

Mushroom and Religion

by

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The profound importance of mushrooms in primitive religion had remained undetected until some twenty years ago, when Mr. R. Gordon Wasson, an American banker, and his Russian-born wife Valentina first called attention to it. The new science of ethnomycology, meaning the attitudes of different races to mushrooms, began with the Wassons' puzzling over the division of Europe into two distinct camps: mycophobes (nations traditionally afraid of mushrooms) and mycophages (nations addicted to eating them). The mycophages of Europe are found in Spain, Southern France, the Balearics, Bavaria, the Balkans and Russia. Russians are the greediest mushroom eaters and recognize over ninety varieties of edible ones.

Until recently we English ate only the white field mushroom *Psalliotis campestris*, except in the Midlands where blewets were sold in the markets. But as a boy in North Wales I found even the field mushroom avoided as poisonous.

My mother had spent her childhood in Bavaria where mushrooms grew profusely in my grandfather's pine woods, and when taken there for holidays as a child I soon learned to distinguish seven or eight edible varieties and bring them back to the kitchen for dinner. Home in Wales, I came across some of these same mushrooms growing in the woods and brought them back to eat; but my mother astonished me by shouting: 'Throw those toadstools away at once! Yes, I know that they *look* like the ones we ate last week at Lauzfor, but here they are deadly poison. You had better wash your hands!' Whether she really believed this - her view seemed borrowed from my mycophobic Irish father - or whether she had to take this attitude because the cook would give notice the moment they were brought into the kitchen, I have never decided.

The existence of so many million unreasoning mycophobes throughout Northern Europe and North America - though, to be sure, some of them now dare to accept cooked mushrooms from abroad, neatly bottled - reminds me of another curious taboo in force among the ancient Greeks. They were forbidden to eat any bright red food, such as lobsters, crabs, prawns and wild strawberries (which had no name because regarded as poisonous). The Hebrew word *syeg*, meaning a 'hedge', explains both these taboos. To protect the Biblical ban on, for example, buying or selling on the holy Sabbath, the Jews of Jesus's day had put a protective 'hedge' around the Fourth Commandment by forbidding anyone to carry coins on his person from Friday evening until Saturday evening. And the truth is that mushrooms had once been regarded as holy and reserved for priests, kings and other privileged people; therefore to prevent the unprivileged from eating a sacred mushroom; a general *syeg* was put on mushroom-eating and reinforced by treating all mushrooms as poisonous. However, as already mentioned, an unexplained relaxation of the taboo in England allowed the eating of white field mushrooms, though the most deadly European mushroom of all, the *Amanita phalloides*, with which Nero's stepfather the Emperor Claudius had been poisoned, was equally white and has often been mistaken for it. It is therefore reasonable to guess that the sacred mushroom originally protected by these taboos grew in forests, not in fields, and was scarlet; and that the taboo explains the diabolic or disgusting names given even to highly edible other mushrooms.

But why was the scarlet mushroom (which can be easily identified with the white-spotted one now favoured by red-coated gnomes in suburban gardens and also associated with Father Christmas's reindeer and decorated tree) held sacred? This spectacular mushroom, incorrectly rumoured to be deadly poison, grows by the million all over the British Isles, but only in birch forests. A simple answer is that this was the magical mushroom, on which sat the caterpillar smoking his hookah, that Alice found growing in Wonderland. Lewis Carroll had read about its properties not long before he published the book; they included the same hallucinations about height - 'curiouser and curiouser' - from which Alice suffered after nibbling it. This mushroom, named *Amanita muscaria* - popularly 'fly agaric' - has now been proved by Gordon Wasson's detailed examination of the Vedic hymns (written in Sanskrit about the time of the Trojan War), to have been the Food of the Gods. It is there

named 'Soma'. That it is also 'Ambrosia' and 'Nectar' (both these words mean 'immortal') which were famous as the food and drink of the Greek Olympian gods, I had myself shown some twelve years previously. Two early Greek poets, Sappho and Alcman, had preserved the ancient tradition of Ambrosia as a drink, not a food. This was because the juice of the mushroom - which lost its virtue when cooked - was squeezed out of it between boards, then mixed with milk or curds; and the pulp was thrown away. According to these Vedic hymns, Agni, the god of mystic illumination and holy fire, who was also expressly identified with Soma, had been created when the Father God Indra threw a lightning bolt at the Earth.

Dionysus (Bacchus), the Greek god of mystic illumination, was similarly born when his father the God Zeus (Jove) threw a lightning bolt at the Earth Goddess Semele; the bolt killed Semele but her child was saved and sewn up in his father's thigh, whence he was later granted a second birth. Dionysus is said to have eventually conducted his mother to Heaven where she changed her name to Thyone, meaning 'Queen of the Maenads' (or raging women) and presided over Dionysus's ecstatic October festival, called The Ambrosia. October was the mushroom season. The effect of the *Amanita muscaria* taken without other intoxicants is to give the taker the most delightful hallucinations, if he is in a state of grace, but horrible nightmares otherwise. Fortified, however, with beer and the juice of yellow ivy it would send Greek men and women raging mad. A mixture of *Amanita muscaria* with whisky has long been used as a celebratory drink by successful salmon-poachers in Scotland. It is called a 'Cathy', in honour of Catherine the Great of Russia who is said to have been partial to it.

The pre-Classical priests of Dionysus, a god now known to have been active in Mycenaean times, seem to have claimed the sole rights in the scarlet mushroom, the memory of which they had brought from their original homes in Central Asia and which is not found growing south of the fortieth parallel, except at a great height and always in birch groves. The Vedic priests of Agni seem to have imported their supply from the birch-groves of the high Himalayas. Throughout the world mushrooms were believed to be begotten only by lightning.

That Dionysus was Ambrosia, as his Indian counterpart Agni was Soma, is proved by the legend of his birth from Zeus's thigh. The Vedic hymns make it clear that the priests of Indra and Agni used the two different ways of taking Soma still found among the Paleo-Siberians called Korjaks, and also in a small Mongol enclave of Afghanistan. The first was a simple drinking of the juice pressed from the mushrooms between boards and mixed with milk or curds. The hallucinogenic *indoles* it contained entered the stomach; but a great many more entered the kidneys and were later discharged with the urine. Clean-minded Classical scholars have until now shut their eyes to the possibility that the Vedic hymnwriter may have meant exactly what he said with 'the great gods piss out together the lovely Soma'. Yet it has been known for at least two centuries that the Korjaks do so after drinking the mushroom juice, and that their friends strain the urine through wool and, after drinking it, enjoy the same ecstasies. And this, of course, explains Dionysus's second birth from the thigh of his father Zeus and his subsequent release to worshippers in a stream of hallucinogenic urine. Yet Dionysus's source of intoxication has always been politely attributed by Greek scholars to wine, and Ambrosia is identified in the *Oxford English Dictionary* with *asclepias* (milk weed); and by various Encyclopedias with almost every sort of plant except mushrooms.

The Norse *berserks* were magicians and sages, and seem to have used the scarlet *Amanita muscaria*, as did the Korjaks, for inducing prophecies. They were called Berserks (Bear-shirts) because they worshipped the Bear goddess, which accounts for our Great Bear constellation, and wore bear skins in her honour. Their cult was suppressed in the eleventh century A.D. by Christian converts, not only in Scandinavia but in Iceland, where dwarf-birches in the centre of the island provided the berserks with their *amanita*. The proverb quoted by the Emperor Nero 'mushrooms are the food of the Gods' was true in the sense that they provided the passport to a Paradise from which the mushroom-eater was permitted to return, like a god, after his celestial visions. Yet Nero who, having been excluded from the Eleusinian Mysteries for murdering his mother Agrippina, had not himself visited Paradise, quoted the proverb only in a mocking sense: for his step-father Claudius, after dying from *Amanita phalloides* poisoning administered by Agrippina, had afterwards been deified.

I have eaten the Mexican hallucinogenic mushroom *Psilocybe heimsii* in Gordon Wasson's company, with the intention of visiting the Mexican paradise called Tlal6can to which it gives access. The god Tlal6c, who was toadheaded, corresponded exactly with Agni and Dionysus. I also wanted to know whether I had been right in supposing that all religious paradises except the Christian (which is based on a first century Eastern potentate's court), such as the Hebrew, the Sumerian, the Indian, the Mexican, the Polynesian and the Greek

(known as the Garden of Hesperides) were not only very much alike but corresponded also with the individual paradises seen by such mystics as the English poet Henry Vaughan, the Silurist. The word *paradise* means 'orchard' in the Semitic languages; an orchard-garden of fruit trees, flowers and running water. Yes, I had guessed right, though there are, I believe, certain dissimilarities: for instance, elephants appear in the Indian paradise and in others the inevitable serpent, familiar to readers of the Paradise chapter in *Genesis*, may appear as it did for me, as an intricately patterned gold chain. A bright snake-like formation is, by the way, a common symptom of a cerebral deoxygenation induced by hallucinogenic drugs; and seeing snakes is a common occurrence among alcoholics, saints who starve themselves, drowning sailors and sufferers from meningitis. My experiences included not only an orchard Paradise where one can see sound, hear colours, and watch trees growing leaf by leaf, but a paradise of jewels like that described in the *Book of Ezekiel XXVIII*, 13-14.

The *psilocybe* mushroom used in the Mexican rites is small, brown in colour, slender-stalked and bitter; but sculptural evidence from Central America suggests that it had supplanted the *Amanita muscaria* in ritual use, probably because it was easier to obtain and because the hang-over did not last so long. The same change seems to have occurred in Greece: the discovery of a new hallucinogenic mushroom, a *stropharia*, or a *panaeolus*, which, unlike the *Amanita muscaria*, could be ground up and baked in sacrificial cakes for religious use in the Mysteries without losing its powers. When, according to the Greek myth, the Corn Goddess Demeter visited Eleusis, the Attic city where the Mysteries were to be celebrated for another two thousand years, she is said to have ordered Triptolemus, son of the local King, to drive around the civilized world in a chariot drawn by snakes, spreading the arts of agriculture as he went. This myth is clearly deceptive. Corn had been sown and harvested in Palestine for several thousands of years before Demeter's people arrived at Eleusis. What may have happened is that the local priestess sent a message about the newly discovered mushroom to priests and priestesses throughout the civilized world - hence the snakes in Triptolemus's chariot. This, if so, would explain why the nature and source of the original Soma has been forgotten in India for so many centuries. The supply from the birch groves of the High Himalayas seems to have been cut off by enemy action, and *placebos*, such as *asclepias*, substituted for it until eventually its place was taken in Brahman ritual, after the receipt of Triptolemus's message, by a better, more manageable and more accessible sacred mushroom.

In 1957 at my suggestion Mr. Wasson and the famous mycologist Dr. Roger Heim, Director of the Musee de l'Homme at Paris, visited the New Guinea Highlands from whence had come reports of a mushroom cult. They were able to attend a Bird of Paradise courtship ceremony danced by Stone Age men and women under the influence of a sacred mushroom. The specimen that Wasson and Heim were offered proved, however, unhallucinogenic. This may have meant either that the tribal elders deceived their visitors for religious reasons by giving them some ineffective substitute or that the tribe, having emigrated there from a place where a truly hallucinogenic mushroom grew, had been reduced to using this other variety as a *placebo*.

Another variety of the *Amanita muscaria* grows south of the fortieth parallel, with the pine as its host-tree, and is equally hallucinogenic. That it was ritually used in Biblical times is suggested by an unwritten Hebrew taboo on mushrooms, broken only by the non-orthodox. (Arabs, by the way, are mycophagous, which perhaps accounts for mushroom eating in those parts of Southern Europe occupied by the Saracens during the early Middle Ages.) I have elsewhere suggested that the golden 'ermrods' laid up in the Ark together with a pot of hallucinogenic manna really represented sacred mushrooms. A concealed reference to their use appears in the *Book of Judges*: the unlikely story of how Samson collected three hundred foxes and sent them into the Philistine's cornfields with torches tied to their tails. The Palestinian fox is not gregarious and the task of capturing three hundred of them, at the rate of one or two a day, and feeding them all until he had collected the full number would have been a senselessly exhausting one. Besides, how could he make sure that the foxes would run into the cornfields and keep the torches alight? The truth seems to be that Samson organized a battalion of raiders - three hundred was the conventional Hebrew battalion strength, as appears in the story of Gideon - and sent them out with torches to burn the Philistines' corn. Indeed, in the 1948 Jewish War of Liberation a raiding battalion was named 'Samson's Foxes'. But why foxes? Because the juice of the *Amanita muscaria* mushrooms (which still grow under the pines of Mount Tabor) could be laced with ivy juice or wine to make the raiders completely fearless, and because this variety, when dried, is fox-coloured. So are other mushrooms, such as the popular *chanterelle* which the Russians call *lisichka*, 'little fox'; but to clarify its meaning the Bible specifies 'little foxes with fire in their tails'. In the *Song of Solomon* the Shunemite bride, about to take part in a sacred marriage, urges her lover to fetch her 'the little foxes that spoil the vines, for my vines have tender grapes'. She means that Solomon must fortify his manhood with mushroom-juice laced with

wine, the better to enjoy her young beauty.

Why mycophobes called mushrooms 'toad's bread' or 'toadstools' can readily be explained. When the toad is attacked or scared the warts on its back exude *bufotenin*, the poison secreted in the white hallucinogenic warts of the *Amanita muscaria*. In ancient Greece the toad was the emblem of Argos, the leading state of the Peloponnese, the emblems of the two other states being also connected with the mushroom: namely fox and serpent. This division into states had been made by a legendary king named Phoroneus, which seems a form of Phryneus, meaning 'Toad-man'. The capital city was Mycenae ('Mushroom City') said to have been built by Phoroneus's successor Perseus ('the destroyer') who, according to Pausanicus, had found a mushroom growing on the site beside a spring of water. The toad was also the emblem of Tlalóc, the Mexican God of Inspiration, and appears surrounded by mushrooms in an Aztec mural painting of Tlalócan, his Paradise.

The Slavs are not mycophobic, probably because their remote ancestors were nomads on the treeless steppes and unacquainted with *Amanita muscaria*. Their fermented mare's milk, called kvasse, satisfied their need for occasional intoxication. Like the Arabs in their desert poverty they had learned to eat any growing plant or living animal that was not poisonous. Bavaria is mycophagous, while the rest of Germany is mycophobic, simply because it was once invaded by Slavs.

I should add that reindeer are known to get high on *Amanita muscaria* in the birch forests of the far North, a habit of which their owners take advantage.