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Selling the Priceless Mushroom: A History of Psilocybin Mushroom Trade in the Sierra Mazateca (Oaxaca)

MARCOS GARCIA DE TERESA 

COLLECTION: WHY
THE DRUG WAR
ENDURES: LOCAL AND
TRANSNATIONAL
LINKAGES IN THE
NORTH AND CENTRAL
AMERICA DRUG TRADES

RESEARCH



ABSTRACT

This article shows, from historical and ethnographic perspectives, how the city of Huautla de Jiménez in the Sierra Mazateca (Oaxaca, Mexico) became an emblematic place for the trade of psilocybin mushrooms. Sales to foreigners started to take place in the Sierra Mazateca during the 1950s, stimulated by botanical expeditions and by the collapse in coffee prices, the main commercial crop in the area. The subsequent ban on psilocybin mushrooms curbed their trade and limited scientific research. However, police operations were unable to stop consumers who visited Huautla to experience the effect of the mushrooms, generating a modest tourist industry in the city. This paper analyzes how the idea that the mushrooms are ‘priceless’ produces an ambiguity that allows foreigners and residents of the Sierra Mazateca to negotiate the exchange value of an illegal and, at the same time, sacred product.

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In Mexico, psilocybin mushrooms¹ have been included in the list of illicit substances since 1971, however their use is tolerated when they are consumed in the context of medico-religious ceremonies of indigenous groups.² The city of Huautla de Jiménez, in the Sierra Mazateca (Oaxaca), has been a popular destination to experience the psychoactive effect of mushrooms (Image 1).

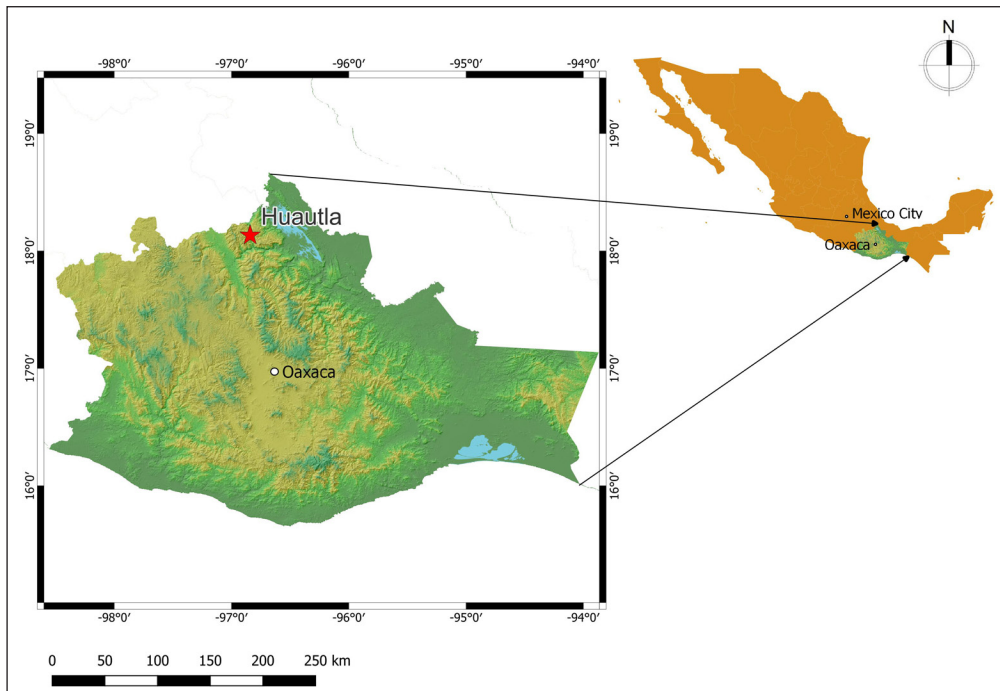


Image 1 Location of Huautla.

The commodification of ‘magic mushrooms’ is part of a broader phenomenon of appreciation of the healing practices of American indigenous groups by Western countries. The interest of the Western public in ‘sacred plants’ led to a process of international dissemination of indigenous knowledge and of the remedies that these peoples use in their rituals.

‘Psychotropic tourism’ (Amselle 2013), motivated by the consumption of hallucinogens in ceremonies guided by native specialists, has been observed for several decades in different parts of the planet. This phenomenon has been studied in the cases of ayahuasca in South America (Baud 2017; Losonczy & Mesturini Cappel 2011), peyote in central Mexico (Basset 2011) and even in Gabon with the consumption of iboga (Chabloz 2015). These works have detailed the irruption of tourists into the areas where these botanical species have traditionally been consumed and have also analyzed the celebration of ceremonies by indigenous specialists in Western countries.

The city of Huautla de Jiménez played a leading role in the history of ‘psychedelic’ drugs and in the popularization of their use by the ‘counterculture’ movement (Agustín 1996; Hofmann 1979; Stafford 1992; Tibón 1983; Wasson 1957). For the Mazatec journalist Álvaro Estrada (1974; 1996), the arrival of foreign fungi consumers completely transformed the region and led to the ‘profanation’ of the mushroom spirit. This diagnosis is shared by several authors, including some of the protagonists of the ‘discovery’ of psilocybin mushrooms (Benítez 1964; Guzmán 2014; Tibón 1983; Wasson 1970).

More recent works have reflected on the role of psilocybin mushrooms in the development of tourism in Huautla and its relationship with the appreciation of Mazatec culture (Demanget 2006; Feinberg 2003; Piña Alcántara 2019; Rodríguez Venegas 2017). These investigations

¹ Among specialists there is an intense debate about the terminology that should be used to refer to these fungi and there are some controversies regarding botanical classifications (Guzmán 2014; Wasson 1980). In this paper I do not intend to discuss these debates; my working stance is that most of psilocybin mushrooms belong to the *Psilocybe* genus, but there are species of other genera—such as *Conocybe*—that also contain this substance.

² The Convention on Psychotropic Substances of the United Nations, signed in 1971 by 183 countries, stipulates in the article 32: ‘A State on whose territory there are plants growing wild which contain psychotropic substances (...) and which are traditionally used by certain small, clearly determined groups in magical or religious rites, may (...) make reservations concerning these plants (...) except for the provisions relating to international trade’.

have pointed out that the commercialization of psilocybin mushrooms in Huautla is a source of conflict, which is expressed in accusations of ‘selling’ to foreigners an invaluable cultural element for the Mazatecs or in denunciations of ‘charlatanism’ hurled against some shamans. These works have focused mainly on describing the interactions of tourists with Mazatec shamans but have not studied in detail the production and trade of psilocybin mushrooms in the Sierra Mazateca.

The ethnography of Citlali Rodríguez Venegas (2017: 34) mentions the existence in Huautla of ‘mushroom trade networks controlled by the owners of the land where they grow’. However, no text has described how the psilocybin mushrooms for tourist consumption are produced. This work pioneers in the presentation of ethnographic data on the commercial gathering of psilocybin mushrooms in the Sierra Mazateca.

This research seeks to reconstruct, from historical and ethnographic perspectives, the process of picking and selling psilocybin mushrooms in the Mazatec region, to show how the idea that they are ‘priceless’ has been a tool in negotiating its exchange value. I was able to obtain unpublished material on this subject in the archives of Tina and Gordon Wasson, safeguarded in the botanical library at Harvard University Herbaria.³

On the two occasions that I visited the archives, in 2015 and 2017, I consulted the field diaries that the ethnomycologist wrote during his trips to Mexico between 1953 and 1962. I also reviewed the correspondence with his main counterparts in Huautla (Herlinda Martínez, Álvaro Estrada, Isauro Nava, Gutierre Tibón, Eunice Pike, George and Florence Cowan) and with some of the collaborators of his expeditions to the Sierra Mazateca (Robert and Irmgard Weitlaner, Allan Richardson and Guy Stresser Peán). Gordon Wasson kept in his files the newspaper clippings about psilocybin mushrooms sent to him by his friends living in Mexico, mainly from *Excelsior*. This information complemented a press analysis that I carried out in 2010 in the city of Oaxaca, where I reviewed the local newspapers *El Imparcial* and *El Gráfico* for the years 1953 to 1971.

In addition to archival work, I was able to carry out anthropological fieldwork in the Sierra Mazateca for a period of three months in 2009, five months in 2010, as well as trips of about a month each in 2014, 2015 and 2017. During my fieldwork in Huautla de Jiménez, I was able to observe the sale of mushrooms by a household that also offers lodging and the experience of a traditional mushroom consuming ritual to tourists. I also had the opportunity to go on excursions to neighboring municipalities—particularly San Antonio Eloxochitlán and Santa María Chilchotla—with a mushroom picker.

THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE INEBRIATING MUSHROOM (1953–1956)

The publication of Gordon Wasson’s article ‘Seeking the Magic Mushroom’ in *Life* (1957) revealed the existence of mushrooms with psychoactive effects to the international public opinion. The history of the ‘discovery’ of psilocybin mushrooms is widely known and has been described on different occasions (Benítez 1964; Estrada 1977; Wasson & Pavlovna 1957). Since the end of the 19th century, a great interest had arisen in Mexico in classifying the national flora and identifying its possible pharmacological effects (Pérez Montfort 2016). One of the concerns was to identify an inebriating mushroom described in early colonial times by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún and that the natives called in Nahuatl ‘*teonanacatl*’, the flesh of gods.

R. Gordon Wasson, at the time vice president of public relations at J.P. Morgan, and his wife Valentina Pavlovna Wasson were interested in the role of fungi in human cultures. Their works were pioneers in a field of study known as ethnomycology. When the Wassons came upon the discussion on the identification of the *teonanacatl*, they planned, with anthropologist Robert Weitlaner, an expedition to Huautla de Jiménez to confirm the existence of this mushroom. The American banker suspected that the word *teonanacatl* could refer to several species of fungi unknown to Western taxonomy.

Gordon and Valentina Wasson traveled to Huautla for the first time with their daughter Masha and Robert Weitlaner from August 5 to 17, 1953. They were received by Herlinda Martínez Cid, a bilingual teacher and former contact of Weitlaner. On this occasion, the team had difficulty

³ Unless otherwise indicated in the bibliography, the translations included in this text from Spanish and French into English were made by the author.

finding mushrooms, and their informants assured that this subject was 'very perilous'. Aurelio Carreras, Herlinda's brother-in-law, managed to get specimens of three types of mushrooms with intoxicating properties and held a divination ceremony for the researchers. Gordon Wasson rewarded Aurelio for his services with the 'princely sum' of 120 pesos (around US\$14) (Wasson & Pavlovna 1957: 264).

This finding confirmed that *teonanacatl* corresponded to a group of at least four species of fungi found in the Sierra Mazateca: the so-called 'Landslides' mushrooms (*Psilocybe caerulescens* var. *Mazatecorum*), the 'San Isidro' (*Psilocybe cubensis*), the 'Small Birds' (*Psilocybe mexicana*) and a species that grows on the *Ya nte* tree (*Conocybe siligineoides*). The mushrooms collected in Huautla were sent to mycologist Roger Heim at the Musée National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris. In 1954, the French mycologist managed to cultivate specimens of *Psilocybe mexicana* in his laboratory from samples sent by the banker.

Gordon Wasson traveled to Huautla again in 1955 with his friend, the photographer Allan Richardson. Upon reaching the Sierra Mazateca, on Wednesday June 29, Gordon Wasson walked across a ravine and found next to a sugar cane mill a pile of 'Landslide' mushrooms growing on rotten bagasse. The municipal trustee Cayetano García recommended a 'first-class' *curandera*, a 'woman without stain', ready to celebrate a '*velada*', a ceremony with psilocybin mushrooms. That night Gordon Wasson and Allan Richardson consumed mushrooms for the first time in a ritual led by the *curandera* María Sabina. On that occasion, the Mazatec wisewoman ate thirteen pairs of psilocybin mushrooms and served six pairs to Wasson and another six pairs to Richardson, which caused 'splendid visions' to the foreigners.

The banker paid 50 pesos (US\$4)⁴ to the shaman for the *velada* and offered his hosts, Cayetano and his wife Guadalupe, a gift of 100 pesos, which they refused because they said, 'we did not do this for money' (Wasson & Pavlovna 1957: 304; Wasson & Heim 1958: 77). Years later, Gordon Wasson repeated this same account in his book *The Wondrous Mushroom* but added: 'For those who know the Mazatec need and appetite for money this remark of Guadalupe's will indeed be amazing' (Wasson 1980: 30).

This episode was fundamental for the investigations of the ethnomycologist, who used the encounter with María Sabina to try to demonstrate the survival of an ancient mushroom cult in the Sierra Mazateca. The fact that Wasson's interlocutors seemed to 'not know the value of money' played a fundamental role in the banker choosing of this region as the center of his expeditions (García de Teresa 2019). But, above all, Huautla imposed itself as a base of operations for the gathering of psilocybin mushrooms since Gordon Wasson managed to establish in this city a network of intermediaries that supplied him with abundant quantities of these fungi.

Upon returning from his trip to Mexico in 1955, Gordon Wasson received a call from James A. Moore, a chemist at the University of Delaware, in which he communicated his interest in psilocybin mushrooms and suggested that he accompany him on his next expedition. In his diary, on August 15, 1955, Wasson registered the summary of the phone call of more than two hours in which they discussed the 'mushroom problem'.⁵ Moore claimed that he wanted to work with Wasson to isolate the active agent from fungi and proposed to collaborate with different pharmaceutical companies including Pfizer, Merck and Smith, Kline & French.

James Moore garnished his proposal by promising to provide funds from the Geschickter Fund for Medical Research. This organization was a cover-up for the US intelligence agency (CIA) used to finance missions related to the MKULTRA project (Marks 1979). Through Moore, the CIA awarded Wasson a \$2,000 scholarship for his expedition to Mexico. By the end of 1955, the pharmaceutical company Merck, with the contribution of James Moore, had begun the analysis of the mushrooms consumed in Huautla.

Chemical experiments to identify the active substance of the fungi required copious amounts of psilocybin mushrooms. For this reason, Wasson wrote a letter to Herlinda Martínez, his main contact in Huautla, to propose a 'business' arrangement.⁶ The deal was that Gordon Wasson

⁴ In the period between April 1954 and August 1976, the exchange rate was 12.50 pesos per 1 US dollar.

⁵ GWA Gordon Wasson Field Notebook #6, July 27–31, 1955 (3/3) (English).

⁶ GWA Correspondence: R.G. Wasson to Herlinda Martínez, New York, September 15, 1955 (Spanish).

would pay Herlinda twice the amount she would spend to get the mushrooms. This provisioning scheme was repeated until the last expedition of the banker.

In 1955, Gordon Wasson offered to pay her 20 Mexican cents per mushroom, for an amount of up to five hundred mushrooms from each of the four classes. In other words, Herlinda had to provide him with up to two thousand mushrooms, she would pay 10 cents per mushroom to the people who collected them, and she would keep the rest. Wasson assured that once the first consignment was sent, he would undoubtedly ask for more psilocybin mushrooms because 'in certain circles' there was a 'phenomenal' interest.

The ethnomycologist detailed the description of the four classes of mushrooms sought and carefully explained all the steps necessary to preserve the specimens in alcohol and send them by mail to the United States. In his letter, Gordon Wasson assured her that he would take care of the postage and requested that it be done by registered airmail. Wasson explained to Herlinda that he had obtained a special permit from the US customs to import the mushrooms. His mail contained some labels that she had to attach to the packages and served as an import permit. In this way, the 'friends' of the banker in Washington would send him the packages 'without delay'.

In the second half of the 1950s, mushrooms were sent by mail from Huautla to the United States and even to European or Latin American countries, sometimes without the need of import permits. In 1957 Guy Stresser-Péan, an anthropologist at the Sorbonne and a collaborator of Gordon Wasson and Roger Heim, had sent mushrooms to France. However, the French investigator was unable to send them to the United States because he did not have the permission of the Ministry of Agriculture and 'the post office in Mexico City was more scrupulous than the one in Huautla'.⁷

James Moore, Roger Heim, Allan Richardson and Guy Stresser-Péan traveled with Gordon Wasson to the Sierra Mazateca in July 1956. Upon returning to Mexico City on July 30, Allan Richardson wrote to Valentina Pavlovna to summarize the details of the expedition. In his letter, he claimed that Roger Heim had collected hundreds of specimens including some of unknown species, even though there was little rain and the natives seemed to compete with them in collecting fungi.⁸

In November 1956 Herlinda bought a little more than a kilo of mushrooms that Wasson paid for 100 pesos. The mushrooms were dried in Huautla and mailed to James Moore's office in the United States.⁹ Moore's colleagues were satisfied with the results of the mission and were enthusiastic about the possibility of finding a new chemical agent. However, it was in Switzerland that, at the beginning of 1958, a team from the Sandoz pharmaceutical company led by Albert Hofmann isolated for the first time the active substance of mushrooms, psilocybin.

THE INFLATION OF THE SACRED PLANTS (1957–1960)

In preparation for his 1957 trip, Gordon Wasson wrote to Herlinda Martínez a letter in which he announced that an article on mushrooms would be published in *Life* magazine that year. Wasson asked Herlinda not to mention the article to anyone as he had changed the names of the people and places to avoid 'disturbing them'.¹⁰ In May 1957, a few days before the article was published, Herlinda wrote to Wasson to inform him about the mushroom picking and suggested: 'I have already been ordering the merchandise (...) Don't you think we should see the magazine before we pay for it? Because there will be people who want to charge more for the merchandise due to a certain selfishness'.¹¹

7 GWA Correspondence: Guy Stresser-Péan to R.G. Wasson, México, October 29, 1957 (French).

8 GWA Correspondence: Allan Richardson to Valentina Pavlovna, México City, July 30, 1956 (English).

9 GWA Correspondence: Herlinda Martínez to R.G. Wasson, Huautla, Oax., November 26, 1956 (Spanish) and Herlinda Martínez to James A. Moore, Huautla, Oax., November 26, 1956 (Spanish).

10 GWA Correspondence: R.G. Wasson to Herlinda Martínez, New York, February 25, 1957 (Spanish).

11 GWA Correspondence: Herlinda Martínez to R.G. Wasson, Huautla, Oax., May 22, 1957 (Spanish).

On his 1957 excursion Gordon Wasson managed to collect 80 kilos of *Caerulescens* var. *Mazatecorum* that were shipped fresh to Smith, Kline & French laboratories.¹² Gordon Wasson wrote to Allan Richardson to tell him that Huautla was ‘fully alive’ as consequence of the article in *Life* and that the town doctor was sending mushrooms overseas by the kilo. The ethnomycologist concluded his letter by saying: ‘Mushrooms were offered to us by all and sundry, as we went along the street. Huautla is having a hard time, because of a coffee crop failure, and mushrooms are a pleasant and profitable diversification of industry’.¹³

That same year, while preparing to send a parcel of mushrooms to pharmaceutical companies on a landing strip near Huautla, Gordon Wasson met mycologists Rolf Singer and Gastón Guzmán. These researchers also came to the region looking for psilocybin mushrooms on behalf of the pharmaceutical companies they worked for—Singer for a North American company and Guzmán for a Swiss company. The mycologists stayed with Isauro Nava, who would later be the municipal president of Huautla from 1966 to 1968. Gastón Guzmán returned to the Sierra Mazateca in 1957 on a second expedition to buy large quantities of mushrooms, dry them and transport them to Mexico City for the laboratories that had hired him (Guzmán 2014: 24–26).

The search for psychoactive mushrooms was not limited to the northern region of Oaxaca. In September 1957 Guy Strésser-Péan traveled with Irmgard and Roberto Weitlaner to Tenango del Valle, in the State of Mexico, to collect mushrooms for Roger Heim. In his account of the trip, the French anthropologist assured that the team was preceded by another researcher who had bought mushrooms from the villagers. This event had made it easier for them to obtain large quantities of mushrooms of two species used locally. On the other hand, ‘the providential predecessor’ had caused prices to rise significantly.¹⁴ In his reply, Gordon Wasson hints to Strésser-Péan that the researcher who had preceded him was Rolf Singer, who was in competition with the banker in mushroom research.¹⁵

Shortly after Wasson’s article was published in *Life*, dozens of foreigners began arriving in Huautla seeking to experience the effects of psilocybin mushrooms for themselves. In October 1957, the writer Gutierre Tibón warned in *Excelsior* about the development of the mushroom trade in the Sierra Mazateca: ‘A kilo of hallucinogenic mushrooms is now priced at one hundred pesos in Huautla. This is very sad, because the teonanacate was not an object of commerce; but this is unavoidable, due to the demand that has increased so much, because of Gordon Wasson’s suggestive article...’ (Tibón 1957).

In 1958 Gordon Wasson organized a trip with the main objective of recording the chants of María Sabina and interviewing her to learn about her profession in detail. That year, Wasson asked Herlinda to buy all the Landslide mushrooms that were offered to her, but he insisted: ‘Pay as little as possible, but the price must be high enough to stimulate efforts’.¹⁶ At this stage of his investigations Gordon Wasson began to be more demanding with the mushrooms he bought, he asked Herlinda to be careful with the identification of fungi and to reject the rotten specimens. The teacher paid those years 30 pesos per kilo of psilocybin mushrooms and Aurelio Carreras helped her in the selection, weighing and drying.¹⁷

A couple collecting mushrooms for Herlinda was run over by a car and threatened to death by an ‘Indian’ who claimed to be the owner of the mushrooms that grew on his land. Finally, the couple gave 150 pesos to the landowner ‘to calm things down’. Faced with this situation, Herlinda decided to increase the price of the merchandise ‘so as not to demoralize them, and so on they have spread the word, and now they are going to smuggle them’.¹⁸

On his 1958 expedition, Wasson bought Herlinda 124 kilos and 650 grams of *Psilocybe caerulescens* and paid her twice the 3,571 pesos she had spent. On July 13, the banker wrote in his notebook, ‘We paid lots of people this morning’, including a 5,000 pesos bonus to Herlinda.¹⁹

¹² GWA Correspondence: R.G. Wasson to Guy Strésser-Péan, September 23, 1957 (English).

¹³ GWA Correspondence: R.G. Wasson to Allan Richardson, New York, July 21, 1957 (English).

¹⁴ GWA Correspondence: Guy Strésser-Péan to R.G. Wasson, Mexico, September 15, 1957 (French).

¹⁵ GWA Correspondence: R.G. Wasson to Guy Strésser-Péan, New York, September 23, 1957 (English).

¹⁶ GWA Correspondence: R.G. Wasson to Herlinda Martínez, New York, May 20, 1958 (Spanish).

¹⁷ GWA Correspondence: Herlinda Martínez to R.G. Wasson, Huautla, Oax., June 17, 1958 (Spanish).

¹⁸ GWA Correspondence: Herlinda Martínez to R.G. Wasson, Huautla, Oax., June 18, 1958 (Spanish).

¹⁹ GWA Gordon Wasson Field Notebook #10, July 1958.

To give us an idea of what these amounts of money implied in the Sierra Mazateca at the end of the 1950s, we can rely on a letter that missionary George Cowan sent to Wasson to advise him regarding the payment that should be given to María Sabina and Herlinda for the transcription and translation into Spanish of the chants of the *curandera*. Cowan refused to give him a precise figure with which to pay the women and instead presented a picture of the labor situation in the Mazatec region. The missionary describes in his letter the following list of salaries (in those years the exchange rate was 12.50 pesos per 1 US dollar): the daily work in the field was paid at 5 or 6 pesos, the coffee pickers could receive up to 6 or 10 pesos per day depending on what they harvested. Skilled workers such as bricklayers or carpenters could earn 10 to 15 pesos a day, and Herlinda's salary was 700 pesos a month as a schoolteacher. At the end of the 1950s, a peasant who managed to collect a kilo of mushrooms and sell it to Herlinda for 30 pesos earned the equivalent of at least three days of work harvesting coffee. In the 1958 expedition, Herlinda received 8,571 pesos from the banker, a figure comparable to a teacher's whole year salary.

In his correspondence, George Cowan assured Gordon Wasson that any kind of payment would be welcome as coffee prices were down and people needed money. However, the missionary made the following observation: 'You as a banker of course know better than we do the ill effects of unnaturally high wage and price levels and I believe some of these same dangers in here on the personal level as well as the national'.²⁰

In 1959, Gordon Wasson once again organized an expedition to the Sierra Mazateca. The banker insisted to his main contact in Huautla that he would not buy mushrooms or need the services of María Sabina that year. Gordon Wasson justified his lack of interest by arguing that Roger Heim had managed to grow the different species of psilocybin mushrooms in his laboratory and therefore they would no longer need to buy them.²¹

In his last expeditions, the ethnomycologist was interested in getting seeds of *Ipomoea violacea*, leaves of *Salvia divinorum* and any other plant that the curanderos would use when there were no mushrooms. In 1959 María Sabina performed a ceremony for Gordon Wasson for which he paid 150 pesos; three times more than the amount awarded for the first *velada*. Wasson would write that year in his field diary: 'Huautla is spoiled, everyone is asking a too high price'.²²

In the late 1950s, Gordon Wasson undertook a campaign to publicize his account of the discovery of intoxicating mushrooms. The ethnomycologist promoted his work in the Sierra Mazateca with interviews in magazines and newspapers, and even with an exhibition that was held at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. In the press release for this exhibition, in 1959, you could read: 'Since the coming of the Wassons, life has changed in Huautla. Once reluctant to discuss their special mushrooms, the Indians today are involved in a brisk business of supplying them for scientific use' (Siff 2018: 101).

In 1962 Gordon Wasson made his last expedition to the Sierra Mazateca to collect *Salvia divinorum* in Ayautla accompanied by Albert Hofmann. At the end of the trip, they passed through Huautla and celebrated at María Sabina's house a *velada* with psilocybin pills described by the Swiss scientist in his book (Hofmann 1980). With the chemical puzzle solved, neither Wasson nor the drug companies would buy large quantities of mushrooms in the area. Furthermore, in the 1960s many laboratories had to abandon their projects due to legal problems (Guzmán 2014: 29). In Huautla, the mushroom trade survived thanks to visitors who came seeking to experience their effects.

THE DESECRATED PARADISE (1960–1971)

Gordon Wasson's article in *Life* led many people to travel to the Sierra Mazateca with the goal of trying psilocybin mushrooms. During the first half of the 1960s, mushroom-seekers arrived in Huautla without major complications. There are several testimonies about this period in which the city of fungi is described as a 'Mexican Tibet' (Gutierrez Tibón 1983). The book *Hallucinating Mushrooms* in which the journalist Fernando Benítez (1964) recounts his visions in two ceremonies with María Sabina contributed to the fame of the *curandera*. José Agustín

20 GWA Correspondence: George Cowan to R.G. Wasson, Huautla, Oax., February 20, 1959 (English).

21 GWA Correspondence: R.G. Wasson to Herlinda Martínez, New York, March 16, 1959 (Spanish).

22 GWA Gordon Wasson Field Notebook #11, July 3–19, 1959 (English manuscript).

(1996) points out the relevance of mushroom hunting trips in the Sierra Mazateca for the counterculture movement in Mexico. The Mazatec journalist Álvaro Estrada (1977; 1996) also recounts the arrival of the so-called ‘hippies’ in Huautla.

In 1960 Mark Gumbiner, an anthropologist who served as a tour guide for the company *Off the Beaten Tracks*, offered a ‘Safari into the exotic interior of southern Mexico’. This fifteen-day tourist offer was priced at US\$295 and included two nights in Huautla with the possibility of consulting ‘witches’ in an indigenous mushroom ceremony.²³ In those years, several of Gordon Wasson’s informants participated in the mushroom trade with tourists. María Sabina did ceremonies at a hotel for which she charged 400 pesos;²⁴ and Isauro Nava, also an informant for Rolf Singer and Gastón Guzmán, rented huts and sold mushrooms to tourists.²⁵

Fame brought some problems to María Sabina: government officials and conservative sectors of the community held the curandera responsible for the incidents that involved foreigners under the influence of psilocybin mushrooms. As if that were not enough, her house was burned down on several occasions.²⁶

At the end of the 1960s, the national press developed a frankly contemptuous tone against foreigners who visited Huautla de Jiménez. Since the summer of 1967, the local press called for the intervention of the health authorities to control the influx of ‘pernicious foreigners’ who go ‘in search of new pleasures with amazing mushrooms’ and ‘set a terrible example to the population’ with ‘shameful shows’ (*El Imparcial* 1967). In the national press, *Excelsior* described the arrival of foreigners in Huautla as a ‘Beatnik invasion’. Mushroom consumers were portrayed as ‘useless beings in permanent ecstasy’, ‘addicts of all social classes’ and whose only objectives were ‘immorality and vice’ (Ortiz Reza 1967).

In September 1967, at the request of local authorities and under pressure from the press, the Ministry of the Interior mounted an operation with the judicial police and immigration agents to expel the foreigners who were in Huautla. The result was the deportation of thirty-two Americans ‘whose only concern seemed to be the quest and consumption of hallucinogenic mushrooms’ (*Últimas Noticias* 1967).

At the local level, the arrival of hippies to Huautla coincides with a drop in coffee prices, the main source of income in the region. Some articles accused Gordon Wasson’s team of having caused Mazatec peasants to abandon coffee crops for the mushroom picking, an ‘easier and much more productive business’ (Ochoa 1970).

Initially, the national press was less bothered by the mushroom trade than by its lack of regulation. For example, in 1967 a journalist called on the government to regulate the commercial use of this product based on a nationalist argument: the foreign laboratories that produced psilocybin had obtained benefits thanks to ‘the inexhaustible mycogenic source that exists in the Oaxacan highlands, and of which they have taken advantage of at a ridiculous price, for the free and unlimited export of such a valuable product’ (*Excelsior* 1967).

The hippies who had settled in the region had learned to identify the mushrooms and were going to cut them themselves. Huautla’s municipal president in 1967, Isauro Nava, pointed out: ‘By seeking the mushrooms, the Americans invade private property, committing a crime’ (Ortiz Reza 1967). An article in *Excelsior* (Iñigo 1969) asserted that it was not so easy to get the fungi in the mountain villages because ‘the Indians have taken over the commercial monopoly of the mushroom. For them it means a source of income that has even led many to abandon their work in the fields’.

In July 1969, it was ‘certain’ that Huautla would be ‘invaded by undesirable foreigners who, attracted by the amazing mushrooms, do not mind living the most exciting adventures, even if they are going to jail or being deported to their countries of origin’. For this reason, the Attorney General’s Office requested the support of the 28th Military Zone to send soldiers in helicopters to evict the ‘two thousand hippies’ who had set up a ‘nudist camp’ in the area (*El Imparcial*

23 GWA Correspondence: folder Mark Gumbiner, 1960.

24 GWA Gordon Wasson Field notebook #13, June 12–July 9, 1960.

25 GWA Gordon Wasson Field notebook #16, 1962.

26 GWA Correspondence: Irmgard Weitlaner to R.G. Wasson, Coyoacán, México, July 28, 1967 (English/Spanish).

1969a). A few days later, the operation had barely managed to capture fifteen individuals, of which nine turned out to be Mexicans and six foreigners (*El Imparcial* 1969b).

Reuters (1970) published an article in the *New York Times* about the hundreds of people who risked being fined or imprisoned for visiting Huautla. The article detailed the difficulties in preventing the arrival of mushroom consumers, including rugged terrain, torrential rains, and lack of cooperation from residents. The correspondent spent a week in the area and ‘found no trace of troops but thousands of barefoot Indians who will trade enough fungus to dream away an entire day for a cigarette’.

In response to this article, Gordon Wasson (1970) published in the same journal a reflection on his role in the commercialization of mushrooms. The banker claimed that Huautla had become ‘a true mecca for hippies, psychopaths, adventurers, pseudo-research workers, the miscellaneous crew of our society’s drop-outs’. In this text, Wasson stated that mushrooms ‘did not change hands for filthy lucre in the market-place’. He concluded his article by insisting that he had nightmares for having unleashed a ‘commercial exploitation of the vilest kind’ on Huautla.

Newspaper articles hardened the tone by comparing the sale of psilocybin mushrooms to the international trafficking of illicit substances. In 1970 the press published notably exaggerated police reports. One article spoke of daily shipments of half a ton of mushrooms from Huautla to Mexico City to be processed in laboratories and then shipped abroad (*El Imparcial* 1970). The head of Puebla State Police department assured that traffickers and consumers had managed to preserve the psilocybin mushrooms in jelly without losing their amazing properties. The policeman claimed that a 100-gram jelly cost 25 pesos, a bag of a quarter of a kilo of mushrooms was worth between 20 and 30 pesos, and that in the United States, a kilo of mushrooms could be worth up to 100 dollars (1,250 pesos).

In 1971, the United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Substances which includes psilocybin mushrooms on the list of illicit products was signed. The prohibition of these mushrooms did not stop the arrival of foreigners to Huautla but led to their trade being done clandestinely and restricted to the local market for tourists.

THE PSILOCYBIN MUSHROOM TRADE IN THE SIERRA MAZATECA

Today, Huautla de Jiménez can be reached by bus from Mexico City in about seven hours. The National Institute of Statistics and Geography, reports that in 2020 the city had a population of 12,482 inhabitants, of which a majority were speakers of the Mazatec language (INEGI 2020). Huautla is the commercial center of the Sierra Mazateca: residents of neighboring towns visit it to sell their crops, buy goods and comply with administrative and legal procedures. Despite the crises that have affected coffee prices in recent decades, it continues to be the main cash crop in the area. The salaries of teachers of the national educational system living in Huautla also make an important contribution to the local economy (Feinberg 2003: 93). Currently, the tourists who come to experience the effect of the mushrooms during the months of July and August bring in a considerable income for some families and businesses in the Sierra Mazateca.

Psilocybin mushrooms are not sold in markets or in stores: the transaction is usually done very discreetly and away from prying eyes. In my fieldwork in Huautla I was able to observe that, while tourists and their hosts negotiate the price of fungi, a sales ritual takes place that complements the commercial aspect of the transaction with religious gestures and reciprocity.

In the house where I was staying, the negotiation of the price of mushrooms takes place in front of a home altar. During the exchange, the buyers are reminded of the different rules and ritual prohibitions linked to the consumption of mushrooms according to the local culture. They are explained that mushrooms are ‘sacred medicine’ and that their use should preferably be done in the presence of a traditional doctor. When people accept to take part in a ceremony with mushrooms, they leave the agreed money on the altar and the curandero makes the sign of the holy cross when taking the bills. The transaction can also take the form of barter in which tourists exchange clothing or electronics for fungi.

The inhabitants of Huautla sell the mushrooms to tourists, even if they decide not to do the ceremony, but they insist that they follow certain recommendations: they should not be eaten

on the streets and should not be mixed with other drugs. Visitors are asked to refrain from sexual intercourse for a few days after consuming the psilocybin mushrooms, since according to the villagers, failure to respect this local custom can lead to madness.

Many of the tourists I spoke to, shared the Mazatec idea that mushrooms are a divine gift that grows naturally and therefore should not be paid for. Some even tried to go and pick them for themselves, hoping to obtain fungi for free. On several occasions I was able to observe that, when tourists tried to haggle over the value of the mushrooms, the people who offered them argued that they are 'priceless' and that their quality depends on the ritual precautions taken by the people who collect them.

The classic texts on the subject explain that mushrooms to be used in a ceremony must be gathered under strict ritual rules and away from human gaze (Estrada 1977, Wasson & Pavlovna 1957). People looking for them must abstain from sexual intercourse, not attend funerals, and cut only the fungi necessary to carry out a ceremony.

Most of the psilocybin mushrooms that are currently collected in the Sierra Mazateca are intended for consumption by tourists. The minimum unit in the fungi trade in Huautla is a package with one or two pairs of psilocybin mushrooms wrapped in a leaf which they call '*tamalito*' (by analogy with the '*tamal*', a Mexican corn dish wrapped in a leaf). On some occasions, these packages could contain a mix of different species of fungi and even decomposed mushrooms (Guzmán 2014). Since the mushrooms rot quickly, in a week or two, the sale should be made as soon as possible. Psilocybin mushrooms can also be eaten dry or preserved for several weeks in honey, but they lose some of their potency.

In the years in which I did fieldwork, the most common mushrooms offered to tourists were the ones known as 'San Isidro' and 'Landslide'. The former grow in cow droppings and the latter in loose soil after a mudslide or on the rotten bagasse of sugar cane. To meet the demand for mushrooms in Huautla, the pickers travel to remote areas in neighboring municipalities, such as Santa María Chilchotla or Eloxochitlán de Flores Magón, and even to the lower part of the region, which produces livestock and therefore is abundant in San Isidro mushrooms.

During my fieldwork, I met Ramón (pseudonym), a mushroom picker, or a '*honguero*', as they are called in the area. In addition to selling mushrooms, Ramón grows corn and coffee on his land in the municipality of Chilchotla. I joined Ramón on his search for psilocybin mushrooms in the municipalities near Huautla on four occasions (2009, 2010, 2015 and 2017). On these excursions we collected Landslide mushrooms growing alongside roads, on steep slopes within the forest or among coffee plantations (Image 2). To get to the places where the mushrooms grow, we took a shuttle to a nearby town and then had to walk for several hours to find the mushrooms in hard-to-reach areas. It is difficult to find psilocybin mushrooms in the forest because they grow hidden among the vegetation and can be easily confused with other poisonous species. To a certain extent, finding fungi also depends on chance, so Ramón used to carry with him amulets to attract 'luck' and protect himself from spells such as the 'evil eye'. Mushroom pickers avoid displaying the fungi they have found, as local belief says that prying eyes could decompose them.



Image 2 Picking of psilocybin mushrooms (author: Soria Yi-2017).

Landowners generally ask for a fee from those who find psilocybin mushrooms on their property. In certain places, Ramón contributed with a payment of 100 pesos to the landowners, who in exchange gave him the mushrooms that they had collected. In two of the excursions in which I accompanied Ramón, we were questioned by residents who complained that we were cutting mushrooms without the authorization of the municipal authorities. In these cases, the problem was solved by giving these people a few coins. When the hongueros are detained by the police, they argue that mushrooms are not a drug but a sacred medicine and that they grow by themselves, they are never sowed.

Ramón assured me that he sold tamalitos of psilocybin mushrooms to a middleman in Chilchotla for 20 pesos each. For his collecting excursions to be profitable, he had to pick enough fungi to be able to deduct transportation costs and the landowner's fee. In his calculations, he had to collect the equivalent of at least fifteen tamalitos to obtain a profit of more than 100 pesos (5 US dollars),²⁷ which is what was paid in those years for a day of agricultural work in the region.

Sometimes Ramón negotiated directly with the tourists, but most of the time he sold the psilocybin mushrooms to an intermediary who could distribute them in Huautla. In general, these intermediaries are people who host tourists in their homes, as this facilitates access to clients interested in buying fungi.

For a tourist who bought mushrooms in Huautla in 2015, the price of a tamalito was around 30 or 35 pesos. Prices can vary greatly depending on the person requesting them and, in the years in which I did fieldwork, some foreign tourists paid between 50 and 80 pesos for a tamalito. Generally, the mushrooms contained in a package are not enough to experiment its effects. Mushrooms are also sold by 'trip', that is, the dose necessary to 'hallucinate', which corresponds to three or four tamalitos depending on the physical condition of the consumer and the potency of the fungi. The price of a 'trip' could vary between 100 and 150 pesos. The price of the ceremony, which generally includes the mushrooms needed for the velada, was around 500 pesos per person and could even reach up to 1,000 pesos depending on the curandero consulted.

From all these observations it is not difficult to deduce that those who have obtained the greatest benefits from the psilocybin mushrooms trade in the Sierra Mazateca are not the pickers, nor the owners of the land where they grow, but rather the intermediaries who ultimately negotiate prices with foreigners that arrive in Huautla.

CONCLUSIONS

The psilocybin mushroom trade began in the Sierra Mazateca with the botanical expeditions that in the 1950s sought to identify the active substance of these fungi and was encouraged by the recurring crises in coffee prices. The police operations of the late 1960s and the subsequent prohibition of mushrooms did not stop the arrival of fungi consumers in the Sierra Mazateca, but they forced their trade to develop clandestinely and to be geared in a privileged way to foreigners who arrived to Huautla. Currently, tourism that consumes psilocybin mushrooms in the Sierra Mazateca constitutes a modest source of income for a few families in the region. In the rainy season, the mushrooms gathered in neighboring municipalities are sent to Huautla to meet the demand generated by the arrival of visitors.

Criticisms against the commodification of 'sacred mushrooms' have even been formulated by some of the main protagonists of the incorporation of these fungi into the international market. When the Mexican writer Fernando Benítez visited the Sierra Mazateca in the early 1960s, Gordon Wasson warned him of the risks of hiring a 'trickster' and assured him: 'The sacred mushrooms were not previously sold on the streets, just as sacramental bread is not sold, but today they are offered everywhere and constitute a trade that is already worth a few thousand pesos' (Benítez 1964: 87). In the biography of María Sabina written by Álvaro Estrada, the Mazatec woman declared: 'A wise person like me should not charge for her services. You must not profit from your wisdom (...) Of course... with the little things you should not trade...' (Estrada [1977]: 57).

For his part, Isauro Nava, Gastón Guzmán's main informant, claimed that the Mazatecs were angry with María Sabina for selling the secrets of the mushrooms to Wasson, because that

27 In the years that I did my fieldwork (2009–2017) the exchange rate was around 20 pesos for 1 US dollar.

knowledge ‘was not sold because of its sacredness, but it was rather given’ (Guzmán 2014: 27). In his article, the Mexican mycologist affirmed that the current existence of curanderos who ask money for mushrooms represented ‘a bad mercantilist and pragmatic evolution’ of the rites discovered by Wasson, in which ‘no fee was charged’ (Guzmán 2014: 33).

Throughout this article we have seen that since the first botanical expeditions of Gordon Wasson, foreigners paid for the mushrooms they obtained from local people. The fact that mushrooms were not sold in the marketplace does not mean that they could not be obtained for a fee. In 1910, in one of the first ethnographic descriptions of the indigenous peoples of northern Oaxaca, Mariano Espinosa wrote that the Mazatec man sewed the clothes of his children, cared for them when they were sick or hired the ‘sorcerer who cured them, whose payment consisted of corn, cotton and poultry’ (Espinosa 1961: 102).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the area gradually integrated into a monetized economy. In the first decades of that century, in the farms of the Mazatec region, coffee pickers were not paid with money but with corn (Feinberg 2003: 61–65). At that time, the mushrooms were not exchanged for cash, because money was not yet in common use, but that does not mean that the work of the wise person who administered them was not remunerated. Gordon Wasson himself informs us that the payment of 50 pesos that he gave to María Sabina for the velada she celebrated in 1955 was a little more than ‘the usual fee for her services’, which according to the banker was 20 pesos (Wasson & Pavlovna 1957: 252).

The commodification of psilocybin mushrooms did not necessarily imply a desecration of the mushrooms used in Mazatec rituals, because there is really no contradiction between the trade of mushrooms and their medical-sacred use. What the advocates of preserving Mazatec culture in Huautla have criticized is not the money that the curandero receives for his work, but the fact that clients are deceived ‘with excessive fees and false promises’ (Rodríguez Venegas 2017: 118). The reproach is not directed against the remuneration of mushroom pickers or specialists who hold ceremonies for tourists, but against practices considered immoral.

Criticism of the commodification of psilocybin mushrooms raises issues that are not limited to the monetary aspect and that involve both moral and therapeutic dilemmas regarding the use of the fungi. Ultimately, these debates seek to define who can supply mushrooms and determine what are the appropriate contexts and purposes for consuming them.

The idea shared by some foreigners and residents of Huautla that psilocybin mushrooms are ‘priceless’ has been a tool in negotiating the conditions of access to this product. Mushrooms can be considered an invaluable cultural element that should not be sold. This does not mean that fungi should be free, since to obtain this resource the effort, knowledge and particular skills of the pickers and the specialists who celebrate the ceremonies are needed. This ambiguity has made possible to use the argument that mushrooms are ‘priceless’ both to negotiate the exchange value of mushrooms and to denounce their sale and restrict access to the benefits of this trade.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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