

# THE DIVINE MUSHROOM: PRIMITIVE RELIGION AND HALLUCINATORY AGENTS

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THE world of wild mushrooms and toadstools is of little interest to most of us, even those of us who are lovers of nature. We all know something about birds and insects and trees. But how often do you fix your gaze on a wild mushroom?

This neglect is a mistake. What a wondrous world do they offer us, in the diversity of their shapes, their colors, their odors, the texture of their skins; yes, above all in the aura of silent mystery that seems to enfold them. Indeed this aura of mystery may explain why they are neglected. My wife and I believe that, anthropologically speaking, for us Anglo-Saxons a tabu hangs over wild mushrooms, a tabu coming down from our remote past and surviving today long after the reason for it has slipped away from men's memories.

For close to thirty years my wife and I have been devoting part of our spare time to studying, not so much the mushrooms themselves, as the attitude toward them of various peoples in Europe and elsewhere. We have arrived at the conviction that the common ignorance and distrust of wild mushrooms are not the fruit of rational behavior.

It is a cultural legacy of a remote age when our unlettered ancestors held wild mushrooms in awe as the habitation of demonic powers. There is no time to develop for you our supporting evidence. Instead I shall leap forward to the phase of our inquiry that led your Society to make us a grant in furtherance of our studies.

There exist certain species of wild mushrooms that contain a most potent and mysterious drug—mushrooms which, if you eat them, cause you to see visions, breathtakingly vivid visions in color and motion, visions of almost anything you can imagine except the scenes of your everyday life. These mushrooms confront us with a scientific problem. We must isolate the active agent, determine its molecular structure, synthesize it, and arrive at its properties, and also its uses if any. This scientific problem is as difficult as it is in-



FIG. 1. María Sabina, the Mazatec *curandera*, passing the mushrooms through the smoke of aromatic plants. Photo taken in 1956 by Allan Richardson.



FIG. 2. María Sabina invoking with prayers the divine blessing for the ceremony she is about to undertake. Photo by Allan Richardson.



FIG. 3. Partaking of the divine mushroom: María Sabina and her son at the moment of the holy agape. Photo by Allan Richardson.

viting, and needless to say we are passing it over to those who are qualified to perform it. But the hallucinogenic mushrooms invite our study for another reason. From earliest times they have been worshipped by certain primitive peoples scattered from Mexico to Borneo and Siberia, and we think formerly in Europe too.

The visions that you see when you eat the mushrooms are staggering in their subjective impact. They are no shadowy, uncertain sights. When you see them you are moved to exclaim, if only to yourself, that never in your normal state have you seen things so clearly, so truly. At last you are seeing clearly, not as through a glass



FIG. 4. In ecstasy, seeing visions. In the dead of night, in pitch dark, María Sabina's son, caught unexpectedly by flash-light, as his mother is singing to him. The baby is asleep, having taken no mushrooms. The other Indian also is seeing visions. Photo by Allan Richardson.

darkly. If in that span of ecstatic vision you think of Plato, you will say to yourself that you are seeing the Archetypes, the very Ideas of Plato. You do not lose possession of yourself. You are in a pseudo-schizophrenic state, and you can take notes, and observe yourself, and afterwards you remember everything in detail. Possibly the hallucinations are aural as well as visual. Just as you are seeing things in your mind's eye, so you may hear things in the mind's ear, the music of the spheres accompanying the Ideas of Plato. The emotional effects of the drug are equally interesting. You experience ecstasy. In my case, for the first time the meaning of "ecstasy" came over



FIG. 5. A Zapotec Indian, a *curandero* of the Sierra Costera, contemplates his bowl of mushrooms. This photo was taken in 1955, by Howard E. Brunson, at San Agustín Loxicha, linguistically far removed from the Mazatec country.

me, no longer as an intellectualized definition, but subjectively. Indeed, you are spellbound by awe, by feelings of wonder and reverence, by an overflowing sense of empathy, of *caritas* towards those who are sharing the mushrooms and the experience with you.

The primitive peoples who worship these mushrooms consider that they open the gates to another plane of existence, to the past and future, to Heaven and God, who then answers truly all grave questions put to him. If we are right in our conjecture that the secret of these mushrooms was discovered by early man, perhaps very early as he was emerging from his bestial past, think

for a moment what their miraculous properties must have meant to him! Our hallucinogenic mushrooms opened to him conceptions and emotions theretofore beyond his reach: horizons beyond his horizons, planes of existence other than the one in which he lived, feelings of awe and reverence, yes perhaps the very idea of a Superior Being. They may have served as a mighty detonator for early man's soul and mind and imagination. It is surprising, we think, that students of early cultures have paid so little attention to the subjective impact on them of hallucinatory agents like these.

On this subject I speak to you not by hearsay but as a witness. On the night of June 29-30,

1955, my friend and photographer Allan Richardson and I ate these mushrooms in the course of a mushroomic communion or agape in a remote circle of Indians in Mexico. So far as the records indicate, we are the first white men of the modern world to have had this experience. We underwent the visual, aural, and emotional effects of the mushrooms. Since then a few other persons, introduced by us, have eaten the mushrooms under similar circumstances. Furthermore, my wife and daughter and I have also eaten them cold turkey, so to speak, by ourselves, even in New York, without the accompaniment of the primitive religious ritual. The effects were in no wise diminished.