

Maria Sabina wearing the jewelry from the Soviet healer, which Stan Krippner gave her



Maria Sabina :

Wise Lady

Of The Mushrooms

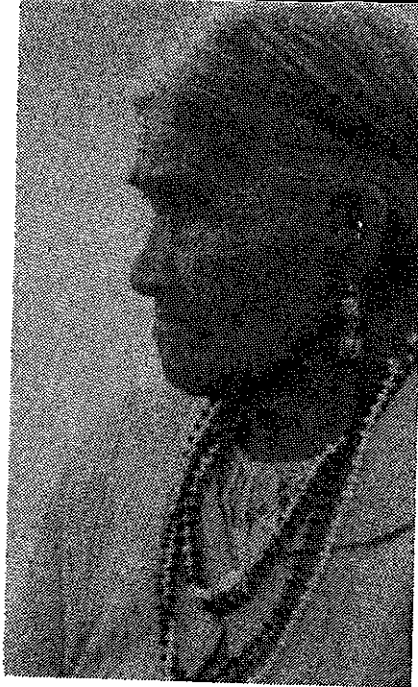
by Stanley Krippner and Michael Winkelman

The Mazatec Indians call Maria Sabina a "sabia", one who is wise. Her special area of expertise is the use of "teonanacatl" or "los ninos 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 has been one of physical hardship and personal loss. 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 40s), Maria Sabina's use of the mushrooms was sporadic because of the prohibition against sexual activity before ingesting "los ninos 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 [1a], Maria Sabina proclaims 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".

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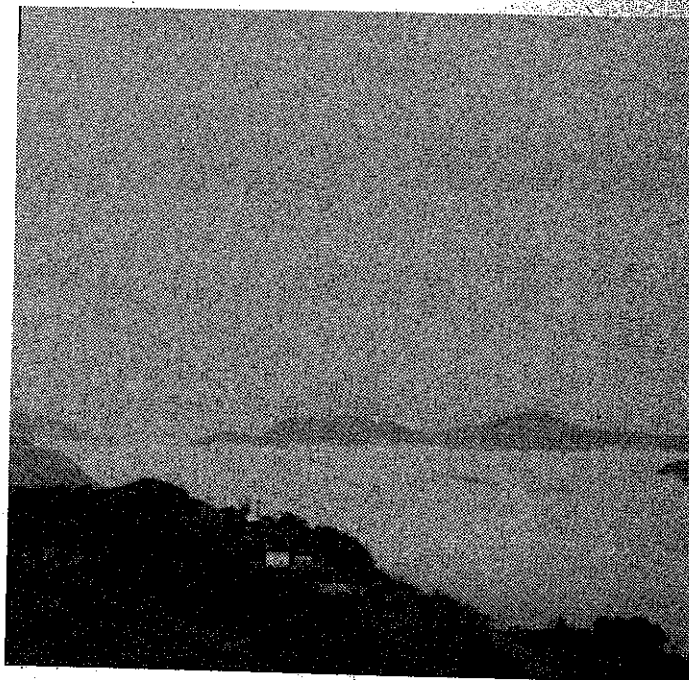
Maria Sabina

Maria Sabina's great grandfather, grandfather, great aunt, and great uncle were all "sabios" or "sabias" who ingested the sacred 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, and most of it has been 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 has 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 whom 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 Richard Evans Schultes, an eminent Harvard botanist, 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 (or mushroom specialist), 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 described his experience as one of ecstasy.

A view from Maria Sabina's house



In 1958, Wasson brought his wife Valentina and his daughter Masha to the village. On an 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 [2] 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, what saints to invoke, what 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 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 1960s because they did not respect Mazatec customs and ate the mushrooms with a lack of preparation and without the direction of a "wise one" [1a]. As a result, she has stated that "teonanacatl" has lost its purity and much of its power.

In 1980, a few of us visited the town of Huautla de Jimenez which is located in the Mazatec mountains at the northern corner of Oaxaca. We 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: we could look down through the mist and see Huautla de Jimenez far below.

During our first audience with Maria Sabina, one of us (SK) gave her three pieces of jewelry — a present from Juna Davitshavili, a folk healer whom he had interviewed in Soviet Georgia. We explained how the rings and the bracelet had been made by craftspeople halfway around the world, and how they had been a gift from another woman who 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 our esteem.

When she discovered that we wanted 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 our entourage. We had obtained the services of a towns person who could speak both Mazatec and Spanish; one of us then translated the words from Spanish to English.

Upon 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 our party asked to have a blessing from Maria Sabina. Her daughters, Maria Apolonia and Maria Aurora, stood at her side and collected financial donations. We did not object to this procedure as we were sure that Maria Sabina had been exploited over the years by both tourists and media representatives. We had already given her a donation upon arriving and had resolved not in any way to take advantage of this woman who had been referred to as "la madre del mundo", the world's mother.



After receiving our blessings, we left with a great deal of admiration and respect for "la sabia". The following day we returned, hoping to ask a few more questions. We entered her sturdy mud and wood hut (a gift, we were told, from the Mexican government). On this occasion, no translator was available and our stay was brief. However, Maria Sabina was wearing the jewelry from the USSR and she pointed to it with a twinkle in her eye. As we were returning to our car, a local entrepreneur approached us and succeeded in selling members of our group her entire supply of hand embroidered Maria Sabina tee shirts.

In our interview with Maria Sabina on the previous day, she had told us 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 had retired as an active healer as she approached the ninth decade of her life. However, when we saw her, she repeated many of the same sentiments which she had sung during the mushroom ceremony recorded by the Wassons in the middle 1950s [1b]:

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,
I'm a wise in the way of plants woman.

Before we left Huautla de Jimenez, we found a local "curandera", dona Clotilde, who performed the mushroom rites for us 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 ninos santos" — the little saints — performed their magic [1(b)]:

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.

References

- 1a. A. Estrada, *Maria Sabina: Her life and chants*; Ross-Erickson (Santa Barbara, California), 1981.
- 1b. Mushroom ceremony of the Mazatec Indians of Mexico, Folkways Records, 1967. Record No. FR8975.
2. R. G. Wasson, *The wondrous mushroom: Mycolatry in Mesoamerica*; McGraw Hill, 1980.
3. R. G. Wasson, et al. *Maria Sabina and her Mazatec velada*; Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974. □

photos by Bonnie Colodzin and Richard Yensen's camera

Maria Sabina doing "blessings"