

Hallucinogenic Mushrooms in Guatemala

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Among the earliest references to the ritual use of hallucinogenic mushrooms in the Americas were those recorded by Sahagún (1956) and Hernández (1959) in the latter part of the 16th century. The mushrooms used in Mexico were then called by the Nahuatl name *teonanācatl*, meaning God's flesh, and strenuous efforts were made by the Spanish priests to eradicate their use, a practice then considered idolatrous and consequently severely punished (De Landa 1966). Inquisitorial techniques were diligently applied to those who erred, but this apparently met with only partial success, for at least in some parts of Mexico the tradition survived three centuries of Spanish occupation.

Evidence has been accumulating for the past two decades on the occurrence and role of hallucinogenic mushrooms in contemporary Mesoamerica. The well known religious cult dedicated to the ceremonial use of *Psilocybe* species in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, has been amply documented by Wasson & Wasson (1957) and Heim (Heim & Wasson 1958) was the first to grow in culture several species of the Mexican agarics.

Field investigations recently undertaken in Mexico and Guatemala show that the knowledge of hallucinogenic mushrooms among the indigenous people of these regions is reflected in their language as well as being manifest in significant post-conquest documents such as the *Popol Vuh* (Anonymous 1927) which recounts the traditions of the Quiché of Guatemala. Among the powerful dieties in the Maya pantheon, the *Popol Vuh* mentions *Kakuljā*, the god of thunder and lightning.

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During the course of inquiries made in Antigua, Guatemala, it was discovered that the name of this ancient god was in current use among the Quiché and that it referred specifically to *Amanita muscaria*, long known for its hallucinogenic properties. That the mushroom is still regarded with awe is indicated by an expression used among the Quiché, who refer to it as *itzel ocox* (Lowy 1974), the evil or diabolical mushroom. *A. muscaria* is known not only among Guatemalan Indians but also by their neighbors in the state of Chiapas, Mexico, where two additional epithets for this mushroom are current. Among the Spanish speaking natives of San Cristobal Las Casas it has the name *yuyo de rayo* or thunderbolt mushroom and the inhabitants of nearby Zinacantan call it *yuy chauk* which has the same connotation (Lowy 1974).

In June 1976, inquiries in the Cobán area of Guatemala where the predominant language is Kekch'i, revealed that they too have a comparable tradition regarding *A. muscaria*, for they refer to it as *rocox aj tza*, the devil's mushroom. The widespread use in these regions of ancient and continuous Maya tradition, of identical expressions for *A. muscaria*, underscores the significance that the mushroom has had there in the past and demonstrates that its influence still prevails.

A. muscaria is of widespread occurrence in the Americas but mycologists had not reported it from Guatemala prior to 1970 (Lowy 1972). Evidence also indicated that this species may have had a considerable influence among the Maya, since part of the Madrid Codex, one of three surviving Maya codices, has been interpreted as showing a magico-religious ritual in which



Figure 1. *Psilocybe mexicana* Heim. Natural habitat photograph.

Figure 2. Children offering *Psilocybe mexicana* for sale at Guatemalan roadside near Santa Elena Barillas.

a mushroomic object that appears to represent *A. muscaria* is preeminently depicted in ceremonial offerings (Lowy 1972). In this context it is also pertinent that by far the greatest number of Maya artifacts known as mushroom stones have been found in Guatemala (Lowy 1971). The most widely accepted interpretation of these relics, some of which date back as early as one millenium B.C. is that they played a preeminent role as part of the symbolic paraphernalia used in hallucinogenic mushroom rituals (Furst 1976).

The search in Guatemala for evidence of the current existence of an autochthonous hallucinogenic mushroom cult has thus far been unsuccessful. However, on June 29, 1976, the first recorded Guatemalan collection of *Psilocybe mexicana* Heim (Figure 1) was made by Bernard Lowy, Rubén Mayorga and Miguel Torres in a meadow near Santa Elena Barillas, about 25 Km south of Guatemala City. Previously this agaric had been known only from Mexico. It was also found that a local trade in *P. mexicana* was flourishing and that the children in that area (Figure 2) were collecting the mushrooms, calling them *pajaritos* (little birds), in quantity and were offering them for sale to a clientele

who traveled considerable distances to make their purchases.

The identification of *Psilocybe mexicana* Heim in Guatemala lends credence to the possibility that a still undiscovered hallucinogenic mushroom cult may eventually be found there.

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