

The Use of Hallucinogenic Mushrooms for Diagnostic Purposes among some Highland Chinantecs

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*This article describes the ingestion of hallucinogenic mushrooms—*Psilocybe Hoogshagenii* Heim—as a means to diagnose illness among contemporary Chinantec-speaking Indians of the Sierra de Ixtlán, Oaxaca, México. It is possible that several varieties of hallucinogenic mushrooms are used amongst these highland Chinantecs, the specific variety utilized depending upon “seasonal availability and the precise purpose for which the narcotic is to be taken” (Schultes, 1972: 10). However, the following describes only the observed use of *Psilocybe Hoogshagenii*, and it should not be generalized to the use of other mushrooms which may prove equally available to diagnosticians in the Sierra.*

As Wasson, Schultes, and Heim have already made abundantly clear, the contemporary usage of narcotic mushrooms in México boasts a long and venerable past. It is now clear that at least some of the hallucinogenic mushrooms utilized in contemporary México were represented by the *teonanacatl* of the pre-hispanic and colonial past. It is unfortunate that, for the most part, those descriptions of *teonanacatl* usage which do come down to us from the early chroniclers, describe its use amongst Nahuatl speakers of the central highlands, leaving only speculation as to the extent to which those descriptions might be applied to non-Nahuatl speakers, located in the more southern regions of México.

However that may be, it is a reasonable assumption that the Spanish missionaries forcefully inveighed against and fearsomely sanctioned continuance of the use of hallucinogenic mushrooms or such other mood modifiers as morning glory seeds or fermented liquors. The confessional used by

Padre Nicolás de León (La Barre, 1959) is a case in point, as is the *Doctrina Christiana en Lengua Chinanteca* used by Padre Nicolás de la Barreda. Padre de León's concerns are illustrated in the following translation into English (La Barre: 23):

Art thou a sooth-sayer? Dost thou foretell events by reading omens, interpreting dreams, or by tracing circles and figures on water? Dost thou suck the blood of others? Dost thou wander about at night, calling upon dreams to help thee? Hast thou drunk peyotl, or given it to others to drink, in order to discover secrets, or to discover where stolen or lost articles were?

Of more immediate interest are the concerns of F. de la Barreda during the early 18th Century, inasmuch as de la Barreda's parish included Santiago Comaltepec, the *municipio* from which this current information derives. Comaltepec, San Juan Yólox, and, probably, San Juan Quiotepec are three localities which were joined together by a civil *congregación* in 1603 to form a single parish served by a priest who resided in the town of Yólox. Incidentally, these three *municipios* are the exclusive components of the sub-group of Chinantecs known as Dza-Hmi (Weitlaner and Cline:

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1; Cline's introduction to de la Barreda: 19). Father de la Barreda's major concern for his parishioners is reflected in some questions from his confessional of 1730, which refer to the First Commandment:

Have you adored, given cult to the devil, or to poles (palos), or to the Sun, as your ancestors did? Have you become a witch or sorcerer? Do you have herbs or other instruments in the house with which you are able to communicate with the devil? Do you have herbs or other instruments in the mountains with which you can communicate with the devil? [39, 41]

It is curious that he makes no specific mention of either hallucinogenic mushrooms or *Rivea corymbosa*, although it is a reasonable possibility that implicit reference was made to these substances when questions were asked of the confessor with respect to divination, the use of special plants, herbs, "or other measures for the exercise of witchcraft and sorcery" (Cline: 61 Weitlaner and Cline: 551). As Cline noted with respect to de la Barreda's 18th Century confessional, "In spite of the brevity of the questions and the absence of many details, it is clear enough that in 1730 as well as today, a great part of the ancient rituals and beliefs persisted in Yólox. The plain, unadorned suggestions found in de la Barreda serve only to excite the researcher's appetite without satisfying it."

The paucity of ethnographic references and inferences to be drawn from de la Barreda, and the rarity of materials left us by other chroniclers of the Sierra de Ixtlán prior to the Twentieth Century (Weitlaner & Cline: 530; Gwaltney: 198-205) make it difficult to ascertain the importance of *pulque*, *Rivea corymbosa*, or *Psilocybe Hoogshagenii* during the centuries preceding our own. Today, however, it is very clear that residents of Santiago Comaltepec regularly ferment and drink both *pulque* and *tepache* during the seasons when they are available (and without any indication of public, uncontrolled inebriation about which Father de la Barreda expressed so much concern), but neither the mushrooms or *Rivea corymbosa* are used extensively today except by a very few people. We have record of only a handful of men and

women in the entire municipio of more than 1,100 residents who have ingested mushrooms. When they have done so it is only to diagnose, or divine the whereabouts of a lost object or animal, or to establish communication with deceased loved ones. To our knowledge, there is no one in Comaltepec regularly using *Rivea corymbosa*, although residents are aware that it is available in the neighboring municipios of San Juan Quiotepec and San Miguel Maninaltepec in which localities there are persons who take it in the form of a tea to divine on request (cf. Mac Dougall). It should also be noted that although the senior author is well acquainted with several very reputable healers in Comaltepec, none of them to my knowledge make use of either *Rivea corymbosa* or *Psilocybe Hoogshagenii* for purposes of diagnosis, healing or divination. The only person of our acquaintance to regularly use *Psilocybe Hoogshagenii* in Comaltepec is Don Antonio from whom most of the following ethnographic information derives.² Don Antonio ingests mushrooms only on the request of patients seeking diagnosis or the whereabouts of lost articles or animals. Compared to other healers, Don Antonio does not boast of high stature in this community.

Don Antonio is a Chinantec-speaking male of approximately 36-40 years of age. He was born in the municipio and attended several grades of elementary school, but is functionally unable to communicate in Spanish. Like other healers of the municipio, Don Antonio learned his techniques during an apprenticeship with another, elder practitioner whom he paid for the training received (cf., Munn: 103, 105, 119).

Several meetings with Don Antonio permitted the collection of information about beliefs related to the collection and use of the hallucinogenic mushrooms preliminary to observations of a night-long session during which he ingested ten of the plants.

These transcriptions of conversations and, later, observation of a session indicate how very much interwoven are the moral-

² The name Don Antonio is a pseudonym to provide the medium some protection from outsiders.

istic norms which help govern this peasant society and a deferential involvement with those supernatural beings—"the children"—who so readily reinforce those moralistic norms. Despite the infusion of moralistic admonitions in the talk of "the children", and despite the deference with which they are treated, one is hard-put to describe the observed ingestion of mushrooms as either a ritual or a religious mystery in this municipio. This, of course, is in remarkable contrast to the ritualism and sense of mystery associated with the collection, preparation, and ingestion of hallucinogenic mushrooms among the nearby Mazatec of Huautla de Jiménez as described by Wasson (1972: 195) and Munn, or among other Mexican groups described in the literature. However, this relative paucity of ritual or mystery in Comaltepec is quite consonant with the more general observation that such symbolic elaboration is quite scarce throughout the cultural life of this municipio.

Among the more important beliefs governing the use of hallucinogenic mushrooms in Comaltepec, are the following. For best effect, the mushrooms should be eaten only on the favorable or propitious days of Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday. The plants may be picked by anyone, male or female, married or unmarried, child or adult. They may be collected at any time of the day, but may be eaten only at night and in a secluded spot isolated from the sounds of other humans. The mushrooms are not processed in any way after picking. They are not ground, nor are they to be soaked or boiled in water. Neither should they be cut with a knife. Because the mushrooms are of a "cold" quality the medium needs sip on *mezcal* liquor throughout the session. (For concepts of "cold" and "hot" in this region, see Adams and Rubel). There is no need to practice sexual continence prior to eating the mushrooms, but one must abstain from the eating of a heavy meal immediately before a session. On the other hand, it is quite alright to eat lightly of soft boiled eggs, coffee, chocolate, bread, although tortillas are considered too heavy. As a matter of fact, the distilled liquor *mezcal* and "holy water"—*agua bendita*—

are prescribed accompaniments of eating the hallucinogenic mushrooms in this community, and coffee is considered a necessity. The *mezcal* and coffee provide the medium the strength necessary for the rigors of the experience, and *mezcal* counteracts the "very cold" quality inherent in the mushrooms.

On the other hand, the holy water is kept alongside the medium before and after he eats the hallucinogens in order to protect him from undesirable effects. "The people are also accustomed to drink holy water when they have a bad trip with the mushrooms. You can die, or you can find your mouth tight, so much so that you cannot talk. That is why you require holy water at hand." The most common cause of a bad trip, according to Don Antonio, is the lack of good faith on the part of the client. That is, if the person asking Don Antonio for assistance is either trying to ridicule the latter's diagnostic procedures or really does not believe in the worthiness of "children" (*Los Niños* or *Los Chamaquitos*). Characteristic of a bad trip is that, instead of pretty little children arriving to the sounds of lovely music, such ugly animals as snakes, octopus, tigers, and coyotes march before one's eyes, encircle his face and head, often-times kissing him on the lips and eyes. Don Antonio reports that sipping holy water before lying down, but after eating the mushrooms, serves to prevent such horrendous experiences.

From the reports of Don Antonio, complemented by those of a few others who have accompanied mediums as they partook of the mushrooms, a good trip is a most pleasant and rich experience. If one has eaten only "female" mushrooms there will appear to him only female children, if one has eaten only "boys," then only boys will appear. There is some controversy over the relative value of "boy" and "girl" mushrooms (*machos* and *hembras*) because Don Antonio, on the one hand, avers that "the boys are more powerful and talk more," whereas a woman who has eaten the mushrooms reports that this is not so. Nevertheless, there seems agreement that it is best to take boys and girls together so that boys and girls together will appear to the diag-

nostician. It should be emphasized that Comaltepec informants universally denied the requirement of eating mushrooms in pairs: a boy and a girl, a boy and a girl, together.

Informants also agree that the boys and girls are approximately one inch in stature or approximately the height of a full-grown *Psilocybe Hoogshagenii*. According to Don Antonio: "The *chamaquitos* look and dress the way that people look here. They wear cotton trousers (*calzones de manta*), they are little boys and girls. (It should be noted that the *calzones de manta* are the traditional indigeneous costume for highland males, but only three or four men in the entire *municipio* were observed to dress so conservatively, and no children were observed in *calzones de manta* during Rubel's year in the community.)

"They are just a very little taller than the mushrooms, and they look like the mushrooms. They seem to be very handsome. They wear stocking-hats (a woolen hat very much affected by the male residents of the highland, cold regions). On the other hand, they are barefoot and wear neither sandals or shoes. Some of them are dark-skinned, others light, just as are the mushrooms, themselves, of different colors. Sometimes they speak Spanish, sometimes they speak in Chinantec. Even when they speak amongst themselves, they speak both languages mixed together. They appear to be poor people as I am for, after all, it is I who am eating the mushrooms."

As has been mentioned earlier, Don Antonio's reports of his involvement with the respected children are very much enfolded within moralistic reinforcement to the norms of behavior in the community. The children speak in support of cooperative and friendly interpersonal relations. They enjoin against fractious and hostile ties. In support of such an orientation, they oppose the fractiousness generated by witchcraft accusations, enjoin against the breaking of promises, or the ridiculing of others. When a client requests assistance in good faith and treats the medium with respect, and the diagnostician has not eaten a large meal immediately prior to eating the mushrooms, then the boys and girls enter in a

good humor. "They enter by twos and threes, boys and girls together. They enter dancing, and leaping, and playing. When they come in a good humor, there is very pretty music, it is very pretty. But only when they are in a good mood.

"There are those in our community who want to know the truth. They ask me to find out which person is doing them harm. They want the names of those people, that is the custom of our people. But, I have not been able to tell them the names of their enemies because the mushrooms, themselves, do not permit it. The boys and girls who appear before me say 'No'. They will not seek out the names, they won't give me the names! They will only say that the patient should ask God—*Dios*—for help, or that the patient should make a vow to God. That is all that they permit. They do tell me that someone is doing harm to the patient, but they refuse to identify who it is. If they were to do so, it would cause me difficulty, and cause my patient difficulties. That is why they do not wish to identify the person causing my patient's illness.

"The mushrooms advise me that the reason why they will not tell me the identity of the witches (*dañadores*) is to protect me, that is what they advise me. At times, the people would become drunk and they would strike me because I have identified them, and then I would suffer.

"There are many kinds of sickness, but many times the people don't carry out the cures that I advise. They only desire to ask me their questions in order to ridicule me, as shown by the fact that they do not comply with my recommendations. That is why I do not like to agree to eat the mushrooms for the people because I lose time and, besides, I suffer (from a consequent bad trip). There are those who ask me what they should do and I find out for them, I make recommendations to them, but they do not follow my instructions. Instead, they blame a witch (*brujo*) for the persistence of their condition. I get tired of those who do not obey what I recommend to them. It is tiresome. For example, there is the case of a woman who once came to ask me questions. I told her what she must do, I told her that she was suffering from *susto* [for

description of the *susto* illness, see Rubel, 1964]. I gave her the cure which the mushrooms had given to me for her. She never complied [with my advice]. Then she returned to ask me to eat the mushrooms a second time for her. I took them again, but this time the mushrooms scolded me [*me regañaron*]. They said to me: 'Why do you do whatever the people ask you to? If the people don't do what you tell them to, if they only make fun of you, then you should not comply with their whimsies'. The mushrooms recommend that the people make a vow, or request a mass for the dead, or they recommend remedies which the patient should take, and they counsel that the patients have faith in God. That is what the mushrooms say!"

In this vein, the mushrooms also admonish Don Antonio to look out for his own welfare as well as that of his clients. "The mushrooms tell me: 'You comply with what we have advised, and if the others do not, the fault is not yours. You collect [your fee] from the people', that is what they tell me to do!" "There was a woman who came to see me and to request my assistance. I ate the mushrooms and advised her that she was to dig a hole to cure her *susto*. She was to dig the hole at the place where her *susto* occurred. Then she was to bring the earth she had excavated from that place back to her house where it was to be used to blow [*soplar*] upon her. She never did it! She returned to insist that I take the mushrooms another time which I did because of her need and her insistence. The second time the mushrooms scolded me. They asked me: 'Why do you comply with their wishes if they do not follow your advice? Why should you suffer from eating little [abstaining from the large meal of the day] when they do not pay you attention? Don't pay any attention to the capricious requests of the people!', that is what the mushrooms counseled me."

There now follows a description of observations made during a session in which Don Antonio ingested *Psilocybe Hoogshageni* Heim. The reader will readily note the infusion of moralistic injunctions incorporated in the communication of messages between "the children", the medium, and the

client. In this instance, the client was the senior author who requested a diagnosis and prognosis for his own mother who was critically ill in New York City.

Despite our having been informed previously by Don Antonio that Thursday was not a propitious day for diagnosis, other pressing matters related to our research on the *susto* phenomenon prevented our joining Don Antonio on a Wednesday, Saturday, or Sunday, and it was considered better to take a chance on an unpropitious Thursday than risk the later disappearance of the mushrooms, as the season waned in late August. Don Antonio accepted the logic of this argument and agreed to a session on an unfavorable day. However, the reader will note several references in the forthcoming text in which Don Antonio comments on the unpropitiousness of the day.

Our arrangement was to pick up the diagnostician at a place alongside the highway, drive in the jeep to another location, and proceed on foot to an isolated, depopulated hamlet, four hours walk from the highway. Unfortunately, a flat tire, and delays caused by highway construction caused Rubel and his interpreter to arrive several hours late.³ The delays made it impossible to walk to the hamlet before sunset, and neither Don Antonio or the interpreter relished walking the mountain paths in the cloud forest after dark. Consequently, it was decided to go to another, populated, hamlet alongside the highway. This alternative proved less propitious than the original plan because youngsters peered through the windows of the schoolhouse in which we prepared for the event. Moreover, instead of permitting the medium to collect the mushrooms in the security and privacy of the cloud forest surrounding the abandoned hamlet, he was subjected to the ridicule of the children who accompanied him as he picked the plants in our alternative site.

On arrival in the hamlet, Don Antonio immediately set about to locate the mushrooms which grew in profusion in the immediate neighborhood of the homes. He and the children quickly collected enough

³ Further references in the text to "the author," "the anthropologist," or "this man" refer to Rubel.

to meet his needs. It is worthwhile observing that he was aided by both boys and girls, and that as far as could be observed, neither he nor they made any special preparations for the task. No one washed their hands or other parts of their bodies, changed clothes, said prayers, crossed themselves, or in any other way prepared themselves for the collection of the plants. When the mushrooms were in hand, there seemed no special way of handling them while carrying them to the schoolhouse. However, Don Antonio showed care not to discard, or allow to be discarded, any of the mushrooms which were picked.

When Don Antonio decided that he had enough mushrooms, we retired with him to the empty schoolhouse where he awaited the dark of the night and the quiet that came with it. During our wait, the medium piled the ten mushrooms one on top of another, reminding me of a game of "pick up sticks." When asked the significance of the number ten, he responded that *he* had picked only six mushrooms, but that the mischievous children had picked the other four. He commented that he had taken the other four from the children so that they—the four mushrooms in excess—would not feel mistreated.

Although, clearly, the act of collecting the mushrooms and the respect which surrounds the act of eating them in this hamlet show this occasion to be different from other, more mundane events, they could not be described as mysterious, a usage implying a religious experience.

The use of the term 'mystery' very aptly (Wasson, in Furst: 195) describes the preparation and ingestion of mushrooms among the neighboring Mazatec of Huatla de Jiménez (Ibid.; fig. 1 in Weitlaner & Cline; Weitlaner & Hoppe). There are several other differences in the collection, preparation, and use of mushrooms in Comaltepec compared with their treatment elsewhere in Mexico. Those differences will be discussed in concluding sections. However, it should be well noted that the problem of comparing the cultural usage of hallucinogenic mushrooms in Chinantec-speaking Comaltepec with that characteristic of linguistically different peoples in Mexico is

compounded by the fact that only one person regularly practices the eating of mushrooms in Comaltepec, making it difficult to distinguish between what may prove to be cultural behavior and that which possibly represents idiosyncratic behavior.

After dark, Don Antonio began to eat the mushrooms one by one without any perceived preparation other than an "Our Father" and a "Hail Mary" in Spanish which preceded the actual eating of the mushrooms by between 40 minutes to an hour. Rubel was startled by the matter-of-factness with which he set about eating the ten mushrooms, one by one, button end first, followed by the entire stem. Nothing was left, nothing set to one side. I say that I was startled because of reports which describe somber preparatory rites among contemporary Mazatec (Wasson, 1972), Mixtec (Ravicz: 80), Zapotec (Ravicz: 84), and Lacandon (Robertson, 1973).

Unlike all other reports of contemporary use of hallucinogenic mushrooms in Oaxaca (see Schultes, in Furst), these observations in Comaltepec are notable for the absence or rarity of ritual, magical connotations, or religious "mystery", but this is quite consonant with a general paucity of ritual in this municipio.

After ingesting the mushrooms, Don Antonio sipped at the *mezcal*, following which he became more friendly to me and inquired of me whether my body was *contento* (comfortable). I advise him that it was and inquired whether his body was also *contento*? He responded that it was. He requested us not to provide him with large amounts of *mezcal* when he requests a drink because he was not supposed to drink large quantities but, rather, to sip the *mezcal* from the shot-glass provided.

Because, during the collecting of the mushrooms, he had distinguished males (*machos*) from females (*hembras*) based on his understanding that the larger mushrooms were male, I enquired of him whether those he had eaten represented both male and female plants. He answered that he had eaten only males. I suggested that there had been some small mushrooms among them and asked were they not

hembras? He responded again by affirming that they had been all males.

He then asked me to describe my mother's condition to him. I described her as very ill, very weak, and so sad that, at times, she begins to cry. Her abdominal area has become quite enlarged although she does not eat much. He responded by asking whether her condition is not very frail? I answered that it was, but that at the present time she is not in the hospital, although she goes in and out of the hospital as her condition changes. I also informed him that she had been very ill for approximately three years. Don Antonio responded: "I do not know what to do, and neither do you. Let's see what these people [*gente* that is, the mushrooms] will say. Because that is what he wishes to know."

Then Don Antonio began to pray in Chinantec: "I do not attempt to mistreat you. I do this only in response to the problems which people have at home. I obliged myself to help this man, and he made an agreement with me, and here he is. I came to fulfill my part of the agreement. It is not that I wish to eat, you know. You are aware of what is happening. You know that others laugh and make fun of what I do, but also you can tell whether what they say about me is true. Well, that is the way it is! Yes, they try to ridicule us. They cannot! Well, let us see how many of the mushrooms I am able to eat?"

Then he informed us that the six mushrooms were equivalent to "six pesos. If it was someone other than him who came with me, they would be worth six pesos. I collected ten of them, but I feel able [*aguanto*] to eat only six. Only six will I eat, because these are fresh. Those that are left over I will keep, in order that they do not complain about me. If one were to throw them away they would complain. One digs them up because they are useful. One cannot simply throw them away. You dug them up for a reason, to meet a necessity, and cannot throw them away. However, if he wishes to take them away with him, he may do so for it is as if he had bought them now. I am going to keep them because I dug them up, and to throw them away would mean that they would suffer,

and then they complain". He then requested the interpreter to extend the straw mat (*petate*) on the floor because he was now ready to lie down.

Before he lay down, Don Antonio advised the interpreter that he had spoken to the mushrooms to advise them as to the reason for digging them up. He advised them that the reason was to answer my question about the health of my mother. I asked whether piling the mushrooms on top of one another before eating them had any significance. He answered that it had simply been to gather them together, but had no other significance. We then asked Don Antonio whether it was not true that one was supposed to take both males and females together [*revueltas*]? He answered in an interesting fashion: "It is not essential. They can be eaten—all males—when they are found like this [that is, when only males have been discovered]. In fact, the words of the males are of greater value. The men have greater value because they talk more and they appear in a more pretty form [*porque platican más y se ven más bonitos*]. If you eat them mixed together—men and women—then they arrive together [*revueltas vienen*]."

The interpreter then requested Don Antonio to advise us when he was hungry because we had brought much food for him to eat. The diagnostician answered: "That's what I like. People attend me well when they have a problem [*Así me gusta. La gente sí atiende bien cuando hay necesidad!*]." He then said that he would not eat until after the children [*los niños*] have bade him farewell, until after the matter was closed.

Don Antonio then asked us to request some hot coffee from the storekeeper. The interpreter suggested the possibility that hot coffee at this time might not be good for him. He responded: "I will drink it immediately while I am still hot because the mushrooms are cold, are they not?" When the interpreter responded that he, himself, had no idea whether they were cold or not, Don Antonio advised us that: "These mushrooms are cool [*frescos*] and will soon have an effect. If they had been dry, it would be more difficult". Don An-

tonio then sighed audibly, which led me to ask whether he was feeling sad. He said: "This act is difficult because when one commits himself to it, he must comply. It is difficult; I always worry when I commit myself to taking the mushrooms. I always worry because when I take the mushrooms, they always have an effect, and one is always frightened. That is because one always sees frightening, ugly things. It startles one. When you have taken many times, as I have, then you know that you will be frightened, and so I worry because the moment is arriving in which I will be frightened. It is always like this when the effects begin. One becomes sad. He is not content because he is unable to sleep well."

He then asked whether I had advised my mother that I was going to make an inquiry about her condition? I told him that I had not because she is far away in New York City. He then asked whether I have visited my mother, and I told him that I had paid her a visit in June and during last Christmas. Don Antonio then asked whether the tape recorder would make a record of the fact that he was not eating the mushrooms out of sheer whimsy but, rather, to the contrary, he does so to respond to my need to be informed about my mother's health. He repeated his anxious comments: "No es por mi gusto que tomo, pero por cierto necesidad!" He began to yawn very deeply and often, again expressing his fears of the effects to come: "Está difícil, éste!" The interpreter asked whether there was still time for him to go out for the purchase of hot coffee before the diagnostician was affected by the mushrooms. The latter reassured him about the time and stated that he would not go to sleep without hot coffee. As a matter of fact, he adds that he would like some hot coffee and that, at the present time, he is going to request a piece of the bread we have brought for him, ". . . so that I can eat it when the coffee arrives. In this way I will be strong [be courageous?] when the effects begin". [Amongst these Chinantec it is generally customary to drink hot coffee before retiring at night.]

We then left for coffee and on our return found him yawning deeply and sighing. He

advised that he was now ready to retire. At our request he repeated a prayer he says he pronounced during our absence. It proved to be an "Our Father" followed by a "Hail Mary," both in Spanish.

In response to several repetitions of a question by the interpreter as to whether that was the complete prayer, or whether there might be more, he continued with a Hail Mary.

He then began to eat the mushrooms. In the midst of eating them, he requested a bit more of the mescal. Then: "We will wait awhile until the smell [*olor*] of the mushrooms passes. Mientras tanto, se ponga silencio!" [In the meantime, be quiet!] He began to eat the mushrooms again after a brief respite during which he asked for a little more mescal. He announced: "I am going to eat all ten of the mushrooms in order that none be left over. Once and for all, I will eat them all, in order that none of them be lost! I usually eat only six, but I will eat all ten, then it would be like throwing the remainder away. They—mushrooms—could say to me: 'Why did you throw away our *compañeros*? It is as if they were *we* and you had thrown us away!'"

Don Antonio then asked of the interpreter whether there was mescal in the other bottle we had brought him. When told that it contained mescal, he answered: "Well, you are well prepared. Tomorrow you can give me the meat, if he has brought meat? Don't say anything to my brother. If he so wishes, he can leave the meat with my mother telling her it is for Antonio to eat." He then asked whether I have, indeed, brought him meat. I answered that I have eggs, and tortillas, and bread for him. He began to laugh when the interpreter advised that Antonio had already eaten the meat we had brought him in sandwiches while we drove along the highway.

He continued to talk, but became more and more disconnected and rambling. He suggested I give him some payment now so that when we go to the store on the highway tomorrow, we need not speak of payment in front of onlookers. In answer to his request for more mescal, the interpreter advised him not to get drunk, but he re-

sponded that he wanted more mescal because he felt like vomiting from the food he had just eaten. His conversation became more and more rambling as he became more and more loquacious in both Chinantec and Spanish.

He then asked: Is your mother's illness the only thing that you wish to find out? Perhaps there is no cure for her, for you say that she has been ill for three years." Following this, he either began to speak to himself or was whispering so low that we are unable to recover what he said from the tape. Then, again, he became more audible, speaking to the anthropologist. "I am pleased with the help that you have given to the *municipio*. I am very grateful! There are people here who have threatened me because I do not assist with the communal labor, something I am unable to do. There are those who have mistreated me because I have been unable to help. Perhaps sometime when you and I are together and these people mistreat me, you will tell them to desist because I am your friend. I feel very content because you are helping us. That is why I am making the effort to help you, if only a bit. Even though the people say to me that I have soiled myself for telling you what one is able to do [to speak with "the children" by means of hallucinogenic mushrooms]. I don't know what to do because this man already knows well what it is that I do! This man does favors for the people, too. By not charging for a ride in his automobile, he saves one a lot of money that it would cost for the fare. The people say that I am soiling the community because I tell you that I take the mushrooms. But you are someone who helps the people and assists the community and so I do what I am able to help you. I believe that we are now going to lie down. Let's see what he [Rubel] has to say about it. But first I will smoke a cigarette."

He lay down on his mat in a dark corner of the room, I tried to sleep in my hammock, and the interpreter tried to sleep on one of the benches. Several hours later, but long before dawn, Don Antonio was heard to be restless and began to speak, apparently to himself. I asked him whether "the children" had appeared to him. He an-

swered in the affirmative. He then continued: "They said to me that although it is not yet the proper time, it doesn't matter because you made an agreement with him [anthropologist] and he arrived here fulfilling his part of the agreement. You, too, complied with your word. That is the only proper way to do things.

"Los niños said: 'You have fulfilled your agreement with him.' " "I have met my obligation to him on that matter", said Don Antonio to me. "With reference to your mother, it is certain that she will not recover. But she will live a while longer. She is not going to die very soon, but neither is she going to recover to the condition she was in prior to becoming ill, because she is now elderly. That is the way it is!"

In response to a question from the interpreter as to whether there was not some other message in addition to that which he passed on to me, the response was: "One part ended with that. Then they said that he had best be careful wherever he went. Take care on the highway. Taking account of the condition of the roads where he goes, they are not very safe. Inasmuch as he relates well with the people, nothing will happen to him, because he is a nice person. Well, that is what 'the children' said! I only wish that you two could speak with them. If only you could hear their words. He [anthropologist] appreciates the people, so nothing will happen to him on the road."

I then inquired whether "the children" had told him what I was to do. He answered: "You must request a mass. For example, during this fiesta of ours which is approaching. That is, if you are present at that fiesta? If he really desires that this should come to pass then it will be necessary for him to request a mass. He should request a mass before the Virgen de los Remedios, that is, if he really wants with all his heart that which he is asking."

"They told me that 'We will meet this man afterwards', that is all that they said. They said to me, When a person wishes to speak with you, you also must be prepared to ask questions. That is why we are desirous of speaking, because this man wanted

to come this far with you'. They said to me, 'If this man arrived willingly with you because of his need to ask you a question, you should be willing, also'."

The interpreter asked whether that was all, to which Don Antonio responded that there was nothing else. He then added: "They told me more. They said: 'It is not important that we meet only once in a while, we and you remain the same towards one another'." Then, addressing himself to the interpreter, he began to importune: "They said that it is good that you are working with him. For example, when I am in need of help and that man is not here, then you will do me the favor of seeking help for me from him. In case he is not present, you will serve in his stead. You will favor me with something, according to my need. That is good that you have a friendship with this man and that the mushrooms are not opposed to you. Let us work together, you and I, with this man."

The interpreter asked whether there was more to the message? "Yes. They said that if he takes the trouble to ask for the mass, perhaps his mother will recover. Perhaps she will recover half of her former health. Because when the Virgin of the Remedios arrived, there was the flower known as 'flor de los remedios'. Because she blessed the whole world in order for that flower to exist."

Don Antonio then asked me whether his performance was good or bad. He asked whether I felt happy. I told him that I did not feel happy because he had not provided a remedy for my mother. "But that is why you are to request the mass. Your mother will recover because if you request the mass up there, the blessing will arrive in your country where your mother is. She sends her blessing with much ease. As your mother is of a very advanced age, it has been a long time that she has had this sickness. But she will recover by half." Then, to the interpreter: "Tell him, in order that he does not feel sad!" "Tell him that if he requests the mass he is not to tell people that he does so on Antonio's advice. He can tell them that he does so of his own free will. That is what he can do. That is

all that I can tell you. Let us see if he does this?"

In response, then, to a question from me as to whether the children had presented themselves to him in good humor or in bad humor, he answered that they had been in a good humor because: "They told me that this man is of good will, he really wishes to find out the answer to his question. 'It does not matter,' they said to me, 'that it is not the appropriate day. It is essential to comply with your arrangement when a person arrives truly desiring to know the answer to a question. When a person acts in good faith, even though it is not one of the proper days, one must respond to the inquiry. Whatever else, as he has met his agreements with the people and inasmuch as he has fulfilled his part of the bargain, you, also, have met your obligation. In that way, everything resulted well. It did not result badly! For, if you had not met your word, it would be bad'."

Inasmuch as Don Antonio had advised in an earlier conversation that he sometimes saw animals, sometimes children (*los niños*) after eating the hallucinogenic mushrooms, the interpreter asked Don Antonio whether animals presented themselves this time. "Yes, the snake presented himself. The snake always appears. He always appears together with the octopus. These animals presented themselves after the children had appeared. The children say that these animals are for those people who do not marry, who do not become formally married, for those who only live together, but do not marry. Moreover, these animals are for those who do marry, but later become divorced. Like Martín, it is not good!

"They said to me that when persons call upon you, you must attend them. When you are in need, and it is critical, and you have nothing for your expenses, you should request aid of those who have. Ask them to help you when you are in need. Remember that time when this man called upon me to assist him? That is why I went, to be of assistance to him. It is not good when one has been offered a gift and immediately afterwards returns to that same person to request of him another gift. That is not right! Isn't that right, isn't it? It is

not good to wander about, shamefully asking aid of people. The people remember to whom they have previously provided assistance. It isn't correct to return again and again to the same people for aid. Do you recall that time when I arrived at this man's house and he gave me some money to help me? He helped me plenty that time. I am very grateful for it.

"I have still not slept; I am now going to sleep for a while. I have not lied. I now am going to sleep peacefully. I have not slept a wink. I have done a favor for him, and he did a favor for me. That is the way that I like it! I like it when we help one another in the face of need!"

SOME COMPARISONS

Although the preceding interviews and observations related to the ingestion of *Psilocybe Hoogshagenii* among highland Chinantec of Santiago Comaltepec suggest some degree of variance from what seems more general practice among other groups of Mexico, we shall dwell on the similarities demonstrated. The way in which Don Antonio and others of Comaltepec relate to the narcotic mushrooms is far more secular and matter-of-fact than is reported from other groups, and particularly from the Mazatec of Huautla de Jiménez from where there are good ethnographic reports (Heim and Wasson, Chapt. II: Munn). On reflection, the difference appears one of degree, rather than of kind. Indeed, as earlier suggested, the matter-of-factness with which the mushrooms are treated in Comaltepec is quite compatible with the general absence of rich symbolism in this *municipio*.

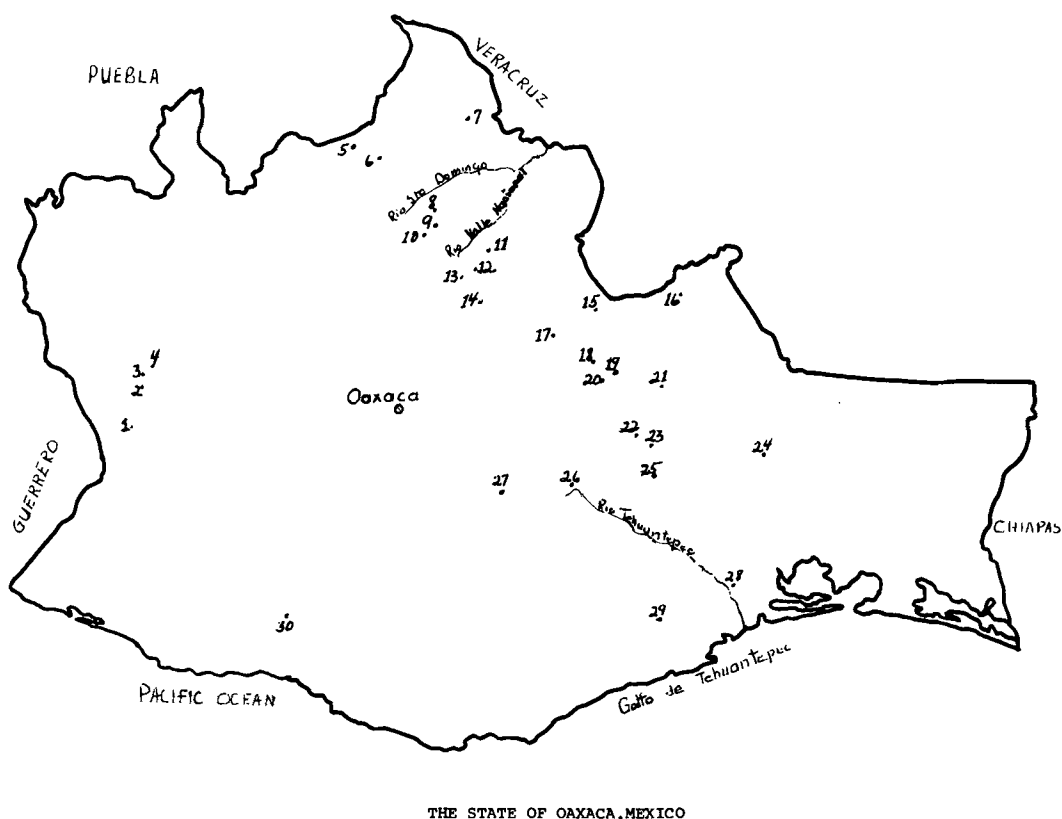
Data obtained in Comaltepec by means of participant observation and interviews indicate that there are many features which these mountain people share with others who are linguistically and geographically distant from them (Merrifield). But, as Miller (1966: 326) has properly emphasized, comparative ethnographic data is so thin and scattered with respect to the contemporary use of narcotic mushrooms that one attempts generalizations only with great caution. Miller warned that rather than suggest the existence of a single cult de-

voted to the use of hallucinogenic mushrooms all over Middle America, it should be borne in mind that even among villages of the relatively isolated Mixe, "... rites related to the use of mushrooms vary from one locale to another" (*Ibid*; cf., Ravicz: 90). Thus, keeping in mind the need for caution, we will emphasize only those traits from Comaltepec which appear to be of greatest significance and which are generally shared with other groups from which the use of these hallucinogens has been reported.

First, and perhaps of over-riding significance, mushrooms with narcotic properties are distinguished from others which do not have such an effect. The narcotic mushrooms are gathered only in order to respond to an individual's need to know the answer to questions of critical personal import: "What is the cause of my illness?" "What must I do to recover good health?" As is true elsewhere, but not universally, the mushrooms are collected in Comaltepec by *either* the diagnostician or the client for whom he will query the "little people"—*los niños*. However, in Comaltepec *only* the diagnostician eats the hallucinogens, and only he hears how "*los niños*" respond to his questions.

As is universally true in this region of the Sierra, in Comaltepec the mushrooms are ascribed special religious characteristics and treated with reverence. Unlike other localities, such as Mixe-speaking Camotlán in which the mushrooms are referred to as "Our Lords, the Earth's mushrooms" (Miller, 1966: 319), or as among the Nahuatl of San Pedro Nexapa who call the narcotic plants "The Noble Princes of the waters" (Wasson, 1963: 184), in Comaltepec, the personified mushrooms receive deference but not *such* great awe.

It is generally true in this area that the same techniques of prayer are used to solicit aid of the mushrooms as of other supernatural beings. Moreover, people do not arbitrarily discriminate between those supernatural figures which are post-conquest, and those which probably derive from pre-Christian periods. Although all reports indicate that narcotic mushrooms are revered in and of themselves, the ex-



THE STATE OF OAXACA, MEXICO

Fig. 1. Sites in which use of narcotic mushrooms is reported in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico.

- | | |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. Santa Maria Zacatepec | 16. Santiago Yaveo |
| 2. Chayuco | 17. Teocalcingo |
| 3. Agua Fría | 18. Santiago Zacatepec |
| 4. Santa María | 19. San Juan Cotzocón |
| 5. Eloxochitlán | 20. Santa Maria Alotpec |
| 6. Huautla | 21. San Juan Mazatlán |
| 7. Soyaltepec | 22. San Lucas Camotlán |
| 8. San Juan Zautla | 23. Santa Margarita Huitepec |
| 9. San Juan Quetzalapa | 24. San Juan Guichicovi |
| 10. San Pedro Sochiapán | 25. Santa Maria Coatlán |
| 11. Santa Cruz Tepetotutla | 26. Juquila Mixes |
| 12. San Francisco Llagas | 27. Mitla |
| 13. San Juan Quiotepec | 28. San Jose Paraíso |
| 14. Santiago Comaltepec | 29. Tenango |
| 15. "Latani"—San Juan Latana | 30. Yaitepec |

tent to which they are independent of the will or control of other, perhaps more powerful, deities seems to vary. Don Antonio appealed directly to the mushrooms for counsel, whereas, in other communities mediating supernatural figures are invoked to ensure that the mushrooms will present themselves. (Wasson and Heim: 88; Ravicz:

80, 82; Munn: 90, 91). Mrs. Merle Robertson reports that among some Lacandon, the practitioners bypass Christian deities in order to go directly to pre-conquest deities: "They (*Psilocybe cubensis* and *Panacolus venenosus*) are placed in the ritual bowls on small stone altars in ancient Maya *oratorios* (places of worship). The

purpose of their use, according to the Lacandons, is to contact their gods." (Personal communication.)

Surely one of the more interesting results of comparative research which Wasson, Heim and Weitlaner have done so much to inspire, is the discovery that hallucinogenic mushrooms have such similar effects across linguistic and cultural boundaries within Mexico. With remarkably little variation, that which is revealed to the taker of the mushrooms assumes the form of graphic, colored, and auditory experiences. The human forms which appear are approximately the stature of grown mushrooms, and these revealed "little people" speak in both the indigenous tongue of the medium, and in Spanish. To the contrary, in reports by European researchers—Heim, Cailleux, Hofman, and Brack—in which they describe the effects on themselves of relatively "controlled" dosages of the mushrooms, or of psilocybin extract, not a single researcher reports significant encounters with persons or animals, much less bilingual boys and girls or elderly people of small stature (Wasson and Heim: 273-4, 280, 282, 283, 284) during experimentation. Doubtless, what one experiences during such an occasion is a function of chemical *and* cultural influences in interaction as Miller (1966: 326, 327) and Munn (114, 122) appear to suggest. One also ventures to suggest, that individual personalities must play some part in the variations in response to the narcotic properties of the mushrooms, a premise which makes all the more interesting the similarity of responses reported from so many Indian individuals, living in so many different cultural milieux.

In Chinantec-speaking Comaltepec, and in at least four other Chinantec-speaking communities (Heim and Wasson: 99), the major function of the mushrooms rites is to diagnose and prognose illness. The important role of the mushrooms in healing have also been attested to among the Mazatec (Heim and Wasson: Chapter II; Munn), among some of the Mixteca (Ravicz: 77-8), Mixe (Miller, 1956, 1966; Hoogshagen: 313-4), Chatino (Wasson, 1966: 343, fn.), and Nahuatl (op. cit., 346). The second most often reported function of

the narcotic mushrooms in this region is for purposes of divining the whereabouts of an object or animal which has been lost or, perhaps, stolen. Utilization of the mushrooms to communicate with the dead seems restricted to Comaltepec (cf. Miller's commentary on séances, p. 326).

Finally, as Wasson has emphasized (1966: 166-70), despite widespread use, narcotic mushrooms are nowhere in the region taken whimsically or without serious consideration, preparation, and reverence. Its most general use is to acquire counsel from divine beings for diagnosis and prognosis of illness. However, by no means do *all* diagnosticians have recourse to, or even know how to exploit, the powers of the mushrooms. Whether or not those practitioners whose diagnoses depend upon the hallucinogenic mushrooms differ from other healers of the same community, along dimensions of personality, social status, or the manner in which they have been recruited to their healing responsibilities remain tantalizing questions to be answered only by empirical field research. Because of the rapid changes affecting the communities where these traditional practices of diagnosis and divination still survive, the time which remains for such badly needed research is distressingly brief.

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