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## **The Mazatecs Indians' Creation of Linguistic Art Through the Use of a Hallucinogenic Mushroom**

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The goal of this paper is to demonstrate that the use of hallucinogenic mushrooms by the Mazatec Indians stimulates their artistic creativity, producing chants composed of a special language. To this end, I examine the chemical composition of the mushrooms, the necessity and importance of the shaman in the mushroom ritual and the role of linguistic creation in Mazatec society. The author's interest in the subject of hallucinogens in the creation of art among the Mazatec Indians of northern Mexico was sparked by a study of the phenomenon among their western neighbors, the Huichol. The Huichol Indians of the Sierra Madre Occidental in northern Mexico produce art work inspired by images derived from the use of peyote, a hallucinogenic cactus containing mescaline and other alkaloids. Every year small groups of Huichols are led by a shaman priest, the "mara' akame," to their sacred land of origin, Wirikuta, in order to hunt peyote for use in their rituals. Following ingestion of the peyote, hallucinated visions are perceived by the Huichol, who later "translate" these visions into artistic creations. This paper addresses the question of whether other Indian groups employed hallucinogenic plants and, if so, whether they also awaken creativity and inspire art.

A long standing interest in the Indian groups of Oaxaca prompted the present study of the Mazatec Indians of Huatla de Jiménez. The Mazatec Indians, in fact, do employ a psychoactive plant, the mushroom *Psilocybe mexicana*, in the context of their religious ceremonies, divination and curing. Furthermore, use of the mushroom does invoke creativity. The Mazatec shamans partake of the mushrooms to compose songs and elaborate chants. These compositions are made up of an esoteric language of the gods, the words of which derive from their mushroom experience.

### **Chemical Composition**

The catalyst producing such eloquence is a small, tawny fungal inhabitant of wet pasture lands. In the Mazatec country, it is during the rainy season from June to August when the mushrooms grow. In the early 1950s, ethnologists and mycologists discovered Oaxacan Indians using these "magic mushrooms" and sent samples to the Sandoz Laboratories of Switzerland for chemical analysis. In 1958 the alkaloids psilocybin and psilocin were isolated. The amount of psilocybin and psilocine in *Psilocybe mexicana* is about 0.03 percent in fresh mushrooms and approximately 0.3 percent in dried material. The mushrooms' other ingredients are composed of carbohydrates, proteinaceous matter, mineral salts, and various other compounds. Fresh

mushrooms contain about 90 percent water (Schultes 1979:23). Effects of psilocybin and psilocin include colorful hallucinations, muscular relaxation, occasional hilarity, and alteration of time and space perception.

Mexican mushrooms are reportedly pleasant to consume and produce no offensive toxic reactions such as vomiting or vertigo (Emboden 1979: 91). Important in my research is the fact that the intoxication is not a stupor, but is experienced as a period of new consciousness and new reality. One feels isolated from his environment because he feels he has entered a new plane of existence. It is in this plane of existence that one finds a reality enabling the transcendence of ego, the ability to answer questions, solve problems, and find creativity. The words expressed by one in this period of new consciousness indicate a creative activity neither outside of the realm of reason or out of contact with reality. Reality reveals itself through the experience in words, as if it had found a voice to utter itself (Munn 1973: 114).

### **Importance and necessity of the shaman in mushroom ritual**

While all members of Mazatec society may ingest hallucinogenic mushrooms on certain occasions, they are guided and directed by the shaman. ( In the Mazatec language a shaman is equivalent to a curer, thus called a "curandero" or "curandera" if female ).

"During an all night ceremony the mushrooms are eaten by the curandera or shaman, her assistants, and the patient, but it is through the chanting voice of the curandera that the mushroom speaks and effects the cure" (Rhodes 1963: 189).

The shaman plays an important role not only in the mushroom ceremony and as the Indians' link to the supernatural world, but also as an artistic catalyst, instigating the creativity of each member of society. The visions of the people are made real by the interpretations of the shaman; his or her knowledge diminishes any fears or doubts of the people which may have arisen from the visions. This capacity of the shaman to provoke and interpret hallucinatory trance is the essence of shamanic art. As Alana Cordy-Collins has written,

"The shaman brings the imagery from the other world into the common world. This act of artistic creation serves two purposes: it validates the shaman's experience as true, while it also lays the foundation for others to experience the same truth during a communal hallucinatory event" (Cordy-Collins 1989: 39).

By a change of his everyday consciousness, the shaman enters the metaphysical realms of the transcendental in order to confer with the supernatural powers and gain an understanding of the hidden reasons of events, of sickness and all manner of difficulty. The Mazatec curers are therefore shamans in every sense of the word: "their means of inspiration, of opening the circuits of communication between themselves, others, the world, and the spirits, are the mushrooms that disclose, by their psychoactive power, another modality of conscious activity than the ordinary one" (Munn 1973: 113). When Mazatecs eat the mushrooms they ask the curer to guide them, because this individual is recognized within their society as an expert in such psychological artistic adventures. Therefore, it becomes the curers' vocation to eat the mushrooms because they are the people of the spirit, of language, and of wisdom.

## **Linguistic Creation and its role in Mazatec society**

Language, in the form of chants or expressive dialogue, is the way in which the bemushroomed person manifests his or her creativity. Words are manifestations of consciousness; language is a vehicle of their relation to reality. By the use of the hallucinogenic mushroom and through the voice of the shaman, the Mazatec society members reveal themselves. Feelings are articulated concerning their past, future and present.

All societies have a need to freely portray themselves and it is through hallucinogens and a shaman that many societies feel secure to exhibit creativity. The experience becomes a psychological and social release. What is spoken of by the shaman is the communal world; even the visions of his imagination must have their origin in the context of his existence and the myths of his culture.

“The subject of another society will have other visions and express a different content in his discourse. It would seem probable, however, that apart from emotional similarities, colored illuminations, and purely abstract patterns of a universal conscious activity, between the experiences of individuals with differing social inferences, the common characteristic would be discourse, for judging by their effect the chemical constituents of the mushrooms have some connection with the linguistic centers of the brain” (Munn 1973: 98).

The language of Mazatec shamans is not ordinary, everyday language, nor is it a controlled verbalization. It is as if one has a special talent for extraordinary articulation.

“Intoxicated by the mushrooms, the fluency, the ease, the aptness of expression one becomes capable of are such that one is astounded by the words that issue forth from the contact of the intention of articulation with the matter of experience. At times it is as if one were being told what to say, for the words leap to mind, one after another, of themselves without having to be searched for: a phenomenon similar to the automatic dictation of the surrealists except that here the flow of consciousness, rather than being disconnected, tends to be coherent: a rational enunciation of meanings” (Munn 1973: 89).

Reports of mushroom use demonstrate the almost impossibility of expressing one's experience and linguistic ability to one who has never been in a bemushroomed state. For example, R. Gordon Wasson, who in 1953 was among the first outsiders to eat the mushrooms and partake in the sacred Mazatec ritual, could only describe his incredible experience as saying “We are entering upon a discussion in which the vocabulary of the English language, of any European language, is seriously deficient. There are no apt words in it to characterize one's state when one is, shall we say, “bemushroomed” (Wasson 1972: 190). Likewise, Wasson also linked the mushroom experience with the creative expression of language in general. He compared the writings of St. John of Patmos in the Book of the Revelation and of William Blake as linguistic expressions of individuals who had just partaken of the sacred mushroom.

“Clearly some poets and prophets and many mystics and ascetics seem to have enjoyed ecstatic visions that answer the requirements of the ancient Mysteries and that duplicate the mushroom agape of Mexico. I do not suggest that St. John of Patmos ate mushrooms in order to write the Book of the Revelation. Yet the succession of images in his vision, so clearly seen and yet such a phantasmagoria, means for me that he was in the same state as one bemushroomed. Nor do I suggest for a moment that William Blake knew the mushroom when he wrote his telling account of the clarity of ‘vision’” (Wasson 1972: 196).

However, the mushroom:

"permits you to see, more clearly than our perishing mortal eye can see, vistas beyond the horizons of this life, to travel backward and forward in time, to enter other planes of existence, even (as the Indians say) to know God" (Wasson 1972: 197).

Knowing the importance of language in a society and the role it plays in the mushroom ritual, one must realize the recognition placed on the shaman as chief conductor of language.

The Mazatecs say that the mushrooms speak. From a western point of view no mushroom speaks, only man speaks, but he who eats these mushrooms, if he is a man of language, becomes endowed with an inspired capacity to speak. It becomes the function of the shamans who eat them to speak, they are the speakers who chant and sing the truth, they are the oral poets of their people, the doctors of the word, they who tell what is wrong and how to remedy it, the seers and oracles, the ones possessed by the voice. Mircea Eliade writes that

"the shaman is both singer and poet . This creative aspect of the shaman assumes special importance, for the shaman's songs and music are central to the notion of his power, ritual efficacy, and aesthetic expression" (Eliade 1992: 18).

The shaman becomes the mediator of the expression of language for the Mazatecs. Inherent and thus essential in all Mazatec mushroom rites is the chant of the shamans: The ceremony begins with a low subdued humming on long sustained tones, limited in range to the interval of a fifth with an occasional added tone. This humming often leads into passages of chanting in which the second syllable of "Jesosi", the ceremonial word of Jesus, is repeated in a long series of tones of equal durational value. The reiteration of names is a characteristic common to all the Mazatec chants. The names repeated today by the shaman are holy names of the Catholic Church, whereas in ancient times other divinities were named. The invocation of holy ones inspires religion and creates familiar visions in the reality of the people. Much of the chanting appears to be free in form, ametrical, and structured on texts lines varying in length. However, at certain points the chant becomes formalized into a pattern of alternating phrases, the first cadencing on the second degree of the scale, the second reaching a point of repose on the ground tone (Rhodes 1963: 189). Wasson describes the chant as an essential element to a successful ceremony: " The Mazatec communicants are also participants with the curandera in an extempore religious colloquy. Her utterances elicit spontaneous responses from them, responses that maintain a perfect harmony with her and with each other, building up to a quiet, swaying, antiphonal chant" (Wasson 1972: 198).

The Mazatec shamanic chant becomes a lesson or discourse on the progress of society, integrating every member of the rite into the chant, speaking on a future each individual can relate to and creating a feeling of hope amongst the people. Their indigenous society is being transformed by the forces of history and the shaman remains the peoples' connection to the past, their hope for the future and their outlet to creative expression and the supernatural realm. "The Mazatec curandera in her discourse speaks of the ancient and the modern, of what is happening to her people, peering into the future, she recognizes the inevitable process of transition, of disintegration and integration, that confronts her children" (Munn 1973: 96).

A shaman who in the 1950s received recognition because of the investigation of the sacred Mazatec mushroom rite by R. Gordon Wasson and his colleagues, is María Sabina.

A book has been written concerning her important role as an artist among her people: her chants have linked the Mazatecs to the supernatural and inspired hope for the future. María Sabina first became acquainted with the mushrooms at age six when she witnessed the curing of her uncle Emilio Cristino. A shaman known as "Wise Man Juan Manuel" arrived at her house with a bundle wrapped in banana leaves which he treated with exaggerated care and kept hidden from her sight. The old wise man talked and talked, sang and sang in a language which she did not understand, but which she was attracted to. "One thing that I did understand was that the mushrooms had made old Juan Manuel sing" (Estrada 1981:39). A few weeks later, María Sabina and her sister recognized the mushrooms of Juan Manuel in a pasture and experienced their first taste of the sacred mushrooms.

"After having eaten the mushrooms, we felt dizzy, as if we were drunk, and we began to cry; but this dizziness passed and then we became very content. Later we felt good. It was like a new hope in our life. That was how I felt. Sometime later I knew that the mushrooms were like God. That they gave wisdom, that they cured illnesses, and that our people, since a long time ago, had eaten them. That they had power, that they were the blood of Christ." (Estrada 1981:39, 40).

María Sabina grew older and after two unsuccessful marriages she began to fulfill her destiny as a woman born to cure with the language of the mushrooms. It was in one of her first visions as a curer that María Sabina learned of the "Book of Language". The "Book of Language has been described as María Sabina's link through the visions to artistic creation. It is in the book that she sees the words to speak, however, this book only appeared in her earliest visions because as her mind opened to creativity, the contents of the book became permanent in her memory. Upon ingestion of the "saint children" (her name for the sacred mushrooms) María Sabina encountered the "Principal Ones" she had heard her ancestors speak of. It is therefore from the Principal Ones "Book of Language" that María Sabina gets her inspiration for words and beautiful, meaningful chants.

"One of the Principal Ones spoke to me and said: 'María Sabina, this is the Book of Wisdom. It is the Book of Language. Everything that is written in it is for you. The Book is yours, take it so that you can work.' I exclaimed with emotion: That is for me. I receive it. Wisdom is Language. Language is in the Book. The book is granted by the Principal Ones. The Principal Ones appear through the great power of the 'children'" (Estrada 1981: 47).

Aware of the art and importance of language, María Sabina uses her creative ability to speak and chant as her only force. "I cure with Language. Nothing else. I am a Wise Woman. Nothing else" (Estrada 1981: 56). The sacred mushrooms provoke creation of beautiful language and chants. The words spoken through the shaman are words as real as the Mazatecs' present reality. The phenomenon most distinctive of the mushrooms' effect is the inspired capacity to speak, making those who eat them people of language, illuminated with the spirit, free to express their creativity.

Times have changed in the Oaxacan village of Huatla de Jiménez since the investigation of the sacred mushroom rite in 1953 by Wasson. Once isolated from the modern world, now roads have been built through the mountains in order to connect the Mazatec community with the world beyond. Not only has the Mexican society beyond their village been brought to the Mazatecs, but, with the advent of modern medicine and the increase in foreign trade, an even

broader world has reached the Mazatecs. Following Wasson's investigation of the sacred mushroom rite and subsequent publications of his research in the 1950s, an invasion of foreigners swarmed Huatla de Jiménez and María Sabina for information and the hope of a "trip." However, the Mazatec Indians have managed to keep the divine mushroom a precious secret, sheltered from desecration by white men. The shamanistic customs and the use of *Psilocybe mexicana* still exist, but shamans are difficult to find. Those who do practice, however, continue to use language to cure and to inspire joy, harmony and hope amongst the people. I find it clear that the use of the mushroom opens a gateway to one's creativity and thus brings forth art in the form of expressive language. The mushrooms are the flesh of language, food of intuition, food of wisdom. Some may continue to feel a certain naivete about the use of hallucinogenic drugs to provoke creativity. Perhaps because as Wasson says "those who have not taken the mushroom are disqualified by total ignorance of the subject!" (Wasson p.191). Although inexperienced in the tastes of "the flesh of the gods", the author has sought to glimpse the beauty found in the mushrooms and illustrate the role of the shaman/artist and the "poetry" he and his communicants create. Language is employed universally to depict one's feelings and thoughts and no matter who the person, the words of his/her imagination must have an origin in the context of their existence and the myths of their culture. Therefore, like the Huichol and the Mazatec, who choose to excite their creativity through hallucinogenic drugs, all individuals in a society may utilize some means to awaken their creativity, "to go looking for the tracks of the spirit", the shamans say (Munn 1973: 89). Does one really need mind altering drugs or plants to chant, speak, cure, draw, sculpt...? Undoubtedly not, but the experience described by the Mazatecs and seen through the present research is an experience which in the mind of the Mazatecs cannot be duplicated by anything other than the sacred mushrooms.

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