An Old, Bold Mushroom Hunter

Wasson

Mexican ceramic figure shows shaman beating a drum-like mushroom. Modern Mazatec shamans still beat time during sacred-mushroom healing ceremonies.

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One sacred mushroom of Mexico is Psilocybe mexicana. *The hallucinogenic ingredients make up 0.03 percent of the fresh, 0.3 percent of the dried, mushroom.*

George Byron, Rockefeller Univ.

R. Gordon Wasson turned from a career in banking to a life-long mushroom hunt.

Banking was R. Gordon Wasson's occupation, but mushrooms have been his avocation for more than 50 years. Ever since he and his Russian, pediatrician wife discovered a disparity in their attitudes toward mushrooms, Wasson has probed deeper and deeper into the role of mushrooms in human affairs. A dichotomy, he finds, exists among cultures. In some, such as the Slavic culture, people address mushrooms by a multitude of endearing names and feature mushrooms in fiction and poetry. In others, such as the Anglo-Saxon tradition, there are only three words for this range of plant life — mushroom, toadstool and fungus. These names are often used in a pejorative manner, as when one 18th century British author delighted in calling another "Smellfungus."

The depth of contrasting sentiment convinced the Wassons that there was more to mushrooms than meets the palate. "We postulated that mushrooms, or more likely one kind of mushroom, had played a religious role among our unlettered ancestors," Wasson told a recent meeting in New York. "Their religion elicited love and adoration, fear, yes, and even terror....When that religion, centered on a mushroom, was superseded by another, the rites and practices associated with it would have died out but those emotions, either favorable or unfavorable, would live on and on, in proverbs, children's ditties, figures of speech, turns of phrase."

Wasson has suggested a special name for plants with the ability to alter human consciousness. Instead of hallucinogen, psychedelic or psychomimetic substance, he says such a plant should be called an "entheogen," meaning "inducing a god within."

Wasson argues, and others now agree, that fungi played an important role in ancient Greece. He says an entheogen was the basis of the famous mysteries of Eleusis — the annual religious rite about which Aristides wrote in the 2nd century A.D., "...of all the divine things that exist among men, it is both the most awesome and most luminous." The mysteries of Eleusis were probably an experience comparable with that of taking LSD. The plant material containing the natural precursors for LSD is the grain fungus called ergot, which is also believed to have been responsible for the medieval mass poisonings known as St. Anthony's fire. Studies in botany, chemistry, classical literature and "ethnomycology" (the study of fungi in human tradition) indicate that a fungus species related to ergot could have infected a number of wild grasses in ancient Greece and, if the herbalists of ancient Greece were as intelligent and resourceful as those of early Mexico, the Greeks could have derived a hallucinogen consistent with the experiences reported in the classics.

In 1952 Wasson received exciting hints of the role of mushrooms in New World religion when he saw a drawing of a mushroom effigy carved in volcanic stone dated B.C. from Salvador. He also became aware, from the poet Robert Graves, of obscure papers published years before by Harvard botanist Richard E. Schultes, who had described the mushrooms of a present-day mushroom cult in Central America. Most anthropologists and botanists had believed that the legendary inebriating mushrooms of Mexico never existed but rather were peyote buttons wrongly identified.

The Wassons made several lengthy visits to Mexico to observe use of the mushrooms. Because the natives kept their beliefs secret, it took tact and skill to gain the confidence of the followers of the mushroom cult. Two years after the first visit, Wasson and a photographer companion were allowed to participate in a mushroom ceremony and eat the sacred mushrooms. Wasson described his visions as geometric colored patterns that took on architectural characteristics embellished with precious gems, fabulous creatures and lustrous landscapes. The essence of life, he says, seemed on the verge of being unlocked.

Wasson took Paris mycologist Roger Heim to Mexico to carry out botanical identification of the mushrooms (family Strophariaceae, most in genus *Psilocybe*), and Heim succeeded in cultivating some species in his laboratory. Wasson and Heim supplied mushrooms to several chemistry laboratories for analysis, and at Sandoz Ltd., a pharmaceutical company in Basle, Switzerland, Albert Hofmann succeeded in isolating and characterizing the two substances—which he named psilocybin and psilocin — responsible for the mind-bending effects of the mushrooms.

"Full dress treatment" of the cult of entheogenic mushrooms of Mesoamerica is a goal of an extravagant book Wasson has just put together. The collectors' edition of *The Wondrous Mushroom,* illustrated with Pre-Columbian art, sells for $525. "In the past these mushrooms have been largely ignored by our Americanists...," Wasson explains. "Let us remember that in prehistory the mushroomic entheogens have elicited adoration over much of Eurasia and North America. The monolingual natives of Mesoamerica are passing through their own proto-history right now."

What new mushroom legends and customs will Wasson now hunt? He is turning to the Far East, to Oriental cultures. The Japanese seem to ignore their native hallucinogenic mushrooms, although they clearly know they exist. Wasson recounts a simple story collected toward the end of the 11th century in which woodcutters lose their way and come upon a group of nuns dancing and singing after eating mushrooms they knew would make them tipsy. The woodcutters, also hungry, ate the leftovers and joined in dancing and laughing for hours. Thus the mushrooms are called "maitake" or "dancing mushrooms."

According to a ditty of our own mushroom-fearing tradition, there are old mushroom hunters and bold mushroom hunters, but there are no old, bold mushroom hunters. The 82-year-old Wasson, however, is firm evidence that old, bold mushroom scholars, although rare, keep going strong.