MARIA SABINA: WISE LADY OF THE MUSHROOMS

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The Mazatec Indians call Maria Sabina a *sabia*, one who is wise. Her special area of expertise is the use of *teonanacatl* or *los niños santos*, the divine mushrooms. Maria Sabina is also a poor Mazateca, but one of the most celebrated Mexican Indians of all time.

Maria Sabina's life was one of physical hardship and personal loss. She was born in 1894, and her father died when she was quite young. As a result, she worked in the fields, frequently with little food to sustain her. She initially observed a mushroom *velada* (or night vigil) when she was about six, and originally ate the psilocybin mushrooms for physical sustenance and to overcome hunger. From adolescence until after the death of her second husband (when she was in her 40's), Maria Sabina's use of the mushrooms was sporadic because of the prohibition against sexual activity before ingesting *los niños santos* (the little saints). She became convinced that the mushrooms gave wisdom, that they cured illness and that they were the repository of these powers because they represented the blood of Jesus Christ.

On one occasion when Maria Sabina used the mushrooms, she imagined the figure of death near her sister's side during an illness. She not only received guidance as to how to cure her sister, but reported that she was given access to the wisdom and language of the mushrooms by higher "spiritual beings." Her fame spread and Indians came from miles around to participate in her *veladas*. In the story of her life, dictated to Alvaro Estrada (1981), Maria Sabina proclaimed that ". . . it is the *little things* that speak. And they say so because they sprout by themselves. No one sows them. They sprout because God so wills . . . . The words of the *little things* must be obeyed."

Maria Sabina's great grandfather, grandfather, great aunt and great uncle were all *sabios* or *sabias* who ingested the magic mushrooms. During her ministry, Maria Sabina would eat the mushrooms with her clients and they would have visionary experiences together. During these *veladas*, the circumstances surrounding the client's illness or problem reportedly would appear. The "spiritual beings" would work through the mushrooms, dictating the remedies for the illness or the solution to the problem. Maria Sabina's songs and chants, sung in Mazatec and invoking the power of the mushrooms, would command evil influences to leave and would request healing energies to take their place.

Maria Sabina's life has been marked by humility, most of it being devoted to her spiritual mission. She has had no great conflict with Roman Catholicism, even working with the church in a society of women she helped found, the Sisterhood of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. She won the respect of the local clergy who played a role in protecting her from federal authorities during the time when her work was highly controversial. Maria Sabina's ceremonial liturgy contains an overlay of Roman Catholic imagery, but at its core are the same Nahuatl odes and psalms that were uttered by the high priests of Montezuma II, who Hernando Cortez dethroned in 1521. The Spanish Inquisition outlawed the mushroom rites, which then went underground for more than four centuries.

In 1938, the daughter of eminent Harvard botanist Richard Evans Schultes observed a sacred mushroom ceremony in the Oaxaca region of Mexico. Earlier, Schultes had advanced the thesis that the *teonanacatl* (or God's flesh) referred to by the Aztecs could have been the divine mushrooms. The first recorded outsiders to ingest mushrooms in a native ceremony were R. Gordon Wasson, a mycologist, and Allan Richardson, a photographer, in 1955. On the advice of a close friend who was a municipal authority in her home town, Huautla de Jimenez, Maria Sabina shared her knowledge. (In addition, she has reported having had a premonitory mushroom vision about the outsiders' visit shortly before their arrival.) Wasson (1980) described his experience in ecstatic terms.

In 1958, Wasson brought his wife Valentina and his daughter Masha to the village. On a historic rainy afternoon, the two women became the first Caucasians to eat the mushrooms without the benefit of a native ceremony. In his book, *The Wondrous Mushroom*, Wasson (1980) recounts these sessions and observes that a feature of the *velada* is that the mushroom is thought to speak through the voice of the *sabia* who is the conduit for the sacred wisdom. Typically, the *velada* is held in response to a request by someone who wishes to consult the mushrooms about an illness or serious problem. The mushroom will advise which herbs to find and how to use them, which saints to invoke, which pilgrimage to make, or where a missing or stolen object can be located.

In the years that followed, many foreigners came to Oaxaca to see Maria Sabina, not so much to be cured of illness as to explore the spiritual path. Maria Sabina has

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claimed that even without the advice of the municipal authority she would have revealed the secret of the mushrooms to the outsiders. She saw nothing wrong with this action, as the mushrooms were the blood of Christ, freely available to everyone on a sincere quest of the spirit. Nevertheless, a group of townspeople claimed that she had betrayed Mazatec traditions. Maria Sabina's house and her store were burned to the ground and one of her sons was killed under mysterious circumstances. Later, she was extremely critical of the young people who came in the 1960's because they did not respect Mazatec customs and ate the mushrooms with a lack of preparation and without the direction of a "wise one" (Estrada 1981). As a result, she stated that *teonanacatl* had lost its purity and much of its power. The Mexican Army forcibly expelled the young foreigners from Huautla in 1967.

In 1980, the authors and a small party visited the town of Huautla de Jimenez, which is located in the Mazatec mountains at the northern corner of Oaxaca. The group drove to the top of the mountain on which Maria Sabina's home was located. It seemed to be situated on the top of the world: to look down through the mist and see Huautla far below.

During the initial audience with Maria Sabina, one member of the group (SK) gave her three pieces of jewelry – a present from Juna Davitshavili, a folk healer whom he had interviewed in Soviet Georgia. It was explained that the rings and the bracelet had been made by craftspeople halfway around the world, and that they had been a gift from another woman who also saw her mission as the alleviation of human distress. The jewelry fit Maria Sabina perfectly and she appeared to be delighted with these tokens of esteem.

When she discovered the group's desire to take photographs, Maria Sabina became quite excited and quickly changed into her traditional robe, or *huipil*, a white gown embroidered with colorful floral figures. She then posed patiently with various members of the entourage. Somebody had obtained the services of a townsperson who could speak both Mazatec and Spanish, and one of the group members then translated the words from Spanish to English.

On seeing Maria Sabina in her *huipil*, and feeling the full force of her charisma, one member of our group became visibly moved and began to cry uncontrollably. Instantly, *la sabia* took her aside, prayed for her and "cleansed" her with fresh flowers. At this point, everyone in the party asked to have a blessing from Maria Sabina. Her daughters, Maria Apolonia and Maria Aurora, stood at her side and collected financial donations. No one objected to this procedure, believing that Maria Sabina had been exploited over the years by both tourists and media representatives. The group had already given Maria Sabina a donation on arriving and had resolved not to take advantage of her in any way.

After receiving blessings, everyone left with a great deal of admiration and respect for *la sabia*. The group returned the following day in hopes of asking a few more questions. Everyone entered her sturdy mud and wood hut (a gift, evidently, from the Mexican government). On this occasion, no translator was available and the stay was brief. However, Maria Sabina was wearing the jewelry from the U.S.S.R. and she pointed to it with a twinkle in her eye. On returning to the car, a local entrepreneur approached and succeeded in selling members of the group her entire supply of hand embroidered Maria Sabina T-shirts.

In the interview with Maria Sabina on the previous day, she had said that the mushrooms represented the blood of Jesus. There are Indian tales of a Christ-like figure, Quetzalcoatl, who walked through Mexico healing the sick and teaching the doctrine of universal love. Sometimes thorns would cut into his feet; some legends state that the sacred mushrooms grew where his blood dropped to the ground or where his spittle fell. (It should be noted that pre-Conquest stories also told of Quetzalcoatl's giving the divine mushrooms to Piltzintecuhtli, the "Noble Infant," but the more recent tales demonstrate the Christian influence.)

Maria Sabina's reference to "my clean staff" in Estrada's book, recalls the figures in ancient Mexican mythology who are pictured walking with staffs. The Huichol goddess of growth, Nakawé, uses a magical staff symbolizing a snake. The Huichols deposit similar staffs in caves dedicated to this goddess as prayers for health and longevity. When Maria Sabina chants "I am a lawyer woman. . . . I know how to speak with the judge," she is probably referring to her shamanic intercessions with the powers that govern life and health.

In addition, her use of the term "Lord clown woman" refers to the mushroom's ability to bring about emotional, cathartic experiences during which people laugh and cry. But Maria Sabina is not a silly clown. Instead, she is a Lord clown: a sacred clown akin to the Trickster figure so prevalent in American Indian mythology. When Maria Sabina sings "I am a Lord eagle woman, I am a clock woman," she is perhaps incorporating the Mexican national emblem of the eagle with her continual clock-like clapping during the ceremony. It may be coincidental, but in the center of Huautla de Jimenez, opposite the church, there is a schoolhouse adorned with a tall clocktower emblazoned with the Mexican eagle.

At one point in Estrada's book, she sings "Woman who stops the world am I, legendary woman who cures am I, woman of paper, of smoke am I." Estrada points out that when a Mazatec *huipil* is embroidered, the designer first puts a paper with the pattern punched out on it with holes over the cloth, and then rubs charcoal dust over the stencil to draw the design. Thus, Maria Sabina is a stencil through which designs are drawn on the world. In this way, she is referring to her destiny.

Before the group left Huautla de Jimenez, another shaman, doña Clotilde performed the mushroom rites in her sanctuary. Echoing Maria Sabina and a string of *veladas* going back over the centuries, she chanted for most of the night while *los niños santos*, the little saints, performed their magic. As Maria Sabina had sung for decades (Folkways Records 1967):

That's the way it looks when I go to heaven.
That's the way it looks when I go to heaven.
They say it's like softness there.
They say it's like land
They say it's like day.
They say it's like dew.

This theme runs through many of Maria Sabina's chants, especially the idea of following in the footsteps of Christ. For Maria Sabina, the mushrooms have power because they are the flesh of God. Among the Mazatecs there are three types of people with special powers: the wise ones (*sabias*); the curers (*curanderas*) and the sorcerers (*brujas*). The *curandera* is able to use herbal remedies, but cannot interperet mushroom visions so as to understand the origin of the person's illness. The *bruja* is said to have the ability to enchant or hex, but fears the *sabia* who has a higher power.

Maria Sabina pointed out that she does not use herbs to heal nor does she carry out the celebrated "egg cleansing," in which an egg purportedly assimilates the disease of the sick person. Instead, she cures "with language. . . . Nothing else. I am a Wise Woman. Nothing else" (Estrada 1981).

Maria Sabina retired as an active healer as she approached her nineties. In 1981 she remarried and in March 1983 the newspapers reported that she was quite ill, but emerged from the hospital thanking God for her recovery. When last seen by the authors and their party, however, she repeated many of the same sentiments that she had sung during the mushroom ceremony recorded by the Wassons in the mid-1950's (Folkways Records 1967):

I'm a trying woman.
I'm a crying woman.
I'm a speech woman.
I'm a creator woman.
I'm a doctor woman.

In her chants, Maria Sabina becomes what she names, just as the Tlingit shamans put on or take off a variety of masks during their ceremonies. When she chants "I am a woman who looks into the insides of things . . . a woman who investigates," she is claiming that the mushrooms give her clairvoyant powers, insight and the ability to examine her clients to diagnose their ailments. When she sings that she is a "woman of the

great expanse of the water," she alludes to "swimming" in the sacred realms, as it is very uncommon for Mazatecs to swim in the ocean. She is also a "woman who resounds," because under the influence of the mushrooms, she becomes reverberant and "thunders." Her decades of thunder have produced a rich legacy for the study of Mazatec shamanism.

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