

4.2.2 Sacred Journey into the Presence of God.

Ritual Use of Sacred Mushrooms among the Mazatecs of Oaxaca, Mexico

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Abstract

This chapter attempts to demonstrate why some Mazatecs of Oaxaca in southern Mexico practice nightly healing rituals during which they eat *Psilocybe* mushrooms to experience a “sacred journey”. It aims to explain the ritual process and the aspects of ensuring its effectiveness. In addition, the chapter describes how, by means of the “sacred journey”, the Mazatecs gain the knowledge necessary to resolve their health-disease or spiritual conflicts.

Keywords: shamanism, entheogens, healing rituals, treatment

Introduction

The Mazatecs are indigenous people who live in the Sierra Madre Oriental in the northern state of Oaxaca. Their territory is known as the Sierra Mazateca.⁴² Mazatec people use several varieties of “sacred mushrooms” (*Psilocybe* spp.) for ritual and therapeutic purposes. The ritual is known as “velada” (night vigil) and it is performed by a *chota chinée* in Mazatec language, in Spanish “gente de conocimiento” (wise men) or “sabio” (a wise one).⁴³

To understand the process of healing with “sacred mushrooms”, it should be noted that night vigils or “veladas” constitute a central part of the worldview and religious life of these people. According to the Mazatecs, the universe is made of a duality containing a physical dimension, what we see, and we can touch, which is named *Je'so'nde*, this world, and a part that we cannot touch or see with the naked eye, known as *Ri'ingo so'nde* or other world. They also consider that a human being is composed of two parts: the physical body called *yao' na*, my body, and *sen*, image or spirit, which is called *sen'na*, my spirit, and *sen'ni chin Na*, the spirit that God gave us. They also distinguish between the corporeal and spiritual aspects of disease. The latter is more complex, since an emotional imbalance or a difficult problem can be considered as a disease, i.e. anything that threatens the physical and emotional stability of a person (Incháusetgui, 1994; Minero, 2012; Perez, 2006).

Mazatecs consider *sen* as the subtle part of a person, which has the power to come out of their body, leave it and travel while asleep. It is also possible to provoke this detachment during the “sacred journey” by ingesting *Psilocybe* or other entheogens.⁴⁴ It is with this notion where the healing power of the ceremony lies. If we conceive that human being has a spirit with the ability to move freely outside the body, then the “sacred journey” can be successfully carried out or how they perceive it: “you can stand before the sacred presence of God”.

In order to develop this research, the ethnographic method was applied, during several periods of fieldwork between 2007 and 2012 in the Huautla de Jiménez municipality and its communities. A number of other municipalities were also included, e.g. Santa María Chilchotla, San Antonio Eloxochitlán, San Miguel Huautepéc and San José Tenango, mostly belonging to the Mazateca Alta.

42 The Sierra Mazateca is divided into three areas: “Mazateca Alta” and “Mazateca Media” in the Sierra Madre Oriental and “Mazateca Baja” in the Tuxtepec valley and the lake area of Miguel Alemán Dam in southern Mexico.

43 The *chota chinée* are male and female, but in this chapter I speak generally of wise men. The generic term is *chota chinée* (wise men and women) (A/N). However, the most famous Mazatec *chota chinée* was a woman, María Sabina. For further reading on her healing practices, see Horák (2006) (Ed.).

44 *En-theo-gen* (god within; god- or spirit-facilitating) a psychoactive sacramental; a plant or chemical substance taken to occasion primary religious experience (Ruck et al., 1979: 145–6).

There were various techniques applied, e.g. participant observation, in-depth interviews and life stories, when it was possible to attend the velada. This research was also made possible thanks to the long-term cooperation of many participants: the *chota chinée* (wise men), their family members and persons who participated in veladas and ingested “sacred mushrooms”. After the ethnography was completed, the information was classified and analyzed using a qualitative approach to achieve the description and interpretation of “sacred mushrooms” consumption during night vigils.

Velada and Healing

Night vigils (*veladas*) and “sacred mushrooms” form a fundamental aspect of Mazatec culture and identity, and they are considered to effective to treat serious diseases that have not been cured with allopathic medicine;⁴⁵ to trace missing persons or objects; to inquire into peoples' future with the aim of changing their destiny, or as the Mazatecs say, “to straighten the fate”; and learning how to solve difficult problems (Boege, 1988; Flores, 2003; Hernández, 1998; Minero, 2012).

In order to perform the ceremony, it is necessary that a *chota chinée* determine the nature of the case merits it. Within the Mazatec cultural tradition, mushrooms are neither ingested for recreation nor for curiosity. They do so exclusively in cases of extreme necessity and nightly rituals under the supervision of the *chota chinée* (Fig. 27).

One of the main functions of the velada is to meet the goals set in the beginning, i.e. to achieve the knowledge necessary to resolve the conflict. This is attained through the ingestion of “sacred mushrooms” and experiencing an ecstatic trance or “sacred journey” that for the Mazatecs connotes a “sacred journey to the path of God” or “to stand before the sacred presence of God symbolically” (Minero, 2012).

The ritual process to perform a night vigil consists of three stages: one that precedes the ceremony, called purification, the velada itself, and a later stage that involves certain restrictions. In general, all night vigils share a particular structure: initiation, development and completion (Minero, 2012). However, the events that arise during their development are very different from one another, since each ritual is performed for various reasons. On the following pages, I will unfold the stages of purification, night vigil and restrictions.

Purification

The Mazatecs who wish to have access to the velada and communicate with God must obey certain rules and principles. They must be purified physically and spiritually, i.e. to liberate their thoughts of all prejudice, remove all physical and symbolic burdens (*carga*) to be able to “travel” freely, without any bounds or fears.

Sexual abstinence is a primary requirement. When the “sacred mushrooms” are ingested for the first time or the case is severe, it must be followed for fifty-two days prior to the velada. However, if it is for the second or third occasion, only four days are necessary (Inchaustegui, 1994; Hernández, 1998; Minero, 2012).

Another requirement is a diet in which one avoids eating black beans. Because the color blocks the desired illumination; spicy or irritant foods; red meats, especially pork; eggs, since sometimes they are used as offerings, for cleansing (*limpia*) or egg reading (*lectura de huevo*), which is a way of divination. Finally, one should not drink alcohol or coffee. Likewise, on the day of the velada, a person has fast in order to be allowed to ingest “sacred mushrooms” and so that they can take effect more rapidly.

⁴⁵ Allopathic medicine and allopathy are terms coined in the early 19th century by Samuel Hahnemann, the founder of homeopathy, as a synonym for mainstream medicine (Whorton, 2004: 18) (Ed.).



27: *Chjon chinée*, wise woman in front of her altar before the *velada*

Source: Minero, F. 2010

Velada

The ritual process of the *velada* begins from the moment in which the participants enter house of the *chota chinée*. While waiting for the opening of the ceremony, the *chota chinée* talks with participants and advises them not to be afraid of asking questions for clarification. The *chota chinée* also gives them the full confidence that he will guide them and help them during the ritual and healing process.

The nightly ritual is formally started when the *chota chinée* lights the fire in his incense burner and in which he puts a piece of copal. With this act, he engages in communication with God, invokes him and asks for the permission to carry out the work, supplicates help for the healer and participants, raises the problem that has brought them together and explains his intended objectives for the ritual (Estrada, 1986; Minero, 2012; Wasson, 1983). Then, he turns off the electric light in the room, leaving only the candle lit altar. Then the *chota chinée* assigns each person with a single ration of “sacred mushrooms” according to their physical and spiritual characteristics (Fig. 28).

When the ingestion is finished, the *chota chinée* smudges participants, spreads fresh “San Pedro”⁴⁶ in the form of a cross on the joints of their hands, behind the knees, on their ankles, navel and back. Finally, he appeals to them to strike up their own conversation with God, to explain him their problems to him and ask for the help.

In this first stage of the ritual, after the ingestion, petitions are carried out to God, to the beings of nature, to the Catholic saints, to the spirits of deceased relatives and *chota chinée*. Personal communication with God must be established, as well as the reason for the ceremony and its objectives must be clear from the beginning. After this, the *chota chinée* turns off the candle light (*veladora*) with a flower from his altar. From this moment, everything is left in total darkness (Estrada, 1986; Hernández, 1998; Minero, 2012).



28: *Psilocybe caerulescens* var. *mazatecorum*. The Mazatecs affectionately call them “holy children” (*niños santos*).

Source: Minero, 2010

46 “San Pedro” is a mixture of tobacco (*Nicotiana rustica*), lime and garlic, which serves as a protective amulet.

Then the *chota chinée* begins to pray Catholic prayers to intercede before God for the participants; but they must also pray, if they have ingested “sacred mushrooms”. Those who accompany them must pray as well, even if they have not eaten mushrooms, because they are precisely there to help in the healing process of the patient.

Once the *chota chinée* has agreed to the “sacred journey” through the ingestion of “sacred mushrooms”, he begins to check the patient's body to locate the disease; when he finds a problem area in the body, he gives a massage, symbolically removes the disease and ejects it out the door. Only in severe cases does the *chota chinée* ask for assistance from the companions. As soon as the occasion calls for it, he performs the cleansing of the patient with some flowers from the altar (Fig. 29).

It is worth mentioning that everything performed during the ritual and healing process of the velada is indicated by God during the “sacred journey”, and the same is true regarding what has to be undertaken to restore the balance of the patients. The Mazatecs consider that if you do not carry out the orders, it is as if you were playing with God and the mushrooms. Then the entire ceremony will be in vain, and there will be no beneficial results. In the worst case, it could be counterproductive.

During the “sacred journey”, it is sometimes indicated that it is necessary to visit an allopathic physician or that a surgical intervention should be performed. Other times, in the most drastic cases, God indicates during the “sacred journey” that the patient will die, and the only thing that remains to do is to wait for death.

It is essential to highlight the work of the *chota chinée*, since he or she can “rub”, “suck” or remove the evil; this is why, during the ceremony, they put into practice their knowledge and skills to cure and remedy the ills that affect their patients (Cortés, 1986; Minero, 2012; Villanueva, 2007; Zolla, 1994).

The *chota chinée* regularly ingests “sacred mushrooms” together with a sick person. So they are both “traveling” to the “other world”, where the past, present and future meet; he ascends into heaven or descends into hell to investigate their doubts and diseases (Eliade, 1960). At other times, it is only the patient who chooses to ingest them, and the *chota chinée* guides them through the ceremony and their journey; on other occasions, only the *chota chinée* does so and indicates the events of their journey to them.

In this regard, I have obtained very interesting testimonies, e.g. from one woman, a resident of the Río Santiago community in the Huautla de Jiménez municipality, who told me that she was very sick, and her body was paralyzed. In order to help her, they organized a velada, but she was unable to swallow the mushrooms because her body did not respond. The *chota chinée* recommended putting them in a little aguardiente and then placed them with a handkerchief upon the temples of the sick. According to the informant, the “sacred mushrooms” entered her body, and she started to feel the effect. In this way she managed to see the causes and origins of her disease.

I also obtained several testimonies about distant healing practices, in which the patient is unable to be present at the ceremony; in this case a garment of the patient, or a picture or some other personal object, is requested. The name of the person is pronounced and interceded for in the “other world”, to get God to rid the person of the disease. This is precisely due to the concept of person, in which personal objects, e.g. photos, contain or absorb the vital substance of human beings (Fagetti, 2007; Minero, 2012).

In some ceremonies performed in more severe cases, singing, percussion and dance occur spontaneously. During the “sacred journey”, the *chota chinée* performs a song that is almost always accompanied by percussion made with his body. These sounds are sometimes dynamic.

When the velada is developed, and all the actions indicated during the “sacred journey” are completed, the intensity and rhythm of the ceremony gradually slows down and both the participants and the *chota chinée* experience some lethargy. Participants note that their perception is changing and slowly returning to their ordinary state of consciousness.

Sometimes the *chota chinée* performs patient cleansing, on other occasions, he or she smears them with a little bit of fresh tobacco (*Nicotiana rustica*) on the joints. Other times he gives them tobacco to smoke or sprays water on their faces (*soplar*). All of this aims to return their spirit from the places that they have visited during the “sacred journey”. Finally, the *chota chinée* tells them that they must rest and encourages them to pay attention to their dreams. Once the rest of the night or early morning has elapsed, they discuss their dreams, because they think that they have something to learn from them.

The following morning, the participants of the velada meet in front of the altar, and they are asked what they dreamed of while asleep. Answering helps them interpret their dreams; in the case of a negative omen, the *chota chinée* proceeds to perform cleansing, or readings of an egg, copal or pure beeswax candles, to each participant, or to the sick. After the specialized reading, using any of these methods of divination, he or she makes a San Pedro amulet and gives it to each of them; he or gives instructions for each case.



29: Altar with some ritual objects: San Pedro, chicken eggs, beeswax candles, cocoa, copal

Source: Minero, 2010

Subsequent Restrictions

After completing the first velada, changes or restrictions in social behavior are required. One of these includes four days of sexual abstinence after the night vigil. The family members of the patient must also comply with this rule. Otherwise, it may hinder the healing process.

Another restriction is to avoid leaving the house or to do so only if it is very necessary. The Mazatecs believe that once the “sacred mushrooms” enter the body, they remain inside for four more days. Thus, the spirit is still weak or sometimes it finishes assimilating what

has happened during the “sacred journey”. It can also suffer from shock or fear (*susto*). Therefore, the spirit might leave the body, leaving the person unprotected (Minero, 2012).

In severe cases or if necessary, more ceremonies are performed (Fig. 30). Under such circumstances, we are talking of a long-term ritual and healing process in order to heal the sick in a kind of treatment with its respective instructions that must be fulfilled precisely. Sometimes more ceremonies are performed because there were no answers to what the person wanted to learn during the first session, and it is necessary to delve into further investigation. However, all of this depends on the particular case.⁴⁷



30: Wise woman and patient after the *velada* performing a strengthening ritual at the Cerro de la Adoración (Nindó Tococho)

Source: Minero, 2010

⁴⁷ For further reading on traditional indigenous medicine of the Mazatecs in Spanish, see Biblioteca Digital de la Medicina Tradicional Mexicana (2009).

Conclusions

The sacred character ascribed to *Psilocybe* mushrooms by the Mazatecs demonstrates the great difference in the meaning of consumption by people according to their culture, universe of symbols and meanings shared by group members. We must also consider that there are people who even when they are attached to the local culture, do not share the same meanings, ideas and religious beliefs.

Finally, it is for this reason that the entheogenic experience of the Mazatecs is not comparable with what individuals from other cultures may experience. It is during the “sacred journey” when the difference between various notions of “sacred mushrooms” consumption becomes more noticeable.

Derived from all this, many people are unaware that the ritual process of the velada is approximately nine days long: four days prior to the session, then the day of the first ingestion, and then four days after the night vigil. This is one of the essential characteristics of the therapeutic process that is divided into the three phases mentioned above: purification, the velada and further restrictions. However, the majority of foreigners that arrive to undergo this experience practice only the night vigil. Those who meet all the requirements of the ritual find it easier to have access to the “sacred journey”, and communicate with God. They will also gain the knowledge they seek by ingesting the sacred substance.

In the same way, I think that the Mazatecs's perception of the “sacred mushrooms” and their ritual framework are something that most of people outside their culture are unable to share and much less understand. Despite the enigmatic nature of this experience, most scholars in the social sciences and humanities seek to understand this kind of practice, which they refer to as subjectivity, holiness and imagination. We could find explanations for many issues that are in the focus of anthropological inquiries.

Summary

The Mazatecs strongly believe that the ingestion of “sacred mushrooms” favors a journey to the presence of God and that it is He who sets out the knowledge necessary to resolve their conflicts and diseases. During the “sacred journey”, the stimulus-response relation is not only caused by ingestion of mushrooms, but all the elements that constitute the velada play an important role; and what happens affects both the change in the perception of reality and the modification of bodily behavior. At the same time, it is the primary role of the *chota chinée* to assist the patient in the search for answers and to interpret the “sacred journey” successfully.

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