

From Mazatec veladas to psychedelic medicine. Notes on psilocibin mushrooms between philosophy, medicine and ethnography

Paolo Pecere*

Abstract: Psilocibin mushrooms have been a central topic of cross-cultural and transdisciplinary investigation since their rediscovery by Gordon Wasson in the 1950s. Today psychedelic medicine is experiencing a revival in the US and Europe, as experimental results are confirming the efficacy of psilocibin for the treatment of disorders such as alcohol addiction and depression. At the same time, philosophers and neuroscientists are investigating psychedelic trips as means of transformation of the Ego. In this paper, I examine this recent research against the background of its original ethnographic origin: based on field work in Huautla de Jiménez (Mexico) and the surrounding area, I connect and compare debates in contemporary Mexico and in the USA, arguing that the prospects of psychedelic medicine overlap with broader cultural and political issues.

Keywords: psychedelics, ego transformation, medicine, addiction

1. *Psilocibin today: a cross-disciplinary overview*

Over the last years, the revival of scientific research on psychedelics is raising urgent questions in different fields, including medicine, philosophy, ethnology and politics. Experiments with psilocibin therapies have already been conducted in the early phase of research on psychedelics between the late 1950s and the 1960s, leading to promising results in treatments of different disorders such as addiction and major depression, as well as in the psychological care of terminally ill patients. The recent reprise of this scientific research, whose start is commonly epitomized with a 2006 paper by Roland Griffiths of Johns Hopkins University (Griffiths *et al.*, 2006), has corrobo-

* paolo.pecere@uniroma3.it

University of Roma Tre, Fellow at the Italian Academy of Advanced Studies at Columbia

This research has been conducted in the framework of the PRIN project *Diet-Ethics. How Early Modern Ideas Shaped European Food Ethics*.

rated those early claims. E.g., a recent experiment led by prof. Michael P. Bogenschutz at the NYU Center of Psychedelic Medicine has concluded that therapies including treatment with psilocybin substantially impact alcohol addiction. Bogenschutz, who is director of the center, has worked with two control groups of a total 95 people with a strong alcohol addiction (Bogenschutz *et al.*, 2022). All participants went through a cycle of psychotherapy, but only one group also received the administration of two doses of psilocybin. The result, monitored over a 32-week period, was that people in the second group drank half as much as those in the other (who also reduced consumption). Their alcohol consumption had decreased by an average of 75%, and 38% were no longer drinking.

The case of depression has been the object of another clinical trial with promising results. The administration of 25mg of psilocybin has resulted in “clinically and statistically significant reductions in depressive symptoms and improvement in measures of functional disability compared with a 100-mg dose of niacin placebo administered under an identical protocol” (Raison *et al.*, 2023). These positive results are supporting the cause of a full medical legalization of psilocybin and the field is receiving growing amounts of financial support (Pollan, 2015; Jacobs, 2021). The founding of a number of centers of psychedelic medicine and consciousness research in major American universities is a sign of this institutional breakthrough concerning what have been perceived for decades as street drugs and fringe sciences. E.g. the mentioned NYU Langone Center for Psychedelic Medicine has been founded in 2021, and similar places have blossomed over the last few years¹. Nevertheless, results are still based on a limited number of experiments and trials, and the knowledge of the mechanism of this drug is incomplete.

Parallel to this research, psychedelics are receiving growing attention in the media and popular culture. This renewed attention is documented in books on psychedelics and mushrooms such as Michael Pollan’s *How to Change your Mind* and Merlin Sheldrake’s *Entangled Life* (2020). According to Pollan, who has charted the psychedelic renaissance in a number of articles and books, this interest reflects the specific need for “new therapeutic tools” in societies affected by a “mental health crisis” (Pollan, 2015). Indeed, hope in the prospects of psychedelic therapies runs parallel to doubts on the effectiveness of other drugs and treatments in modern psychiatry (Harrington, 2019).

However, this new interest is not limited to the treatment of serious illnesses and disorders. Psychedelics are more broadly seen as a possible means to produce transformative experiences and help individuals in their existen-

¹ The first large-scale research center dedicated to psychedelics has been the Johns Hopkins Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research (2019), followed by the UC Berkeley Center for the Science of Psychedelics (2020).

tial processes. This perspective is grounded on a general medical recognition of the neuropsychological impact of psychedelics. As Bogenschutz puts it, “these experiences do change people”, but benefits and risks need to be carefully studied². On this point, the ongoing medical research crosses broad social and philosophical points of interest.

On the side of philosophy, a number of questions are starting to be debated. A major study is Jonathan Letheby’s *Philosophy of Psychedelics* (2020), which focuses on the question whether the effectiveness of psychedelics depends on sub-personal mechanisms or personal-level experiences. A shared assumption of these investigations is that psychedelic experiences entail a temporary modification or “dissolution” of the Ego, which can allow of profound changes in the emotional life and the personality of the subject. This insight is grounded on neuroscientific research: e.g., Robin Carhart-Harris has connected the ego to a functional brain system called the Default Mode Network (Carhart-Harris *et al.*, 2014). On Letheby’s account of psychedelic experiences, it is the disruption of this structure that produces relevant psychological results, and these experiences are the “key causal factor” of psychedelics (Letheby, 2020).

Two features of this account need to be highlighted. First, the philosophical characterization of these experiences in naturalistic terms. According to Letheby, there is no need to recognize the existence of a transcendent “Reality” in order to acknowledge the phenomenological effects and psychological benefits of psychedelics. “Metaphysics” and mysticism are not the only ways to describe the experiences of “ego dissolution”, and these are effective independently from the occasional mystical ideations that can accompany them. There are also “more naturalistic” experiences of ego dissolution, such as “connectedness, emotional catharsis, and psychological insight”. A second feature of this account is the focus on psychedelic experience as related to “the self” and no one else. It is taken for granted that “changes in self-awareness” are the result of an intrinsically solitary experience elicited by the drug.

Now, both these assumptions are far from obvious in a broader cultural perspective. The need to separate a “naturalistic” from a “metaphysical” view of psychedelic experience is related to the naturalist tendency of contemporary philosophy. The focus on the individual subject of experience, as isolated from a social context, reflects the most common way of describing significant experiences and healing practices in contemporary societies. In the following sections I will argue that we can better understand contemporary debates in medicine and philosophy if we compare them with how the experience of mushrooms is conceived and debated in its original Mazatec context, where traditional views and ceremonies are challenged by projects of new clinical and pharmacological paradigms.

² Listen to the 2024 podcast at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8dqUyeOV3go>.

2. *Veladas in contemporary Mexico: an ethnography of the Mazatec Sierra*

The awareness of *psylocibe* in the West has been famously sparked by R. Gordon Wasson's trip to Oaxaca in the mid-1950s, his participation to a *velada* (a ceremony with mushrooms) under the guide of the *sabia* ("wise woman") María Sabina in the Mexican village of Huautla de Jiménez, and the publication of his story "Seeking the Magic Mushrooms" in the popular magazine "Life" in 1957. In fact, this event elicited both the isolation of psilocybin from the *psylocibe Mexicana* mushroom by Albert Hofmann (1958) and the massive diffusion of psychedelics in North-American society and counterculture. Nevertheless, these events were predated by a long history of knowledge and interpretation of mushrooms and ceremonies ranging from early modern Christian missionaries to early 20th century mycologists (Guzman, 2008). A crucial example of the former, the Franciscan Fray Bernardino Sahagún (1569-1582) reported ceremonies of the Nahuatl Indians with a mushroom called *teonanácatl* ("flesh of gods"). In general, Sahagún dismissed native beliefs as "fictions and falsehoods" about "false gods", arguably following the model of Augustine's account of pagan beliefs (de Sahagún, 2021).

As a result of this pressure against "pagan" rituals and mass conversions to Christianity, the Mazatec people gradually adopted forms of syncretism. This was still noticeable in the views of the famous María Sabina. She was illiterate, but her words and chants were reported in the biography published by her friend Álvaro Estrada in 1981 (Estrada, 2015). Here we find the cautious talk of sacred mushrooms named as *cositas* ("small things"), that reflected the need to keep secret both the ceremonies and the related beliefs. On the other hand, María Sabina talked of her visions of the "fundamental Beings". In a chant, recorded during a *velada* by Wasson and transcribed by Estrada, she qualifies herself with a number of visionary epithets such as "woman-book", "woman-Christ" and "woman-eagle". After Wasson's visits, many more visitors followed, including hippies, and María Sabina, while still a poor person, became an international popular figure. In today's Huautla, she is depicted in many *murales* and venerated as a saint. Her former house is now a museum with photos and paraphernalia.

In order to reconstruct present perspectives of mushrooms in the Mazatec society, I conducted ethnographic research in Huautla and surrounding villages in August 2024 with the collaboration of the anthropologist prof. Antonella Fagetti of Puebla University. I interviewed relatives of María Sabina and Estrada, artists and healers, recording the interviews. In what follows, I report and analyze some details of those conversations.

Near the house of María Sabina, I visited her great-grandson Bernardino.

He welcomes us in front of an altar laden with statues of angels, candles, electric lights and effigies of the wise woman. Here he celebrates his *veladas*, drawing inspiration from his ancestor who watches him from a life-size statue. “Mother Sabina appeared to me in a dream and told me that she now lives in me”, he says. He talks a lot about his healing activity, manifesting a deep belief in the power of mushrooms, a kind of animism which our philosophical and religious tradition misleadingly invites us to associate with the “supernatural” (Pecere, 2024). For him and other Mazatec people, the properties released by mushrooms and the visions of his ancestor belong to the same reality. The thrilling certainty of being inhabited by the saint, who decided on his life as a child, is accompanied by his activity as a healer, which has an important economic payoff. Tonight, he is expecting visitors, a Dutch couple.

This intertwining of belief and interest is typical of Huautla after decades of psychedelic tourism. Huautla is still a poor village, and I learn that María Sabina’s inheritance is disputed among various descendants. Bernardino would like to buy his ancestor’s house from relatives, and to raise the huge sum needed, he says, he has been saving for years. The Dutch pay well, and I suppose, as was the case in Wasson’s time, they come to him not because of illness, but to seek psychological benefit or a mystical experience.

Before the arrival of this kind of wealthy clients, what was (and still is) the use of mushrooms among the Mazatecs? To understand this, I interview Soledad, Álvaro Estrada’s sister, and her niece Aide. Soledad tells me that she first took mushrooms as a child to cure a toothache. At the time, Huautla was a town without paved roads, isolated and lacking in sanitary services. She remembers the construction of the road and the arrival of Dr. Salvador Guerra, sent here from Mexico City. Guerra immediately befriended his brother Álvaro. He medicated María Sabina after a drunken man shot her and became friends with her as well. In turn, she organized a *velada* for him: our medicine and the Mazatec had thus already begun to meet. Guerra was often a guest at Estrada’s house, and Soledad, who was 16 years old, fell in love. Her father opposed the relationship, which resulted in a few clandestine meetings. She tells at length about that love, and at one point of the story a headache and tinnitus appears, and she goes back to eating mushrooms. During the *velada*, she has a vision of being locked in a golden cage, from which at one point a flock of birds enters from the window and flies into her ear.

Three details in her story return in conversations with her granddaughter Aide and other Mazatecs. First, the early experience of mushrooms, which usually happens within the family. Second, mushrooms – although their personification tends to make us think of them as spiritual counselors – are normally eaten to treat various aches and physical ailments. Third, in treatment stories we sometimes also recognize problems that we would call psychological, but these

are not always recognized as good reasons to question the mushroom. The tale of the vision of the cage and the birds, embedded in that story of denied love, seems tailor-made to trigger psychoanalytic interpretations.

To explore points of view outside María Sabina's circle, I visit Sergio Nieto, an artist, writer and musician who lives in a hut near the village of Eloxocitlán de Flores Magón. The area is verdant, surrounded by steep hills, cornfields and rivers. Sergio was born here, lived in poverty for a long time, and is a carpenter and painter. In his works he is inspired by the anarchist Ricardo Flores Magón, his fellow villager after whom the village is named, and by Mazatec traditions. The house is filled with surrealist paintings, depicting misery and revolt, psychedelic experiences and visions of the future of humanity destroying the world. In one drawing, one sees a man from 2065 who is a deformed monster, next to him trees and birds falling dead; on the opposite side is an image of a lost golden age: a man from whose body mushrooms and corn sprout, who savors a fruit while lying under a tree. Sergio is also working on a book: a collection of Mazatec myths, much of which he gathered from his father's oral testimony. As a young man he spent time in Mexico City, where he attended a literary magazine and took classes in philosophy and literature as a free auditor. He shows me two shelves of books. His favorite novels are by Victor Hugo and Juan Rulfo. The philosopher is Nietzsche, "because he speaks against the system, with much energy, as much and more than Marx. He envisions a transformation of man."

He has eaten mushrooms twice. The first time he lost the mobility of one side of his body. After eating the mushrooms, in time, he recovered completely. Another time he decided to take them out of curiosity. In this case the mushroom told him not to question him about futile matters and "go to hell". He tells me about his son, who has long been an alcoholic. After talking to him to no avail, he gave him the mushrooms, and the problem soon disappeared.

Although Sergio is certain of the medicinal properties of mushrooms and cares about public health, he is hostile to the dissemination of mushrooms outside of Mazatec ceremonies. Echoes of Zapatism can be heard in his opinions, traces of which I find on houses in the surrounding area: murals in Mazatec language with slogans such as "land, autonomy, freedom." Mushrooms are a local and free resource. If they became legal someone would seize their potency and make market drugs out of them. Intensive mushroom harvesting and its institutionally organized administration would deprive ordinary people of a wealth they have enjoyed for centuries. He is referring specifically to Alejandrina, a woman who has been collaborating for years with Mexico City politicians to advocate the national legalization of mushrooms. He tells us that she would invite him to an event that she organized in the Capital, only to have him not even speak. According to him, Alejandrina

wanted to take advantage of him to present herself as an interpreter of the people's will.

In Sergio's views I find two recurring elements of contemporary debates in Mexico (and elsewhere): the efficacy of mushrooms for the treatment of addiction and the question of their medical legalization. The efficacy of psychoactive substances for addiction is well-known in different areas of Mexico. There are many native communities that use different plants, such as peyote and marijuana, to treat young people who, coming from socially marginalized families, often become alcoholics or addicted to drugs such as methamphetamine, and moreover have little access to medical care³.

I visit Alejandrina, the woman Sergio told me about, in a house on one of the streets connecting the small villages surrounding Huautla. She is dressed in a white robe and welcomes us warmly. She talks about the many techniques that she uses in her treatments, from simple hand energy to ceremonies with mushrooms and a psychoactive plant that grows in the area, the *salvia divinorum*, known here as the *ska pastora*, "the leaf of María the shepherd". In a round pot, near which kittens play, he shows us the green orbs of a peyote cactus. Her ideas about legalization are quite clear. The objective is to overcome a ban that prevents those outside local communities from taking advantage of these medicines. However, it would not be a matter of legalized uncontrolled therapeutic and recreational use. Alejandrina thinks of "ceremonial centers", where people would access different therapies, meditate and consume psychoactive substances under the guidance of experienced local people like her. This perspective has clear analogies with the discourse on psilocybin and psychedelics in the US, where clinical use and multifunctional centers for psychedelics are both advocated. However, the economic size of the respective projects is hugely different. Besides, the average medical needs of people in rural communities are arguably different from those of individuals in post-industrial cities. I will elaborate on this comparison in the following section.

3. *Comparing societies and mycologies: the role of the ritual*

If we compare the contemporary medical and philosophical debate with the lore and ritual dimension of mushroom consumption in the Sierra Mazateca, we face a number of issues. The clinical use of synthetic psilocybin and

³ I have drawn this information from prof. Fagetti, who has studied similar cases in different regions of Mexico such as Puebla and Sonora, and from interviewing Victor, a healer of the "Sendero rojo" ("Red path", a contemporary pan-Indian church), who organizes ceremonies with peyote in the city of Tepoztlán and abroad.

the ritual eating of mushrooms can respond to different needs and might produce different effects. While the background views and ways of life can be quite different, the chemicals and the individuals are biologically identical in the different contexts. Therefore, in order to realize a comparative study, we need to analyze how the different settings and worldviews can impact the psychological processes.

I discuss this problem on field with prof. Fagetti, who has worked for many years with several indigenous communities in Mexico. She shares with the Mazatec some aspects of their beliefs, and a certain unease at the thought of psilocybin going from the altars of the *veladas* to the counters of pharmacies around the world. Fagetti has conducted an important interdisciplinary research project with neuroscientists, whose aim was to investigate the neural correlates of ritual experiences in Mexico. In an article she co-wrote with Roberto Mercadillo, *Experiences With Sacred Mushrooms and Psilocybin In Dialogue*, she formulates a “transdisciplinary interpretation” of the ceremonies, which is very helpful to understand the relation between the chemical action of psilocybin and the ceremonial factor (Fagetti and Mercadillo, 2022). The authors compare ethnographic reports and observations of neuroimaging of people during psychedelic experience. Based on reports of *veladas*, they focus on the famous “mystical” component of the psychedelic experience, that certainty of witnessing the presence of a divine, higher entity, that has suggested to call psychedelic substances “entheogenic”. According to many reports and some interpretations, this mystical experience is the real psychological cause of the well-being and existential transformation⁴.

On the ritual level, this experience of being in connection to *someone* is certainly a key aspect: people turn to the mushroom, they often *encounter* it. The presence of the personified mushroom is then mediated and nurtured by the dialogue with the *curandera* (“healer”), who always questions the patient to understand his or her ailment and to act with the help of the mushroom. Now, the effect of the ceremonial setting on the psychedelic journey also has, like all experiences, a neural correlate. According to Fagetti and Mercadillo, it turns out that areas of the brain usually activated in moments of social interaction are engaged during the trips. On the neuropsychological level, then, this ritual and symbolic setting adds (or emphasizes) a factor with respect to the purely chemical effect of psilocybin on the isolated individual. This result suggests the need for more investigations. Arguably this social dimension of the experience would also have an impact on the clinical level. Taking a tablet, alone in one’s own home, might be different both from the experiential

⁴ Letheby, as we have seen in the previous section, has argued that on the contrary the “metaphysical” meaning of these experiences in clinical context is not universal, and the key experiences could be described in naturalistic terms.

and the medical point of view.

A further piece of (auto-)ethnography adds a final element to this comparison. In a village near Huautla, I participate to a *velada* with a traditional healer (I will call her Lucía). She welcomes us wearing a simple flowered dress in her house surrounded by lush vegetation. Lucía usually works with people of the community and occasionally with foreigners, using mushrooms and the *salvia divinorum* (which grows under the balcony). She asks us which problem we want to address with the help of the mushroom. At sunset, she shows us the room for the rituals. There are a table with candles and some holy effigies, simple wooden chairs where we are supposed to sit during the ceremony, and mattresses for moments of fatigue and for going to sleep in the middle of the night, when the ceremony should end.

When night falls, Lucía shuts up all the lamps and lights the candles on the altar. She recites the “Our Father”. She takes a number of mushrooms and hands them to me. She also eats some. Then she begins a song in Mazatec language that soon becomes like a fabric, wrapping around the whole world. During the ceremony, Lucía alternates prayers, silence and questions to me, about my family story and my current experience. She observes me, and after I lie down for a while she calls me on the chair in front of her to check out how I feel and focus on the processing of the problems. In the final stages of the ceremony, she gives me some feedback. Then we go to sleep in the same room. In the morning, she suggests that the work should be reprised in more ceremonies.

On the one hand, this whole process is similar to individual (or group) psychotherapy, which suggests that a kind of interactive therapeutic context might produce similar results. On the other hand, the two experiences are still different in some regard, e.g. because of the limited linguistic competency of the healer and of myself (we communicate in Spanish), as well as of the soothing and mysterious effect of the Mazatec chants and the whole context of the house and its surroundings.

4. Conclusion

The different elements of our investigation allow us to draw but tentative conclusions. We can formulate them by distinguishing the different interests that overlap in contemporary approaches to psychedelic mushrooms. The strictly medical interest of psychedelics is pursued in a field of research that has been long prohibited. This prohibition has certainly also depended on the transformative potential of those substances, their capacity to bring to light psychic lability and emotionally charged conscious or subconscious con-

tents. This poses risks to individuals with certain conditions, but evokes in most people a peaceful, harmonious vision of reality, and a deep sense of relationship with nature, which contrast with the dominant lifestyle. In the face of the promising medical results that are now emerging in the scientific trials, the path toward the clinical use of psychedelics seems unstoppable, and with it the need to regulate their use and reopen the broader cultural question they pose.

Here we find the philosophical and psychological interest in psychedelics, which concerns the reconfiguration of the self, even among people who do not have serious illnesses. According to a shared view in philosophy and psychology, from William James to today, the Ego is not a given, intrinsically stable entity, it is rather a process, a continuous acquisition achieved through the exercise of memory, action, and social sharing (James, 1890; Pecere, 2023; Bodei, 2016).⁵ According to Carhart-Harris and his research group, it is also, at the neurological level, a structure that tends to accumulate schemes of thought, emotional burdens and other hardwired habits which one often wants to get rid of. Psychedelics, by disrupting this structure, can facilitate the transformation of the Ego (Carhart-Harris, 2014). In this regard, according to Carhart-Harris's view, this can be an alternative and more effective way to approach the unconscious than the one devised by psychoanalysis for decades (in this regard, psychedelic therapy might appear as a replacement of hypnosis): psychedelics would provide a "highway" to the unconscious.⁶ Other psychiatrists don't share this psychoanalytic background, but still recognize the potential of psychedelics to set the ground for a more effective psychotherapy.

This potential is not limited to the treatment of serious pathological conditions and unconscious traumas. The consumption of legal foods and substances such as tobacco, coffee and alcohol, along with all kinds of recreational activity, study and exercise, is part of an ongoing modification of conscious states that each person (more or less consciously) undergoes and produces. What is at stake here is the degree of self-determination, especially in contemporary societies where the consciousness of individuals, with their emotional states and the contents to which they pay attention, is constantly modified by media, corporations and political agents. In this context, Thomas Metzinger has raised the question of how altered states of consciousness can contribute to a "culture of consciousness", where the very fact of experiencing such and such conscious states in our daily life becomes the object of theoretical and ethical principles (Metzinger, 2024). Psychedelics would be part of this picture, together with meditation and other practices.

⁵ James drew upon earlier view for his dynamic conception of the Ego and its corporeal basis

⁶ Carhart-Harris' opinion is quoted in M. Pollan, "The Psychedelic Trip" cit. I owe the parallel with hypnosis to Béatrice Longuenesse (personal communication).

Compared to the Mazatec context, this project is referred to a more distinctly individualist experience, where psychedelic experiences can incorporate elements of self-therapy, escapism and theophany, but along with this provide a valuable potential for “re-creating” the self and freeing oneself from discomfort and unwanted habits of psychological and/or social origin. In this broader cultural perspective, the ritual dimension of *veladas* appears interesting in a new regard. This is evidenced by the growing phenomenon of importation and restaging of psychedelic ceremonies in North American and European countries, as well as the constant flux of tourist visiting places where these traditions still exist. This phenomenon suggests that something more than therapy is missed. The ethnographic experience casts light on this added level of interest in ceremonies: the strong sense of community of Mazatec communities, as well as the lush environment of plants and animals in which mushrooms and psychoactive plants sprout, contain in themselves an attraction for individuals living in contemporary societies woven with inequality and exploitation, competition and conflict with respect to other human and non-human beings (Cf. De Matteis, 2023). These factors arguably affect psychological health and relationships. This different background explains, I maintain, the nostalgia of remote rituals where all members of a community were taken care of by means of organic beings and for free, which a number of people in contemporary societies just miss or hope to be able to reproduce in some form.

The challenge of dealing with all these different potentials of psychedelic rituals and therapies raises the need for further comparative investigations.

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