNSM, 2015: 37). As such, the narrative surrounding *ayu* does more than recount its origin, it inscribes a geography that structures and legitimises Indigenous territoriality and rights to the land. In doing so, it sustains a form of resistance that extends beyond opposition to extractivist interests—such as coal mining in these regions (Rodríguez and Sáenz Quitian, 2012)— towards the defence of the ontological foundations of Indigenous life.

This view challenges dominant frameworks that tend to interpret Indigenous expressions through Eurocentric binaries, like rational versus irrational, or real versus supernatural. English literature scholar Carolina Buffoli (2025: 4) argues that such binaries reinforce the colonial logic of Western objectivity while obscuring the philosophical nuance of Indigenous knowledge, which often articulates ontological pluralism and relational epistemologies that extend beyond the confines of Western thought. Similarly, Indigenous writer Alexis Wright (2002) cautions against interpreting Indigenous narratives through external frameworks, arguing that such knowledge is not in need of validation or translation into Western categories. Instead, she calls for interpretive approaches grounded in Indigenous traditions, where storytelling remains as a central mode of knowledge transmission and epistemic continuity.

Researcher of multicultural studies Miguel Rocha Vivas (2010: 513) conveys this idea. Drawing on his conversations with Wiwa and Kogui elders, he explains that knowledge is not abstract but lives within the tangible elements of the territory. As he illustrates, the disappearance of a bird signifies more than ecological loss; it marks the erasure of memory, narratives, and an epistemic landscape. In this context, *ayu* is not only an object of knowledge but a living being through which knowledge is generated, sustained, and transmitted

(Confederación Indígena Tairona, 2015: 64). Therefore, without *ayu*, according to Yuneidis Villazón—member of the Arhuaco community— Indigenous peoples would be unable to interpret or enact the Law of Origin, resulting in a rupture from their spiritual knowledge and the loss of clarity in their cultural vision (Álvarez Izquierdo, 2023: 100).

5.2.3 Decoloniality of being: *Mambear* as a self-constitutive practice

The coca leaf —*ayu*— holds multiple ritual functions among the Indigenous peoples of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Álvarez Izquierdo (2023: 103–104) and Salvarrieta Castro (2017: 96–97) identify a range of ceremonial uses that can be grouped into two main categories: life stage ceremonies and spiritual and communal ceremonies. Life stage ceremonies encompass the use of *ayu* in rites marking birth, initiation into womanhood and manhood, marriage, and death. Spiritual and communal ceremonies strengthen the community's connection to the Law of Origin through diverse practices: rituals of healing and cleansing, in which the curative properties of *ayu* are applied to physical and spiritual ailments—such as digestive, circulatory, and stress-related conditions; rituals of reciprocity or *pagamentos*, where offerings are made to Mother Earth in sacred places; and spiritual consultations led by the *mamos,* in which *ayu* facilitates communication, reflection, and guidance of the community. *Mambear* is integral to all of the aforementioned rituals and it is practiced in daily life by the men of the communities of the SNSM (Salvarrieta Castro, 2017: 102).

Mambear refers to chewing slightly toasted coca leaves, keeping them on one side of the mouth and gradually mixing them with lime, a white powder obtained by cooking seashells that is kept in the *poporo*. This practice was described since early sixteenth century by European colonisers, noting it gave the Indigenous peoples the strength to endure long hours of physical labour (Pedro Simón, 1891: 82; Vespucci, 1951: 326; Fernandez de Oviedo, 1959: 206). Although *mambear* is reserved exclusively for men, not all men have the right to perform it. This right is granted during the *joburu ipari* ceremony, which marks the transition from boyhood to manhood (Salvarrieta Castro, 2017: 97). This night-long sleepless ceremony is spent seated on a small stool, listening to the *mamos*' teachings, and concludes with the granting of formal permission to *mambear* and the reception of the *poporo* or *jo'buru*, marking the start of a lifelong spiritual and communal practice. Upon receiving this permission, men assume the right to actively participate in the discussions of the community, becoming socially and politically acknowledged (Wills, 2017).

Mambear is thus seen as an ontological practice that shapes identity, signifying wisdom, maturity, responsibility, and commitment to the Law of Origin. As explained by Damián, from the Kogui community, when men receive their first *poporo,* they are welcomed into a sacred space known as *Nujwé*, where they listen to the teachings of the *mamos* and learn how to be good husbands, fathers, community members, and caretakers of the land (Project Happiness, 2025, 12:25). Hence, it embodies a relational ethic that connects the individual to their family, community, and territory.

Moreover, *mambear* provides nutritional benefits such as vitamins and minerals and enhances endurance and focus (Conzelman and White 2016: 8–12). Arhuaco member Arukin Torres describes the *poporo* used during the practice of *mambear* as a 'sacred companion to think, to write, and to be calm as women are' (Wills, 2017). For the *mamos*, the *poporo* assumes a particular significance as a *marusama*—a sacred medium of communication through which knowledge is understood and transmitted, being able to make consultations to the spiritual world (Álvarez Izquierdo, 2023: 72).

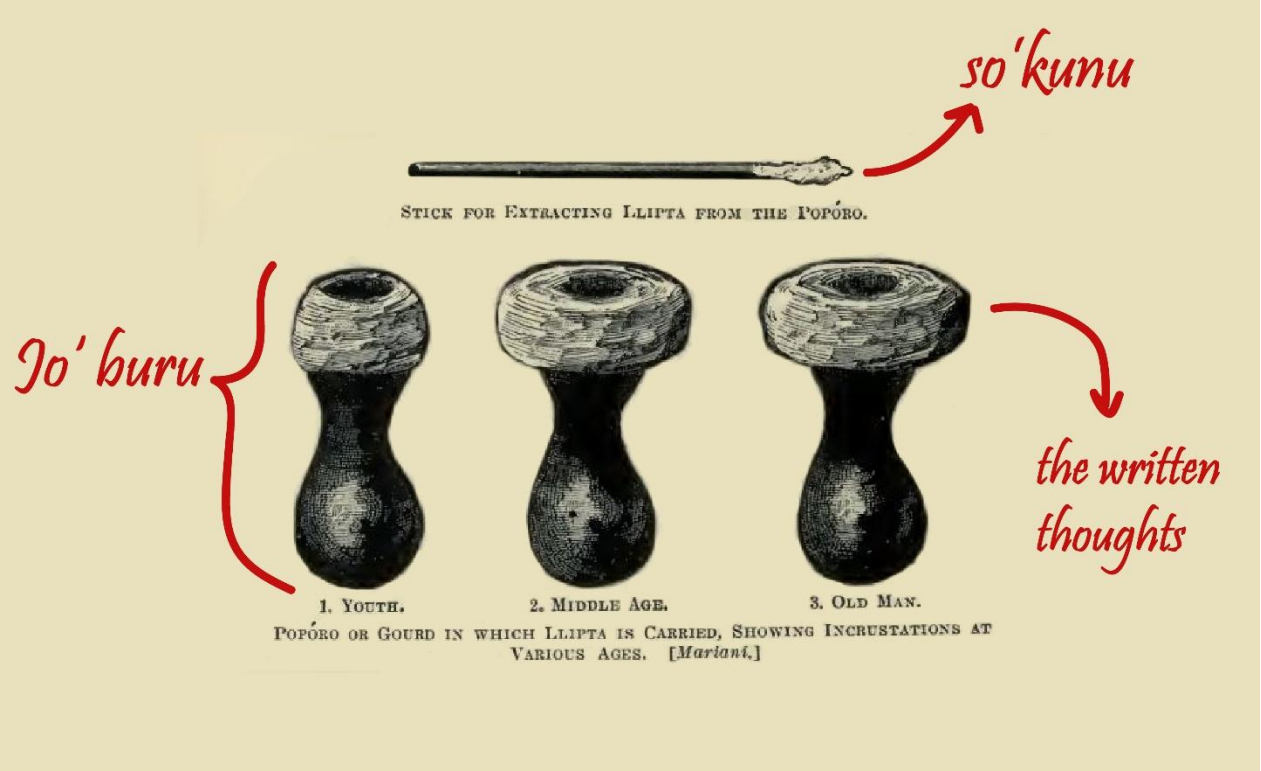


Figure 3. *Poporo* or *jo'buru* over time. Adapted by the author based on Golden Mortimer (1901:210).

The ancestral practice of *mambear* involves not only the *poporo* and the lime, but also the *so'kunu*, a slender wooden stick. The *poporo*, or *jo'buru*, is crafted from the *totumo* plant

(*Crescentia cujete*) and serves as a container for the lime. To use it, the *so'kunu* is dipped into the *poporo* and then gently tapped against the coca leaves held in the mouth. After applying the lime, the *so'kunu* is carefully rubbed around the rim of the *poporo*, gradually creating a cylindrical ring of hardened lime and saliva that grows over time (see Figure 3). *Mamo* Luca from the Kogi community (Taussig, 2007:14) explains that this is how Indigenous men 'write their thoughts', and as such, construct their memory. The size and form of the *poporo* thus become a tangible manifestation of the knowledge and wisdom accumulated through a lifetime of *mambear*, embodying continuous learning and spiritual growth.

This sensorial relationship with coca leaves evokes what María Lugones describes as decolonial aesthesis—a way of perceiving, feeling, and being that resists colonial logics and affirms alternative modes of existence. While often applied to contemporary art practices, decolonial aesthesis also makes possible other ways of relating to the world (Vásquez and Contreras, 2016). Acosta López (2024) argues that embodied, sensory practices—such as *mambear*—operate as both political and epistemic practices. This grounding counters dehumanising reductions, such as colonial descriptions of the peoples who practiced *mambear* as 'cattle' (Vespucci, 1951: 325), and instead illuminates non-dominant forms of being expressed through practices that have historically resisted such framings. In this sense, Lugones theorises a communal and interconnected dimension of both resistance and possibility rooted in cosmological relations (Meda Calderón, 2023; Zembylas, 2025).

This stands in direct opposition to coloniality of being, in which colonised subjects are denied the capacity to produce knowledge due to their lack of conformity to Western notions of objectivity. Understanding coca and *mambear* as alternative or counter-discourses affirms other ways of being in the world—forms of knowing and relating that emerge as antithetical practices to the logic of coloniality (Maldonado Torres, 2016: 10).

5.2 Coloniality of Power

To address how the Indigenous practice of *mambear* is discursively constructed in the Museum of America, this second part of the analysis is structured in two parts. The first examines the museum's permanent exhibition to unpack the representational strategies through which *mambear* is framed. The second part situates these representations within a broader interdiscursive field, analysing how they intersect with, and reproduce longer historical

trajectories of colonial discourse. Particular attention is paid to the entanglements between the coloniality of knowledge and the coloniality of being, as theorised within the colonial matrix of power (Quijano, 2000). By placing museum discourse in dialogue with these decolonial frameworks, the analysis reveals how the representation of *mambear* is not merely a matter of cultural display but a site of contested meaning with real implications for Indigenous sociocultural and territorial realities.

5.2.1 Coloniality of knowledge: Representation and discourse

The representation of coca leaf and *mambear* in the permanent exhibition of the Museum of America offers a rich context for examining how meaning is produced around this Indigenous practice. The selection of specific narratives over others in cultural representation reveals underlying intentions and mechanisms of meaning-making. As Lidchi (2009: 176) notes, exhibitions do not simply present facts; they reflect curatorial decisions about what is considered important for visitors to know. In this case, the representational choices reflect what decolonial theorists identify as the coloniality of knowledge, a system that privileges Eurocentric frameworks while marginalising or distorting Indigenous epistemologies (Mignolo, 2010: 160). It is important to mention that this is a situated and necessarily selective interpretation. It does not aim to offer a comprehensive reading of the entire exhibition but rather foregrounds the colonial logic embedded in the representation of Indigenous practices. Full transcriptions of the analysed texts are available in Appendix 1.

5.2.1.1 Religion in the Museum of America's permanent exhibition

The permanent exhibition of the Museum of America was inaugurated in 1994, following a decade-long closure during which the building underwent significant renovations and the exhibition layout was restructured. The museum's collection comprises approximately 25,000 objects, while the exact number featured in the permanent exhibition remains unclear. Media sources such as Casa de America (2015) and Museo Madrid (online) estimate that around 10–15% of the collection is currently on display. These objects are organised into five main thematic sections: 'The Knowledge of America', 'The Reality of America, 'Society',

'Religion', and 'Communication'[7], which are further divided into subthemes. The exhibition adopts an anthropological perspective and aims to present what the museum describes as the 'fascinating reality of America' (Museum of America, online-a). The permanent exhibition is organised in the first and second floor of the museum in the following manner (see Figure 4)

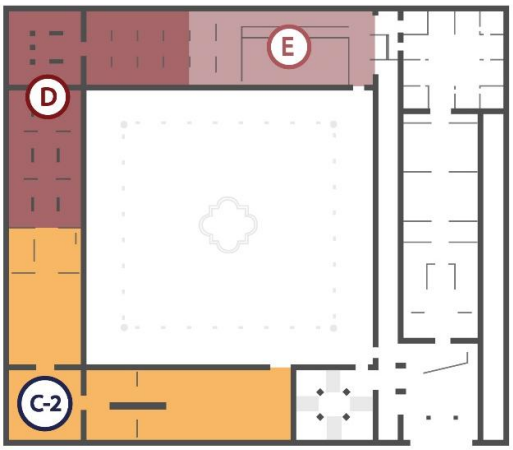
First Floor

A. The Knowledge of America

B. The reality of America

C-1. The Society (the cycle of life and egalitarian societies)

Second Floor



C-2. The Society (complex societies)

D. Religion

E. Communication

Figure 4. Floor plans of the Museum of America's permanent exhibition. Redrawn and adapted by the author based on the virtual tour interface (Museum of America, 2025).

Located on the second floor, The Religion section is organised into four subthemes: (1) spirits, sacred chiefs, divine kings and gods; (2) the sacred space; (3) the ritual; and (4) the sacred objects. Coca leaves are first mentioned in the Quimbaya collection, within the sacred space (2), and later appear in the ritual (3) under the title 'Hallucinogens', which constitute the main

[7] These are the English titles assigned by the Museum of America to each section of its permanent exhibition.

focus of this study (see Figure 5). However, a brief examination of the introductory framing of the Religion section broadly allows setting the context for a more nuanced understanding of how Indigenous practices are represented and legitimised within the museum's permanent collection.

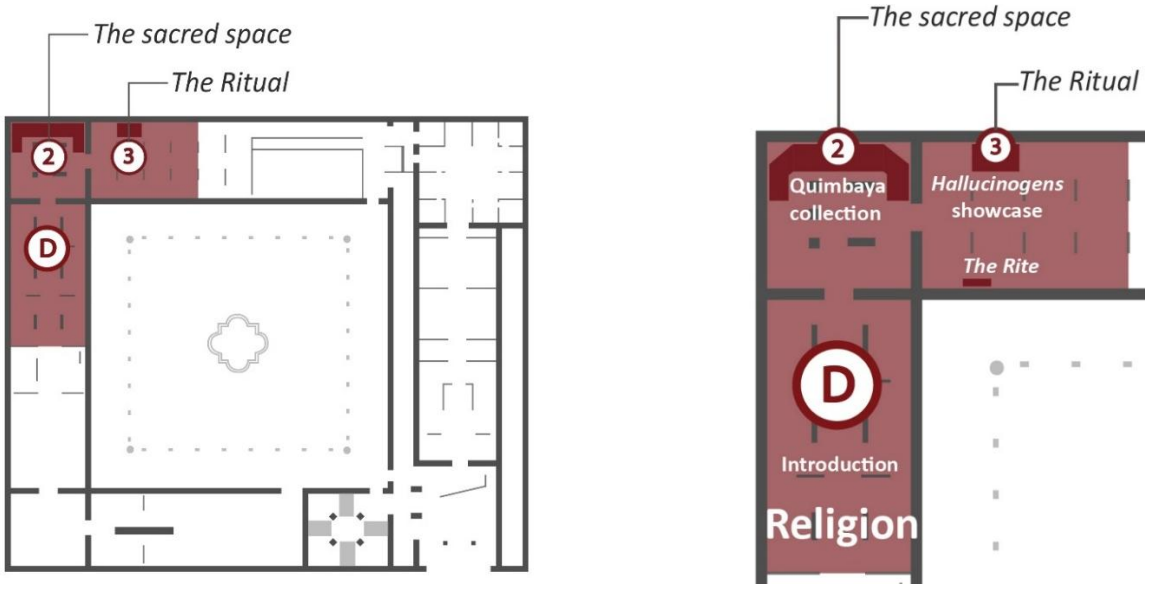


Figure 5. Locations of the analysed spaces within the Religion section. Redrawn and adapted by the author based on the virtual tour interface (Museum of America, 2025).

Figure 6. Exhibition view from the Religion section of the Museum of America virtual tour. Screenshot adapted by the author based on the Museum of America virtual tour (Museum of America, 2025).

Figure 7. Exhibition view of the Quimbaya collection within the sacred space subtheme. Screenshot adapted by the author based on the Museum of America virtual tour (Museum of America, 2025).

Figure 8. Exhibition view of the Hallucinogens showcase within the ritual subtheme. Screenshot adapted by the author based on the Museum of America virtual tour (Museum of America, 2025).

The introduction of the Religion thematic section features a juxtaposition of Christian and Indigenous representations of the divine. Statuettes of the baby Jesus are displayed alongside an unnamed Inca deity (see Figure 6), revealing how deeply interwoven spiritual iconographies became during and after the conquest, and the asymmetrical recognition and classification afforded to each tradition. While Christian figures are presented with specific names and

identities, the Indigenous figure is generically referred to as a 'feline god', a label which flattens its cultural specificity and spiritual significance.

According to the audio guide, the object on display is a ceremonial vase called *quero*[8] that represents a jaguar (Museum of America, Online-b), an animal revered as sacred among different Indigenous communities in Latin America. Archaeologist Alejandro Ortíz Luna (2024), affirms the jaguar in Inca cosmogony embodied transformation and authority. Inca rulers were believed to transform into jaguars, reinforcing their legitimacy and connection to cosmic and territorial power (Ortíz Luna, 2024:51). Classifying Indigenous understandings of the sacred through Western essentialist terms as 'feline god' illustrates, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021:74) argues, the difficulty Western knowledge systems have in recognising or validating alternative perspectives.

Moving forward and accompanied by a series of introductory panels, this space seeks to guide the visitor through the complex terrain of religion in the Americas: as a vehicle for cultural transmission, a means of connecting with the supernatural world, and an expression of spiritual diversity. Presented in a descriptive and ostensibly neutral tone, the first panel states:

> Religion is the greatest instrument available to humans for relating to the supernatural world, … In the Americas, we can find examples of all the religious manifestations present in the rest of the world, ranging from the most personalised shamanic practices to official religions.

This opening text adopts a universalising narrative that presents religion as a shared, ahistorical, and transcultural human phenomenon. Such framing aligns with Western secular ideology which treats religion as a neutral and universally applicable category, when, in fact, it is a historically constructed concept. Anthropologist Talal Asad (1993:40) mentions that the idea of universal religious principles believed to exist in all societies is called 'Natural religion', a concept developed by Herbert of Cherbury in early modern Europe. This approach would later influence how belief was interpreted, judged, and compared with one another (Asad, 1993:41), often reductively. For example, the phrasing of the description implicitly constructs a hierarchy

[8] *Quero* is an Inca ceremonial vase used during rituals to drink chichi, a traditional fermented beverage made out of corn (Lizárraga, 2009).

of religious forms, in which ‘shamanic’, and by extension, Indigenous spiritualties, are positioned as informal or fragmented.

The use of ‘personalised’ to describe shamanic practices individualises and potentially trivialises them, suggesting a lack of coherence or legitimacy, in contrast to ‘official religions’, which are often associated with institutionalised Judeo-Christian tradition. This parallel reflects a broader epistemic hierarchy, in which European religions are individuated and legitimised, whereas Indigenous divinities are subsumed under vague, typological categories. This idea is further supported by the second informative panel, in which Indigenous deities are relegated to the past, erasing their contemporary relevance. The panel states:

> In pre-Columbian cultures, we find a multitude of groups of gods organised hierarchically, where each deity responds to a specific symbolic need. Divinities such as Tláloc and Quetzalcóatl (Mexico) or Viracocha (Peru) transcended their historical moment and became symbols of a golden past, in which people lived according to their ancestral beliefs.

This locates Indigenous cosmologies firmly in the past, using nostalgic and idealising language: ‘a golden past’ de-temporalises and deactivates Indigenous spirituality, suggesting that their role is primarily representational and historical, therefore lacks spiritual relevance in the present. Osorio Sunnuks (2022), explains how this type of representations are understood as ‘allochronic’ views that separate past and present, constructing the display of ancient artefacts without linking them to living Indigenous communities or contemporary belief. The exhibition text further states that:

> The arrival of Christianity led to a reconfiguration of religious expression in line with new necessities. Syncretism … became a process of adaptation in which many Indigenous traditions disappeared, while others were disguised, masked with European elements.

This passage obscures the agents and mechanisms of religious imposition and colonial violence**.** Christianity ‘arrives’ rather than being actively imposed, and Indigenous religions are ‘reconfigured’ rather than suppressed or destroyed. Furthermore, the metaphor of ‘disguising’ or ‘masking’ trivialises Indigenous strategies of survival and resistance, reducing them to aesthetic transformation rather than recognising them as acts of cultural resilience under coercion. The text thus subtly naturalises the outcome of syncretism, presenting it as a neutral, or even desirable development. This is further compounded by a final assertion:

‘Today, one can speak of the existence of an Indigenous Christianity which, at times, may appear unrecognisable, but which nevertheless represents an enrichment of religious life.’

Here, the museum assumes the epistemic authority to name, categorise, and evaluate the legitimacy of religious forms. The claim that Indigenous Christianity is ‘unrecognisable’ implies a deviation from normative Christianity, and positions European forms of religion as the standard. Meanwhile, the notion of ‘enrichment’ glosses over the colonial trauma and loss of spiritual autonomy that accompanied such transformations, where Christianity ‘attempted to destroy, then to appropriate, and then to claim’ Indigenous spirituality (Smith, 2021:74). This language reduces a history of forced religious assimilation and cultural erasure into a celebratory narrative of hybridity, thereby overlooking the power dynamics within colonial religious imposition.

5.2.1.2 The sacred space and the Quimbaya collection

The second subtheme of the Religion section, titled ‘Sacred Space’, includes an area dedicated to the funerary world. Here, the Quimbaya collection is displayed alongside burial assemblages from the Inca and Mochica civilisations, as well as funerary ceramics from Mexico and Colombia. Despite the critical attention to the ethical and political implications of exhibiting human remains in museums since the late 1970s (Jenkins, 2010; Clary, 2018), the display also features a Paracas mummy from Peru, accompanied by a selection of pre-Columbian funerary textiles.

While the audio guide for the funerary world (Museum of America, Online-b Audio guide 01:13) introduces this space by noting that the objects on display are ‘imbued with strong symbolic meaning’, any symbolic and spiritual dimensions are conspicuously absent in the interpretation of the Quimbaya Collection. The artefacts are minimally labelled, with little or no information about their ritual uses, cosmological significance, or the belief systems to which they belong. Instead, they are arranged by formal characteristics against a stark black background (see Figure 7) —a strategy that accentuates the aesthetic qualities of gold and reinforces their classification as a ‘treasure’, as stated in the display title.

Tesoro (treasure) is defined by the Real Academia Española (n.d.) as 'an amount of money, valuables, or precious objects gathered and stored.'[9] Hence, the visual and discursive framing privileges material, economic, and aesthetic values that echo colonial extractivist logics, where Indigenous artefacts are reframed as accumulable wealth. In contrast, the Colombian Academy of History argues that it is more appropriate to designate the assemblage as the *Filandia Collection*. This terminology resists narratives of looting and commodification that position the objects as trophies of greed, and instead foregrounds the need to acknowledge their cultural and historical significance (Martínez Garnica and Lleras Pérez, 2023: 108).

The only accompanying description of the collection reads:

> The Quimbaya Treasure
>
> This funerary assemblage, created between 500 and 1000 AD and donated to the Spanish State by the Republic of Colombia in 1893, represents the most important collection of gold and tumbaga (a gold and copper alloy) objects from Pre-Hispanic America … The assemblage includes vessels shaped like human figures (*caciques*) and gourds (*poporos*), associated with the consumption of hallucinogens, as well as a wide variety of ornamental items such as helmets, ear ornaments, nose rings, bells, pins, and more.

This description foregrounds the legality of the collection's acquisition, positioning it within a framework of diplomatic exchange that implicitly legitimises Spain's possession of Indigenous heritage. It disregards the unequal power dynamics of the late nineteenth century and deliberately omits the longstanding criticisms surrounding the removal of the Quimbaya collection from its cultural context, including Colombia's repatriation requests (Dos Santos Acerbi, 2023: 78), an ongoing process that started back in 1974, twenty years before the opening of the permanent exhibition at the Museum of America. Thus, it leaves no room to question the legitimacy of its ownership. Additionally, the text omits the fact that the artefacts were initially obtained through *huaquería*, non-archaeological and illegal excavations common in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Casanova 2016: 16), before being acquired by the Colombian state.

[9] In Spanish: Cantidad de dinero, valores u objetos preciosos, reunida y guardada.

The reference to the ceremonial vessels for consuming 'hallucinogens' emphasises the imposition of Western thought, which delegitimised other forms of knowing (Mignolo, 2009: 165). While the collection includes 122 gold objects, it is this pharmacological association that the museum chooses to highlight, contributing to the exoticisation of Indigenous practices. The term *hallucinogen*—derived from the Latin *hallucinari* 'to wander in the mind' and the Greek *gennan* 'to produce'—denotes substances that cause altered perceptions of reality (Diccionario chileno de etimología, 2001). Such terminology aligns with a Western scientific discourse, detaching the objects from their spiritual, cultural, and ritual foundations. The resulting narrative conflates ceremonial use with intoxication and irrationality, therefore strengthening colonial discourses that reduce Indigenous cosmologies to the stigmatised consumption of substances that alter the consciousness while maintaining a fascination with the exotic 'other'.

Figure 9. Exhibition view of the vessels and seated caciques. Screenshot adapted by the author based on the Museum of America virtual tour (Museum of America, 2025).

This framing is further reinforced by the object labels, which clarify that the 'consumption of hallucinogens' refers to the chewing of coca leaves in combination with lime. However, as explained by Conzelman and White (2016:2) and Blanco and González (2020: 87), coca leaf does not generate personality disintegration or alteration of self-awareness or reality; thus, it is not hallucinogenic. On the contrary, it has proven medicinal and nutritional properties (Weil,

1978). Therefore, the present narration in the permanent exhibition obscures the ancestral use of coca leaves and represents it inaccurately.

On the one hand, the 23 labels included in the display, mostly provide basic taxonomic information: name, material composition, cultural affiliation, approximate date, and country of origin. Three of them briefly mention formal aspects, such as the seated posture of the *caciques*[10] (see Figure 9), and three left repeat the same description: 'Vessels used to hold lime, which potentiates the effect of the coca leaf when chewed'. This label, though brief, participates in a broader epistemic violence. Its phrasing draws heavily on pharmacological language. Specifically, 'potentiates the effect' implies a chemical enhancement akin to drug use. On the other hand, the audio guide affirms, 'these containers were used to store lime or ash, which was mixed in the mouth with coca leaves to activate their properties'. Although it is a more accurate description of the practice of *mambear*, this framing similarly erases its philosophical and spiritual meaning by triggering associations with psychoactive use**,** potency, and by extension, intoxication or alteration.

This dynamic aligns with what Lira Larios (2015: 20) describes as the 'objectification of Indigenous cultures'[11], in which cultural artefacts are stripped of their relational meaning and presented as anonymous, decontextualised curiosities. The *poporos* (see Figure 10) are thus reclassified as tools of pharmacological function, divorced from their ontological and epistemological dimension. The omission of Indigenous philosophical nuance reflects a broader pattern of suppressing alternative worldviews in favour of Western classificatory systems. As social anthropologist Grada Kilomba (2019) argues, this operates as a dynamic of speech and silencing, wherein European epistemologies assert themselves as the sole legitimate framework, while reducing complex practices to sensationalised descriptions.

[10] The caciques were Indigenous spiritual and political leaders in many pre-Columbian societies in Colombia. It can be similar to the *mamos*.

[11] In Spanish: objetualización de la cultura Indígena.

Figure 10. Exhibition view on the vessels or *poporos*. Screenshot adapted by the author based on the Museum of America virtual tour (Museum of America, 2025).

5.2.1.3 The Ritual and ‘hallucinogens’

The third subtheme of the Religion section dedicated to the ritual continues the visual and conceptual juxtaposition of Christian and Indigenous elements observed in the introduction of Religion. This is evident in the initial panel, which suggests that the ultimate purpose of ritual practices is to establish a connection between the human and the divine in order to obtain a specific benefit. It draws a parallel between European and Indigenous rites like the Christian mass and the Mesoamerican ball game as examples of ritual expression, framing them as analogous forms of spiritual communication.

> The goal is to establish supernatural communication in order to obtain specific results, which may range from ensuring a good harvest (propitiatory rites), to turning an adolescent into a warrior (rites of passage), or guaranteeing the balance of the universe through the ball game, the sacrifice of a captive, or even the celebration of a mass (maintenance rites) … With the arrival of Europeans, Christian rites would come to acquire greater importance and significance.

Although the text may risk flattening the complexity and cultural significance of each ritual, it also appears to aim at translating Indigenous cosmologies into accessible terms for a broad

public audience. In doing so, it invites visitors to recognise a shared human impulse to connect with the divine and to navigate life transitions through ritual. However, the closing statement positions a clear hierarchy of religious value between the European and Indigenous traditions, stating a superior ‘importance’ and ‘significance’ of one over the other. Moreover, the shift from Indigenous to Christian rituals is presented as a natural or inevitable transition. There is no critical examination of colonial imposition, forced conversion, or the symbolic and material violence underpinning religious domination. Rather than acknowledging the suppression, prohibition, and replacement of Indigenous practices, the arrival of Christianity is once more normalised, effectively erasing the historical trauma and resistance that accompanied this shift.

Figure 11. Exhibition view on the Hallucinogens showcase.

In front of the previous description, there is a showcase titled ‘Hallucinogens’, featuring nineteen pieces that include photographs, ceramics, gold figures, and wooden instruments (see Figure 11). Twelve of them are related to the use of coca leaves, even though, as it was previously mentioned, it is not a hallucinogenic. The explanatory panel contains the following text:

> Hallucinogens
>
> They are an important component of ritual language, and in fact, in many American cultures, contact with the supernatural world would be unthinkable without this resource. These contacts often require inducing an appropriate mental state through drugs, whose use is always regulated by the group. The trance achieved provides a pathway to the 'beyond' as if a conduit opened between the gods and humans, making them feel closer together as if the rupture itself brought them nearer.

This narrative conditions Indigenous spirituality on the use of hallucinogens, thereby medicalising and further exoticising Indigenous ancestral practices. It implies that the connection with the supernatural would be impossible without such substances, and that such connection requires an altered state of consciousness. In doing so, it reduces Indigenous religiosity to a form of drug-induced illusion, referred to as a 'trance' that enables the practitioner to 'see the invisible', according to the audio guide (Museum of America, Online-b 1:40), subtly casting doubt on the legitimacy of these spiritual experiences. Furthermore, the use of the term drugs defined as 'a substance or medicinal preparation with a stimulating, depressant, or narcotic effect'[12] (Real Academia Española, n.d), reinforces a biomedical and often criminalising framework that associates Indigenous cultural practices with modern recreational drug use.

5.2.1.3.1 The images

Let's now consider the role and significance of photographic imagery in this display (see Figure 12). Three photographs are prominently featured within the showcase, actively contributing to the process of signification through an ethnographic lens. As the viewer's gaze moves from the descriptive text to the images, it becomes evident that these photographs serve to reinforce the reduction of Indigenous spirituality to a set of exoticised, de-contextualised, and pharmacologically interpreted gestures, presented instead as a spectacle of altered consciousness. Crucially, the photographs provide no contextual information: Who are the people on the images? Where is the ritual taking place? What plant or substance is involved? What cosmological framework gives this action its meaning? In the absence of such details,

[12] In Spanish: Sustancia o preparado medicamentoso de efecto estimulante, deprimente y narcótico.

the viewer is presented with an ambiguous image that evokes associations with drug use, a vision that risks reinforcing stereotypical and reductive notions of Indigenous sacred plants.

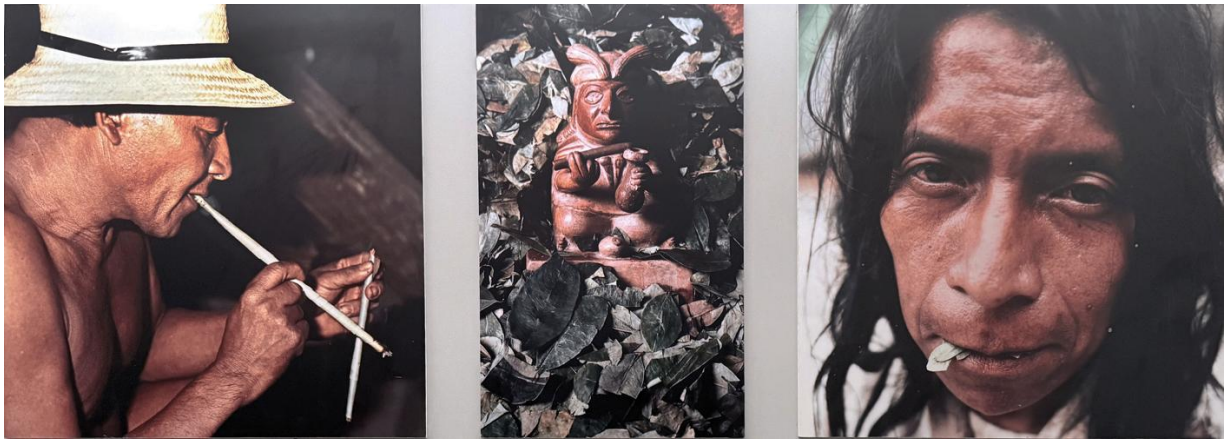


Figure 12. Photographs in the Hallucinogens showcase.

For instance, the image of a man on the left holding what appears to be a long smoking device strips the scene of its cultural context, reducing it to a visual shorthand for ‘drug use’. Such imagery reflects a curatorial logic that frames Indigenous peoples not as epistemic subjects but as ethnographic objects (cf. Hall, 2009-b: 253; Sari and Abdullah, 2024), summing up the argument about stereotyping by depicting them in moments of presumed consumption, suggestive of altered states, or irrationality.

The central and right-hand photographs are related to the use of coca leaves and the practice of *mambear*. In the central image, a ceramic figure representing a person is shown holding a *poporo* and a *so’kunu*[13]. The figure is set within a dense bed of coca leaves and partially covered by them in a clearly staged composition that evokes the abundance of this plant and its consumption by Indigenous communities. This is an example of how museums potentially operate as influential rhetorical instruments, shaping dominant narratives and fostering often problematic attachments to particular cultural ideals (Sleeper-Smith, 2009: 1–2)—in this case, linking Indigenous cultures to drug use. The arrangement of the objects appears designed to support and legitimise such associations.

[13] the *poporo* is a sacred gourd used to carry lime; the *so’kunu*, is a slender wooden stick to take the lime out from the poporo and into the mouth.

Finally, the close-up photograph on the right depicts an Indigenous man chewing coca leaves. While the image is intimate and arresting on its own, its framing within the exhibition space further shapes its interpretation. The man's sombre gaze, with eyes partially closed and a visible wad of coca in his mouth, appears intended to suggest that he is under the influence of the 'effects' of a hallucinogen, triggering a misreading of intoxication signs, thus reinforcing associations rooted in Eurocentric drug discourses. The camera is looking down at him, giving the observer a spatial superiority, reducing him to a visual specimen of alterity, a face of the 'Other' displayed for aesthetic and anthropological curiosity. Rather than fostering understanding, the image is a spectacle of difference, ultimately reinforcing and reproducing a colonial gaze that marginalises Indigenous identity, now reduced to drug consumers.

5.2.1.3.2 The objects

Figure 13. Ceramic sculpture from the Tumaco-Tolita Culture, Colombia (500 b.c.e-500 a.c.e)

Figure 14. Cacique seated on a taburete. Nariño-Carchi Culture, Colombia (750-1500 a.c.e)

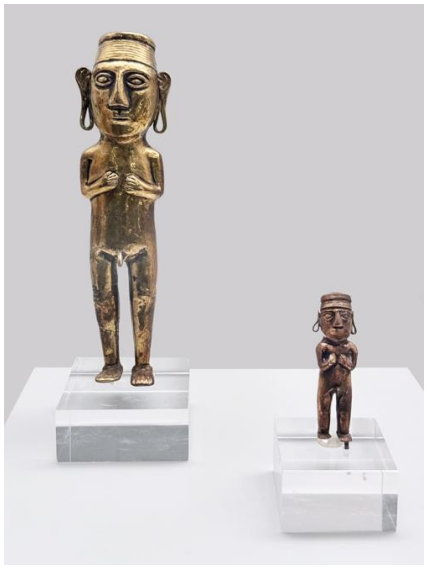


Figure 15. Gold figurines from the Inca Civilisation used on religious rituals called *capacochas* (1400-1532 a.c.e)

Within the showcase there are also four figures made in ceramic and gold representing different actors from South-American Indigenous communities chewing coca leaves, as indicated by the pronounced bulges in their cheeks (Figures 14 and 15). The objects are placed on top of individual white plinths of varying height, promoting a minimalist aesthetic that highlights the formal and material qualities of the objects. However, the description of the sculpture described

as ‘a great lord chewing coca’ (see Figure 13) is imprecise, as further investigation into the museum’s object database (Museum of America, Online-c) reveals no mention of coca chewing in relation to this piece. In fact, the bulges on the cheeks are interpreted as ‘possibly indicating facial decorations’. Moreover, the object is not catalogued as a ‘great lord’, but rather as the ‘bust of a female figure’.

Another notable discrepancy appears in the label referring to the three wooden boards displayed in a linear arrangement and identified as ‘spoons’ or ‘paddles’ (see figures 16 and 17). The accompanying label states that these objects were used for ‘the preparation of coca leaves’. However, archaeological research indicates that similar paddles were in fact used in northern Chile for the consumption of the seeds of the cebil tree (*Anadenanthera colubrina*), a species native to Bolivia and north-western Argentina (Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino, 2008; Museo Nacional de Historia Natural de Chile, Online). This misattribution reflects a broader pattern of generalising and misrepresenting Indigenous practices, particularly in relation to plant use and ritual contexts.

Figure 16. Wooden Paddles (n.d)

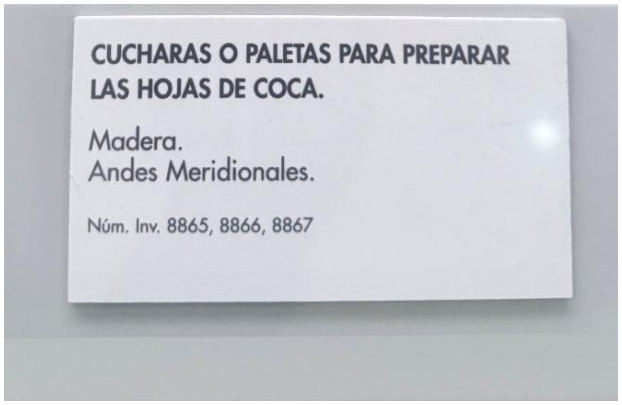


Figure 17. Spoons or paddles for preparing coca leaves. Wood. Southern Andes.

Finally, at the centre of the showcase, there is a decorated wooden plate containing dried coca leaves and a black sphere, identified by the label as a lime ball (see Figures 18 and 19). The label explains that ‘the coca leaves were chewed in combination with lime to increase its effect’, a description that closely mirrors that of the labels accompanying the Quimbaya collection (see section 5.2.1.2). It portrays *mambear* as a bygone or extinct practice, stripped of any contemporary relevance, thereby overlooking the Indigenous peoples who continue to practice it today. This sentence is followed by a clarifying statement: ‘It is not strictly a hallucinogen, as its consumption was codified for the elites’. Although this note appears to

attempt a correction of the misrepresentation of coca leaves as hallucinogenic, it fails to fully dissociate the plant from that category. Instead, it perpetuates a partial association by suggesting that coca lies on the periphery of hallucinogenic classification.

Furthermore, this short affirmation is insufficient to counterbalance the broader narrative established throughout the exhibition, which repeatedly aligns coca use with hallucinogenic substances. While the inclusion of the coca leaves and lime ball might be interpreted as an effort toward ethnographic accuracy, it does little to deconstruct the overarching exoticising and pathologising discourse. In this sense, the gesture toward clarification appears more like a curatorial disclaimer to a broader discursive framework that privileges scientific and colonial classifications over Indigenous ontologies.

Figure 18. Dried coca leaves and lime mixed with coca leaves

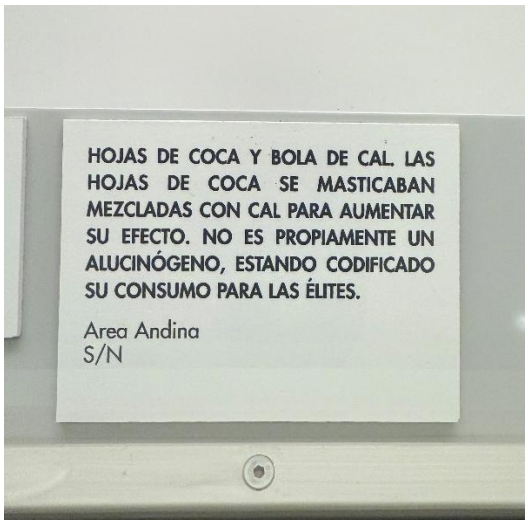


Figure 19. Label from lime ball and coca leaves

Lastly, by stating that coca consumption was reserved for elites, the label risks universalising elite restriction across all Indigenous contexts, thereby overlooking the diverse cultural practices associated with coca among various communities. While this may be accurate in specific cases, such as among the Incas (Sánchez, 1997: 140), it does not account for the broader spectrum of Indigenous groups who have historically engaged in *mambear*, and who continue to do so in the present. Such generalisations side-line the cultural richness and complexity of coca-related traditions, imposing a rigid interpretation. As Ashcroft et al. (2009: 76) note, cultural identities and their components are always shaped by specific historical and spatial contexts, and must be understood as fluid and subject to change. To overlook this is to

perpetuate a static, homogenising view of Indigenous lifeworld that disregards their internal diversity and evolving contemporary significance.

5.2.2 Coloniality of being: Discourse and sociocultural practice

This second part of the analysis examines a range of materials, including historical documents, museum catalogues and guides, as well as publicly available sources such as news articles, academic research, and policy documents. Together, these texts reveal the discursive formations embedded in the representation of the coca leaf, the practice of *mambear*, and the Indigenous peoples who engage in it. The analysis considers both materials produced directly by the Museum of America and external sources that the institution references in its narratives. Particular attention is paid to intertextuality, the manner in which texts (spoken, written, or visual) draw upon, echo, or incorporate other texts (Birrell, 2007: 11). This concept underscores that representation and meaning are not generated by a single text in isolation but is, instead, shaped through its relationship to prior or surrounding discourses (Moosavina et al, 2019: 195). Analysing intertextuality allows to explore how ideologies and power relations construct the 'other' and are reproduced, having tangible effects in the sociocultural practice.

5.2.2.1 The inferior other

The representation of the coca leaf and the Indigenous practice of *mambear* that frames it as a drug and hallucinogen, reflects a nuanced dynamic of epistemic control, selective storytelling, and curatorial choices that obscure, rather than reveal, the spiritual and cultural significance of this practice. From the beginning of the exhibition, the references quoted and featured on the museum (See Figure 20), reveals how history is constructed within a logic that includes coloniser's memoirs and perspectives, exalting and even glorifying them as 'discoverers' who performed heroic achievements, while Indigenous epistemologies are rendered invisible. In this case, the dominant narrative constructed from the colonisers' gaze, risk exerting an oppressive influence, which political philosopher Iris Marion Young (2008) referred to as 'cultural imperialism'.

Figure 20. Exhibition view. List of references in the Museum of America's permanent exhibition.

According to Young (2008: 66), cultural imperialism occurs when the dominant society imposes its own values and perspectives as universal. The dominant culture thus becomes unmarked and unchallenged, while 'the others' are constructed as 'different', 'exotic' or 'inferior'. This erasure and distortion can be situated in colonial accounts. Figures such as Americo Vespucci (1951: 325) described Indigenous people practising *mambear* as 'bestial and ugly', comparing them to cattle chewing grass. Hernando Colón (1984: 217) similarly characterised Indigenous peoples as 'barbaric'. These descriptions did not merely express personal opinions but participated in a broader colonial discourse that sought to delegitimise Indigenous practices in order to justify conquest, territorial appropriation, and epistemological domination.

As Brulon Soares (2023: 10–11) notes, dehumanisation (as the comparisons between Indigenous people and animals) served as a key tactic in colonial discourse used to diminish Indigenous identities and justify their subjugation. Furthermore, Maldonado-Torres (2007: 133) argues that the recurrent use of the term 'barbarian' to refer to Indigenous peoples, marked the emergence of a racialised inferior subject characterised by a fundamental questioning and persistent suspicion of the very humanity of those identified in such terms.

Furthermore, as part of cultural imperialism, ideals from the oppressors and their achievements are embedded into widely disseminated cultural products (Young, 2008: 67), such as educational curricula, literature, and museum exhibitions, while the histories and worldviews of oppressed groups are overlooked. This logic is reflected in the position adopted by the Museum of America when constructing history in different catalogues, policy documents, museum guides, and the permanent exhibition, where 'discovery', 'explorers', 'navigators', 'scientific expeditions', and 'civilising missions' are evidently recurrent words (Museum of America, 1965: 113,122,155; 1994: 10, 12, 18; 2005: 12; 2025). These terms erase the colonial nature of such endeavours and avoid direct references to colonisation, colonisers, mapping and appropriation of territories, extractivist and imperial projects, or the forced and violent conversion to Christianity of Indigenous peoples.

This version of history has served specific political and ideological purposes. After the Spanish Civil War in 1939, the Franco regime strategically revived a narrative of Spanish imperial grandeur to mitigate internal regional tensions and consolidate its authority (Marcilhacy, 2014:9). Emphasising a Catholic and anti-communist identity, the regime rejected modern liberal and secular ideologies (Marcilhacy, 2014:9), in which cultural institutions such as the Museum of America, played a key role, promoting a romanticised image of the Spanish Empire that obscured its violent and colonial foundations.

Through the glorification of Spanish colonial exploits, cultural imperialism was repackaged for a modern national audience. For example, Pérez de Barradas, director of the National Museum of Ethnology in 1941, referred to the recently created museums (National Museum of Ethnology and Museum of America) as 'vehicles to showcase Spain's role as an explorer, coloniser, and missionary power across the globe', reinforcing the idea that 'Spanish maritime expansion advanced global geography and conquered for Christianity countries and continents, widening in time and space the knowledge of men' (Spanish Ministry of Culture, Online).

However, it is important to note that discourses are always contested and shaped within complex power dynamics, especially considering that the Museum of America has operated under the administration of the Spanish government since its inauguration. In 2024, the museum implemented significant changes aimed at addressing its colonial legacy, including the revision of around 200 labels that previously contained derogatory language 'to make it more respectful with the represented communities' (Spanish Ministry of Culture, 2024). For example, the term 'Indian' (*Indio*) was replaced with 'Indigenous' (*Indígena*). That same year,

the museum inaugurated a temporary exhibition titled 'Mirror Mirror'[14], developed by the Madrid-based collective Grandeza Studio. The exhibition introduced a strong decolonial narrative, arguing that the so-called 'discovery' of America—referred to as Abya Yala[15]—was in fact the invention of a geopolitical fiction that positioned Europe as the centre of progress and the rest of the world as subordinate peripheries (Grandeza Studio, Online).

The exhibition provoked intense reactions among the public. Many reviews show how it was criticised it for alleged political indoctrination, anti-Spanish sentiment, and a perceived lack of academic rigour. The exhibition became a site of broader cultural and political struggle over memory, identity, and Spain's colonial legacy. A significant number of reviewers labelled the show as woke indoctrination, taking issue with its references to systemic inequality and its critique of colonialism (Google reviews, Online). For many, the challenge to traditional narratives of empire and civilisation was not seen as an invitation to critical reflection, but rather as a perceived threat to national pride and Spanish cultural heritage.

This dynamic further exemplifies oppression through cultural imperialism, where control no longer relies solely on a binary oppressor-oppressed relationship but operates through more diffuse and structural mechanisms. As Foucault (in Young, 2008: 56), argues, grasping how power functions in modern societies requires moving beyond the traditional notion of power as a direct, sovereign rule. Instead, power often operates through ordinary and seemingly benevolent systems—such as education, public administration, healthcare, and consumer services—which subtly shape peoples' opinions and behaviours.

5.2.2.2 Vice and the stereotypes of the other

Coloniality transcends colonialism, constantly shaping and updating discourses and what is considered as valid epistemic frameworks. This dynamic renews power structures while maintaining the alterity of the oppressed groups (Pandolfo and Lino 2024:142). For example, the idea of *mambear* as a vice, an immoral practice that generated dependence, was established during the colony, as found in early writings from the sixteenth century (Pane, 1999: 65; De

[14] In Spanish 'Espejito Espejito'

[15] Abya Yala is the ancestral name that the Guna people have been using to refer to the American continent, especially Latin America (CEPAL, 2017) and that since 1992 has served by Indigenous groups and activists as an alternative for the European term Americas.

Castellanos, 1944: 75; Poma de Ayala, 1980: 114, 238). A discourse that constructed the Indigenous 'other' as lazy and idle in need of constant occupation, as idleness was seen as a conduit for vice—thus legitimising the imposition of forced labour (López de Velasco, 1880: 34). Furthermore, the expressions of Indigenous cultures were constructed as a symbol of sin, idolatry, and connection to the devil (García, 1729: 296; de Acosta, 2008: 124–126). Characterised as a compulsive, habitual act devoid of physical necessity, these colonial framings laid the groundwork for the enduring stigmatisation of Indigenous communities as drug users.

Although the coca leaf and the practice of *mambear* were heavily stigmatised by European colonisers, they gained significant economic importance from the mid-sixteenth century onwards. Pedro Cieza de León (1553: 122) noted: 'They become wealthy in Spain from the profits of coca, buying it, reselling it, and trading it'. José de Acosta (2008: 125) reported that during 1583, only in Potosí, Bolivia, one hundred thousand baskets were traded and consumed, leaving important profit. The royal cosmographer Juan López de Velasco (1880: 480) similarly noted that coca leaf was the principal commodity of Peru, while Bishop Fray Vicente de Valverde (1959: 314–315) reported that, as early as 1539, the largest share of the Catholic Church's income in Cuzco, Peru, derived from tithes on the coca trade.

As noted above, it was three centuries later that German chemist Albert Niemann isolated one of the coca leaf's alkaloids—cocaine—which soon gained wide social acceptance, being incorporated into medical and psychiatric treatments, beverages, and eventually recreational use. Although one and a half million pounds of cocaine entered the United States in 1907, the early twentieth century was marked by debates over its prohibition, driven by medical, religious, and racist arguments. These discussions ultimately led to the gradual criminalisation of cocaine, alongside other substances such as opium, heroin, marijuana, and hashish (Sarmiento and Krauthausen, 1990: 29–30).

In 1961, the United Nations (UN) adopted the 'Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs', establishing a comprehensive legal framework to regulate and control narcotics worldwide. This treaty not only classified cocaine as an illegal substance but also included the coca leaf. The Convention framed such substances as harmful, asserting they posed 'a danger to the physical and moral health of mankind', as stated in its preamble, further emphasizing the immoral nature of drug use. Additionally, the Convention mandated that coca leaf chewing should be eradicated within 25 years of the treaty's enforcement (UN, 1961:48). A decade later,

the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, reaffirmed the classification of coca leaves as illicit, extending the list to include substances capable of producing hallucinations or disorders of motor function, judgment, behaviour or perception (UN, 2013: 55). The inclusion of both cocaine and the coca leaf in the official list of narcotics, reflects a logic that disregards Indigenous knowledge systems, reducing ancestral practices to public health risks and criminalised behaviour.

In May 1987, the National Museum of Ethnology, in collaboration with the Museum of America, inaugurated an exhibition titled 'Cultures and Drugs'[16]. The exhibition was organised under the direction of the Directorate General of Fine Arts and Archives of Spain[17], which forms part of the Spanish Ministry of Culture. The exhibition featured over 171 objects, including artefacts from the Quimbaya collection and most of the objects previously analysed (see section 5.2.1.3). The temporary exhibition examined ancestral communities in America, Africa, and Asia and related them with substances later classified as drugs, such as opium, betel, tobacco, and coca leaf. In line with the logic of international treaties, the exhibition presented the coca leaf as both a drug and a hallucinogen, a framing that remains unchanged in the current permanent exhibition of the Museum of America.

The temporary exhibition also referenced the document published in 1981 by the World Health Organisation titled 'The problems of drugs in the sociocultural context', which emphasises that drug dependence is rooted in culture, and effective interventions must consider these sociocultural factors. In other words, drug addiction could be better understood and mitigated by analysing its origin, the first users of such substances. It advocated for a historic perspective in which 'indigenous drugs' used to be moderated by a group, although 'unofficially', until shifts in consumption patterns and market demand altered this dynamic (World Health Organisation, 1981: 22).

This perspective distinguishes between two models of drug consumption: a traditional model, regulated by cultural norms within specific communities, and a consumption-based model, primarily driven by recreational use (Directorate General of Fine Arts and Archives of Spain, 1987: 13). In the case of the coca leaf it is suggested—following an evolutionist logic—that

[16] In Spanish 'Culturas y drogas'.

[17] In Spanish 'Dirección General de Bellas Artes y Archivos de España'

this substance transitioned from the traditional model to the category of illegal drugs within the consumption-based model. According to this view, this cultural shift impacted ancestral communities in the Andes, who supposedly abandoned their social norms and traditions in order to 'imitate drug users from the consumption-based model' (Directorate General of Fine Arts and Archives of Spain, 1987:17).

As a consequence, within the 'Cultures and Drugs' exhibition, the spiritual and sacred dimensions of the coca leaf and *mambear*—echoing the World Health Organisation's 1981 discourse—are reduced to narratives of drug addiction. Simultaneously, Indigenous cultural and epistemological structures are portrayed as negotiable or even obsolete, casting Indigenous peoples as actors who bargain away their cultural identity. This disregard for Indigenous sacred dimensions resurfaces in later museographic interpretations, such as the 2016 temporary exhibition 'This is how I sit'[18], which further entrenched the stigmatisation of coca and *mambear*. The exhibition described shamans as users of various 'hallucinogenic plants', who used coca leaf to 'alter their states of consciousness and facilitate contact with the spirits' (Museum of America, 2016: 31), portraying trance as an outcome induced by substance use, a very similar description that the one found currently in the permanent exhibition, reinforcing the dominant drug narrative.

Such stigma frequently perpetuates the historical marginalisation of specific ethnic groups. When drug consumption is—even inaccurately—associated with such groups, it reinforces existing prejudices. While drug use is already viewed negatively, linking it to a historically stigmatised ethnicity legitimises further exclusion and discrimination. This association can also intensify rejection of the coca leaf among dominant social groups, who perceive it not only as inherently undesirable but also as a symbol of a devalued culture (Sarmiento and Krauthausen, 1990, p. 37). In this sense, colonial updated narratives of vice and moral deviance persist as mechanisms for maintaining social hierarchies and epistemic exclusion.

This oppressive dynamic of the external construction of the 'other' has ontological consequences among the Indigenous communities who use coca leaf and practice *mambear*. The concept of 'double consciousness', introduced by William E. B. Du Bois and mentioned by Young (2008: 67), captures the internal conflict experienced by those who must view

[18] In Spanish 'Así me siento'

themselves through the eyes of a dominant society that devalues them. While Du Bois wrote in the context of African American experience (Hudecki, 2020), the idea resonates with the psychological and cultural struggles faced by Indigenous peoples. Constantly confronted with narratives that portray their traditions as deviant or inferior, they must navigate the tension between maintaining their ancestral identity and responding to a society that refuses to recognise it. This creates a dual awareness, a sense of ontological division, in which their self-worth is measured against external standards that deny the legitimacy of their worldview (Young, 2008: 68). In this way, colonial narratives marginalise Indigenous cultures from the outside while simultaneously fracturing their internal coherence. In the words of Mignolo (2013: 134), the colonised have the option either to accept their inferiority or to make an effort to demonstrate that they are human beings equal to those who place them as second-class.

5.2.2.3 The control and marginalisation of the other

The discourses analysed earlier extend beyond misrepresentation in exhibitions or biased interpretations in international treaties—they are embodied in concrete practices that continue to shape the lived realities of Indigenous peoples. As Leotti et al. (2022: 272) affirm, discourse is both reflected and reproduced in social practices, which can manifest in ongoing forms of control. In this case, control over Indigenous territories and cultural rights. These dynamics exemplify a broader pattern of epistemic and ontological domination that has persisted long after the formal end of colonial rule.

From missionary campaigns to contemporary national drug laws, the regulation of coca leaf in Colombia has endangered the continuation of Indigenous traditions (Blanco and González, 2020: 85). Furthermore, as Sarmiento and Krauthausen (1990: 48) have argued, religion has also played a central role in this process, shaping stigmatising discourses and feeding into prohibitionist ideologies that criminalise ancestral practices through a moralising lens heavily influenced by white puritan values.

One historical example of the religiously driven epistemic control is the Catholic Capuchin Order's 'civilising mission' in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. With the purpose of moral and spiritual reform, the Capuchin mission lasted from 1916 to 1982, imposing disciplinary techniques aimed at deculturalising the Arhuaco Indigenous community (Duarte Muñoz, 2018: 6). The establishment of the *Tres Avemarías* orphanage in 1922 exemplified a coercive intervention in which children were forcibly separated from their families and subjected to

strict catholic indoctrination; attempts to escape were met with harsh physical punishment (Muelas and Santamaría, 2012: 133). Furthermore, traditional Arhuaco practices—including the use of the *poporo*, the Iku language, and their customary attire—were explicitly banned (Muelas and Santamaría, 2012: 115).

Over the decades, the Capuchin mission expanded to occupy over 3,500 hectares of Arhuaco territory. The order established 24 schools, a secondary institution, a hospital, and a missionary residence (Duarte Muñoz, 2018: 67). According to Maldonado Torres (2016), like colonialism, coloniality entails the expropriation of land and resources. As a result, many post-colonial societies remain subject to different forms of dispossession. In this ongoing process, colonised and dehumanised peoples lose not only their territory, but also the very conditions needed to live as fully self-determining subjects — able to give and receive, to think, to create, and to exercise their cultural identity (Maldonado-Torres, 2016: 17).

Legal frameworks have been central to institutionalising control over Indigenous practices. Following international drug treaties, Colombia's Law 30 of 1986 classifies coca cultivation as a criminal offence (Colombian National Government, 1986). Although it formally permits Indigenous communities to grow coca leaves for traditional purposes, this permission is conditional. Article 7 grants the National Narcotics Council authority to regulate such cultivation 'according to Indigenous customs', but only when sanctioned by the state. In this way, the law casts the state as the ultimate arbiter of cultural legitimacy, reducing Indigenous autonomy to bureaucratic discretion. Framed as protective, this regulatory model consolidates state control and undermines Indigenous sovereignty.

These legal impositions have had environmental and health consequences. Forced eradication campaigns, particularly through aerial glyphosate fumigations, disproportionately affected Indigenous territories. Between 2000–2007 and 2011–2014, communities in southern Colombia reported the contamination of 15 water sources, including rivers, springs, and streams, as well as long-term damage to staple crops, local wildlife, and human health, including chronic illnesses (Defensoría del pueblo, 2015).

Besides facing religious and legal measures that have historically undermined the cultural heritage of Indigenous peoples from the SNSM, oppression is also perpetuated through the daily actions of individuals who may not see themselves as oppressors, yet nonetheless contribute to its ongoing reproduction (Young, 2008: 56). As Mignolo (2013: 134) notes,

enunciation—that could be understood as the production of discourse—requires an enunciator or agent, often an institution, in a position to manage discourse and impose 'otherness' in the collective imaginary. The Museum of America, through its selective framing and display of Indigenous traditions such as *mambear*, operates as one such agent, shaping public perceptions in ways that can reinforce colonial stereotypes and diminish the practice's epistemic and cultural significance. In this way, the cycle of marginalisation is reproduced not only in political and economic structures but also in the curated narratives of cultural institutions. Within this context, the defence and practice of Indigenous ancestral traditions becomes an act of resistance: not merely a political stance, but an ongoing epistemological and ontological struggle—a reclaiming of language, territory, ritual, and knowledge systems against multi-layered efforts to erase them.

6. Conclusion

This dissertation examined how the Museum of America represents and discursively constructs the coca leaf and the Indigenous practice of *mambear*, in juxtaposition with alternative narratives that foreground their cultural and epistemic significance for Indigenous peoples—particularly the Arhuaco, Kankuamo, Wiwa, and Kogui communities of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in northern Colombia. This dual focus provides a theoretically engaged lens that moves beyond mere critique and textual analysis, to create space for alternative epistemologies and to amplify Indigenous worldviews.

The first main finding is that Indigenous ways of knowing and being offer a means for challenging colonial representations of the coca leaf and the practice of *mambear*. *Ayu*—the sacred coca leaf—differs fundamentally from the notion of illegal or stigmatised substances. Rather, it is understood as an active participant in the spiritual, relational, and philosophical systems of knowledge of Indigenous communities in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Conceived as a living entity, *ayu* sustains and embodies cultural identity, functioning as a conduit through which the ancestral Law of Origin is interpreted, reaffirmed, and transmitted across generations (Álvarez Izquierdo, 2023; Montero, 2023). Furthermore, *mambear* is ontologically constitutive: those who engage in it are not perceived as drug consumers but as individuals worthy of respect, recognised as bearers of wisdom and holders of communal and political authority.

The second main finding demonstrates that, in contrast to Indigenous ontological and epistemological frameworks, the Museum of America's permanent exhibition situates the coca leaf and *mambear* within a discourse of drug use that stigmatises Indigenous peoples. The analysis shows that the exhibition establishes a hierarchy privileging Western knowledge systems as superior, valid, and authoritative, while relegating Indigenous knowledge to the realm of the deviant and morally suspect. Furthermore, the exhibition inaccurately frames coca through associations with hallucinogens, suggesting that Indigenous spiritual experiences derive from drug abuse and thereby undermining the legitimacy of their worldviews. In reducing a complex and meaningful practice to a stereotypical image of drug consumption, the

display perpetuates a narrative that casts such use as a long-standing feature of Latin America—particularly in Colombia.

The third main finding demonstrates that the Museum of America's representation of coca and *mambear* does not does not work in isolation but reproduces and legitimises other discourses. This dynamic marginalises Indigenous epistemologies while leaving colonial narratives unchallenged—a process Iris Marion Young (2008: 67) identifies as cultural imperialism. By privileging colonial interpretations of the coca leaf and *mambear*, the exhibition frames Indigenous practices through a lens of alterity and difference. Practitioners are cast as inferior, deviant, barbaric, and drug-dependent, reinforcing their construction as the 'racialised Other' (Maldonado-Torres, 2007: 130). The narrative further depicts Indigenous peoples as immoral and as having abandoned their traditions, constructing their identity as drug consumers indistinguishable from urban addicts shaped by consumerist models. Crucially, the exhibition's conflation of ancestral practices with illicit drug use echoes the logic of international drug treaties which, since 1961, have criminalised the coca leaf and *mambear*. In doing so, it aligns with a global gaze that delegitimises Indigenous lifeways under the pretext of drug control, thereby reinforcing epistemic and cultural domination.

The intersection between representation and the coloniality of knowledge, used here to analyse how meaning about coca leaf and *mambear* is constructed within the Museum of America, and the link of discourse to the coloniality of being, employed to examine how the non-Western 'other' is produced, provide a novel framework for analysing the representation of Indigenous cultures in museum contexts. Besides, within the matrix of coloniality of power, decolonial understandings that resist it should also be considered (see Figure 1), demonstrating that power is always contested and challenged (Carabine, 2001: 272). This constitutes my key theoretical contribution to the field of museum studies, a standpoint that supports the complementarity of postcolonial and decolonial frameworks.

Furthermore, by recognising Indigenous narratives as legitimate epistemologies, this dissertation proposes a pragmatic approach that addresses epistemic justice and offers reparative interpretations of historically marginalised practices and peoples (Vawda, 2019: 72). In this context, the Museum of America should foster epistemic inclusion that resists Western binaries separating nature from culture, spirit from matter, and rational from irrational, thereby creating space for alternative ways of knowing and being to exist within museum representation. Moreover, as various scholars emphasise (Ariese and Wróblewska, 2022;

Flores et al., 2023; Modest and Agustat, 2023), structural inclusion is equally essential. This requires co-curation with source communities, diversification of museum staff, integrated policy frameworks, and shared, symmetrical decision-making with Indigenous stakeholders—measures that confront entrenched nationalistic and biased perspectives. Though complex, this process is indispensable for a decolonial museum practice.

This dissertation showed how discourses, although manufactured and constructed rather than inherent truths (Carabine, 2001: 268), produce tangible consequences within Indigenous communities. It placed the Museum of America's representation of *ayu* and *mambear* in the broader sociocultural practice that has criminalised ancestral traditions. A scenario that has led to the ongoing struggle over their cultural and territorial rights, a pattern observable not only in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta but also in other regions of Colombia and probably Latin America. In doing so, it is highlighted an ethical imperative and an institutional responsibility. Museums, as educational institutions, play a crucial role in shaping public understandings of history, identity, and legitimacy (Maranda, 2021). Their representations can either contribute to the persistent cycle of oppression by reinforcing reductive or stereotypical narratives (Brulon Soarez, 2023), or serve as educational and pedagogical tools that foster critical reflection and legitimise alternative perspectives (Cateau, 2022: 33). In this context, embracing Indigenous voices, knowledge systems, and representational autonomy is not simply a matter of inclusion, but a step toward social justice and historical redress.

This perspective is especially relevant within museum studies and the exhibition of non-Western cultures. While museums often present themselves as institutions committed to accessibility, inclusion, diversity, and community participation—as articulated by the International Council of Museums (ICOM, Online)—they continue to struggle with decolonial practices that de-centre Western epistemologies and ontologies in order to dismantle entrenched colonial discourses (Maranda, 2021; Reyes, 2023).

Finally, future research could take various directions. Although this dissertation briefly noted visitors' reactions to the Museum of America's permanent exhibition, a closer examination of how the exhibition impacts public perception would be valuable. Additionally, exploring internal power dynamics within the museum—among curators, educators, conservators, and other professionals—would provide important insights. While the Museum of America is approached here as an institutional actor in the politics of cultural representation, it is equally composed of individuals whose roles and decisions shape the narratives presented. As a public

institution, the internal hierarchies and negotiations involved in exhibition-making constitute an additional layer of analysis worth pursuing. Beyond this case study, the broader field of museum studies would benefit from engaging Indigenous epistemologies not as supplementary perspectives but as autonomous, pluriversal worldviews that cannot be reduced to Western categories of knowledge.

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Appendix 1. Transcriptions of the analysed texts in the Museum of America

La religión

La religión es el mayor instrumento con que cuenta el hombre para relacionarse con el mundo sobrenatural, sirviendo a la vez de importante vehículo de transmisión cultural. Gracias a ella, las realizaciones humanas adquieren trascendencia y encuentran el camino para afianzarse y perpetuarse.

Dada la enorme variedad social americana, la religión adopta formas muy diversas en función de las necesidades concretas de cada grupo. En América podemos constatar ejemplos de todas y cada una de las manifestaciones que encontramos en el resto del planeta, desde las chamánicas más personalizadas a las oficiales.

El objetivo más característico del fenómeno religioso es establecer contacto con el mundo de las fuerzas sobrenaturales y el de los hombres, tratando de propiciar e influir en los acontecimientos vitales para la comunidad. Este contacto con lo divino es realizado por personas concretas como jefes, monarcas, chamanes y sacerdotes, tiene lugar en el espacio sagrado, de una forma establecida, con diferentes rituales, y se materializa mediante la utilización simbólica de elementos culturales que son los objetos sagrados

The religion

Religion is the greatest instrument available to humans for relating to the supernatural world, while also serving as an important vehicle for cultural transmission. Through it, human achievements acquire transcendence and find a path to consolidation and perpetuation.

Given the immense social diversity of the continent, religion takes on very different forms according to the specific needs of each group. In the Americas, we can find examples of all the religious manifestations present in the rest of the world, ranging from the most personalised shamanic practices to official religions.

The most characteristic aim of the religious phenomenon is to establish contact between the world of supernatural forces and that of humans, seeking to foster and influence events vital to the community. This contact with the divine is carried out by specific individuals—such as leaders, monarchs, shamans, and priests—within a sacred space, in an established manner, through various rituals, and is made tangible through the symbolic use of cultural elements, which are the sacred objects.

El mundo sobrenatural. Divinidades

La relación con las divinidades es el objetivo último del contacto sobrenatural y para lo que se realiza el culto.

En América, como en el resto del mundo, existe una relación directa entre los tipos de divinidades y el contexto social y cultural en donde surgen. En las culturas precolombinas encontramos multitud de grupos de dioses organizados jerárquicamente, donde cada divinidad responde a una necesidad simbólica concreta. Divinidades como Tláloc y Quetzalcóatl(México) o Viracocha (Perú) trascendieron su momento histórico y se convirtieron en el símbolo de un pasado dorado, en el que los hombres se regían por sus creencias ancestrales.

La llegada del cristianismo supuso una reelaboración acorde a las nuevas necesidades. El sincretismo o mezcla de creencias supuso un proceso de adaptación en el que muchas desaparecieron y otras se disfrazaron maquillándose con elementos europeos.

En la actualidad podemos hablar de la existencia de un cristianismo indígena que a veces resulta irreconocible, pero que sin duda supone un enriquecimiento para la religiosidad.

The Supernatural World: Divinities

The relationship with divinities is the ultimate aim of supernatural contact and the central purpose of religious worship.

In the Americas, as in the rest of the world, there is a direct connection between the types of divinities and the specific social and cultural contexts in which they emerge. In pre-Columbian cultures we find a multitude of groups of gods organised hierarchically, where each deity responds to a specific symbolic need. Divinities such as Tláloc and Quetzalcóatl (Mexico) or

Viracocha (Peru) transcended their historical moment and became symbols of a golden past, in which people lived according to their ancestral beliefs.

The arrival of Christianity led to a reconfiguration of religious expression in line with new circumstances. Syncretism, or the blending of beliefs, involved a process of adaptation in which many Indigenous traditions disappeared, while others were disguised, masked with European elements. Today, one can speak of the existence of an Indigenous Christianity which, at times, may appear unrecognisable, but which nevertheless represents an enrichment of religious life.

Los espacios sagrados

Toda actividad religiosa exige un lugar apropiado. Los espacios sagrados pueden ser tantos como actividades religiosas a desarrollar. Un cerro, una encrucijada, una cueva, una fuente (como espacios naturales); un templo, una iglesia, una tumba (como espacios sociales) confirman, en líneas generales, los ámbitos en los que la actividad religiosa tiene lugar.

Otro aspecto fundamental está constituido por la propia concepción ideológica del espacio social, lo que en algunos momentos hace que se oriente de una determinada forma y se ubique de acuerdo con criterios de tipo geográfico que tienen que ver con una sacralidad que emana de los espacios naturales. Por ejemplo, una ciudad puede edificarse alrededor de un accidente geográfico determinado (una cuerva, un cerro, una fuente, etc.) al que la comunidad ha otorgado un carácter sagrado.

The sacred spaces

All religious activity requires an appropriate place. Sacred spaces can be as numerous as the religious activities to be carried out. A hill, an intersection, a cave, a spring (as natural spaces); a temple, a church, a tomb (as social spaces) generally confirm the areas where religious activity takes place.

Another fundamental aspect is the ideological conception of social space itself, which at times leads it to be oriented in a certain way and located according to geographic criteria related to a sacrality that emanates from natural spaces. For example, a city can be built around a particular geographic feature (a bend, a hill, a spring, etc.) that the community has designated as sacred.

Audio guía Mundo Funerario

La creencia en la vida después de la muerte lleva consigo toda una serie de rituales que aseguran la existencia ultra terrena. En muchas ocasiones, los rituales funerarios están relacionados con la idea de regeneración de la vida y con la fertilidad; además, el culto a los antepasados opera en numerosas culturas como un eficaz mecanismo de cohesión social. En las culturas americanas coexistieron muy variados ritos funerarios: algunas incineraban a sus muertos, otras los enterraban, existían sepulturas individuales y colectivas, y determinados grupos practicaron la momificación.

En la mayor parte de estas culturas, el enterramiento constituía una manifestación del estatus de los individuos, de modo que los ajuares funerarios de las élites, sus objetos suntuarios les acompañaron en la otra vida. Muchas de las piezas recuperadas por los arqueólogos pertenecen a esos ajuares, estos objetos acompañaban al difunto al más allá y hacían posible la entrada en él, ya que poseían un carácter sagrado y ritual. Algunas de esas piezas fueron usadas por el difunto en vida, pero muchas de ellas fueron producidas específicamente como ofrendas funerarias.

En muchas de las culturas prehispánicas, el ajuar funerario estuvo compuesto por objetos de metal, como el tesoro de los Quimbayas que se expone al fondo, textiles, como el mando de paracas situado en la vitrina central o los textiles mostrados a la derecha, y cerámica, en las vitrinas de la izquierda y derecha. Estos objetos formaban parte del difunto, pero también del propio ritual funerario. Están dotados por tanto de un fuerte simbolismo y su decoración suele hacer referencia a aspectos religiosos.

Funerary World

The belief in life after death brings with it a whole series of rituals intended to ensure existence beyond the earthly realm. In many cases, funerary rituals are closely linked to the idea of life's regeneration and to fertility. Moreover, ancestor worship functions in numerous cultures as an effective mechanism of social cohesion. A wide variety of funerary rites coexisted within the cultures of the Americas: some practised cremation, others burial; both individual and collective graves existed, and certain groups even practised mummification.

In most of these cultures, burial served as an expression of the individual's social status, whereby the funerary offerings of the elites—their luxury objects—accompanied them into the

afterlife. Many of the objects recovered by archaeologists come from these burial assemblages. These items accompanied the deceased to the next world and enabled entry into it, as they held sacred and ritual value. Some of these objects were used by the deceased during their lifetime, while many others were produced specifically as funerary offerings.

In many pre-Hispanic cultures, burial assemblages included metal objects—such as the Quimbaya treasure displayed at the back of the gallery—textiles, such as the Paracas mantle in the central showcase or the fabrics shown on the right-hand side, and ceramics, found in the showcases to the left and right. These objects formed part not only of the deceased but also of the funerary ritual itself. They are therefore imbued with strong symbolic meaning, and their decoration often refers to religious themes.

El tesoro Quimbaya

Este ajuar funerario, realizado entre el 500 y el 1000 d. C. y donado al Estado Español por la República de Colombia en 1893, supone el conjunto de objetos de oro y tumbaga (aleación de oro y cobre) más importante de la América Prehispánica, tanto por su calidad estética y técnica como por formar un ajuar completo. Se encontró en dos tumbas quimbayas del sitio de La Soledad, cerca de Finlandia en el valle del río Cauca. Está formado por recipientes en forma de figura humana (caciques) o de calabaza (poporos), relacionados con el consumo de alucinógenos, y por una gran variedad de objetos de adorno: cascos, orejeras, narigueras, cascabeles, prendedores, etc...

The Quimbaya Treasure

This funerary assemblage, created between 500 and 1000 AD and donated to the Spanish State by the Republic of Colombia in 1893, represents the most important collection of gold and tumbaga (a gold and copper alloy) objects from Pre-Hispanic America (…) The assemblage includes vessels shaped like human figures (caciques) and gourds (poporos), associated with the consumption of hallucinogens, as well as a wide variety of ornamental items such as helmets, ear ornaments, nose rings, bells, pins, and more

El ritual

El espacio sagrado no se puede concebir sino como el contenedor de un proceso comunicativo entre los dioses y los hombres, entre las fuerzas terrestres y celestes.

Los ritos y ceremonias son los procesos encargados de este cometido. Pueden variar mucho, tanto en sus objetivos inmediatos como en su grado de complejidad, pero su estructura fundamental no difiere gran cosa. Aunque puedan ser realizados por una persona, una familia, un sector determinado de la sociedad, o por la totalidad de ella, todos parten de las mismas premisas. El objetivo es establecer una comunicación sobrenatural buscando la obtención de unos determinados resultados, que pueden ir desde conseguir una buena cosecha (ritos propiciatorios) convertir un adolescente en un guerrero (ritos de paso) o garantizar el equilibrio del universo a través del "juego de pelota" el sacrificio de un cautivo o incluso la celebración de una misa (ritos de mantenimiento).

The ritual

The sacred space can only be understood as the container of a communicative process between the gods and humans, between earthly and celestial forces.

Rites and ceremonies are the processes responsible for fulfilling this purpose. They can vary greatly in both their immediate objectives and their level of complexity, but their fundamental structure does not differ significantly. Although they may be carried out by an individual, a family, a specific sector of society, or society as a whole, all rituals stem from the same premises. The goal is to establish supernatural communication in order to obtain specific results, which may range from ensuring a good harvest (propitiatory rites), to turning an adolescent into a warrior (rites of passage), or guaranteeing the balance of the universe through the ball game, the sacrifice of a captive, or even the celebration of a mass (maintenance rites).

Ritos de mantenimiento

Son el eje central de todas las religiones y a través de ellos se actualizan los acontecimientos y valores fundamentales.

Estos rituales sitúan a los fieles en un espacio mítico y en un tiempo indeterminado, relacionándolos muy estrechamente con los orígenes del grupo, constituyendo su referencia más importante. En América precolombina podemos encontrar muchos ejemplos Juego de pelota y Palo Volador.

Con la llegada de los europeos serán los ritos cristianos los que adquieran mayor importancia y trascendencia

Maintenance rites

These form the central axis of all religions, and through them the fundamental events and values are renewed.

These rituals place the faithful in a mythical space and an undetermined time, linking them very closely with the origins of their group, thereby constituting their most important point of reference. In pre-Columbian America, we can find many examples, such as the ball game and the flying pole (Palo Volador).

With the arrival of Europeans, Christian rites would come to acquire greater importance and significance.

ALUCINÓGENOS

Son un componente importante del lenguaje ritual Y, de hecho, en muchas culturas americanas, el contacto con el mundo sobrenatural sería impensable sin este recurso. Estos contactos requieren muchas veces la inducción de un estado psíquico adecuado mediante drogas cuyo uso está siempre regulado por el grupo. El trance obtenido proporciona el camino al "más allá", es como si entre los dioses y los hombres se abriera una vía de comunicación, como si la ruptura les hiciera más próximos.

HALLUCINOGENS

They are an important component of ritual language, and in fact, in many American cultures, contact with the supernatural world would be unthinkable without this resource. These contacts often require inducing an appropriate mental state through drugs, whose use is always regulated by the group. The trance achieved provides a pathway to the "beyond," as if a conduit opened between the gods and humans, making them feel closer together as if the rupture itself brought them nearer”

Etiqueta

HOJAS DE COCA Y BOLA DE CAL. LAS HOJAS DE COCA SE MASTICABAN MEZCLADAS CON CAL PARA AUMENTAR SU EFECTO. NO ES PROPIAMENTE UN ALUCINÓGENO, ESTANDO CODIFICADO SU CONSUMO PARA LAS ÉLITES.

Label

COCA LEAVES AND LIME SPHERE. THE COCA LEAVES WERE CHEWED IN COMBITATION WITH LIME TO INCREASE ITS EFFECT. IT IS NOT STRICTLY A HALLUCINOGEN, AS ITS CONSUMPTION WAS CODIFIED FOR THE ELITES.

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20/08/2025