SLAVONIC AND EAST EUROPEAN REVIEW

SEER, Vol. 58, No. 2, April 1980

The Use of Hallucinogens and the Shamanistic Tradition of the Finno-Ugrian People

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THE recent upsurge of interest in what are generally referred to as 'mind-blowing' drugs in our own time has been making an impact on anthropologists by directing their attention to the relevance of these hallucinogenic agents (as they should be properly termed) when examining, describing and attempting to comprehend the religious experiences of primitive peoples.[1] The long neglect and the insufficient comprehension have been due to the lack of field experience with psychotropic materials among anthropologists,[2] and were also produced by the limitations of our own culture, which made little, if any, use of such substances until quite recently.[3]

The latest research, however, has produced overwhelming evidence of the use of hallucinogenic agents to achieve trance states in primitive societies for perceiving and contacting the supernatural

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[1] See, for example, M. J. Harner, ed., *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, New York, 1973, with bibliography.

[2] The first-hand accounts of Carlos Castaneda's experiences with *peyote*, *datura* and various mushrooms were epoch-making, since his experiments had been supervised by a Yaqui Indian shaman. See his *The Teaching of Don Juan*, Los Angeles, 1968, *A Separate Reality*, New York, 1971, *Journey to Ixtlan*, New York, 1972, and *Tales of Power*, New York, 1974. Castaneda argues convincingly that drug-taking is only a means in the process of becoming 'a man of knowledge', and when this desired state of mind is achieved by the shaman, he no longer needs to take stimulants, for he is able to 'see', that is, he has attained the power he set out to acquire with the assistance of drugs.

[3] Visionary experience in the Christian tradition was assisted by fasting, which, in turn was facilitated by the lack of a balanced diet, a natural consequence of the erratic availability and poor distribution of food containing essential chemicals prior to the industrial revolution. Such experiences have become a good deal less common since then as there is no place for visionaries and mystics in the philosophy of Western man, basically resting on the validity of the natural sciences. See, for example, Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, London, 1954, and *Heaven and Hell*, London, 1956, particularly Appendix II. In Hungary, the poet Ferenc Juhász experimented more recently with drugs. His account 'Diethyl-kisérlet' was published in his *Mit tehet a költő?* Budapest, 1967. Currently fashionable theories argue that the central core of Christian religion retained a symbolism of earlier drug-taking experiences. See J. M. Allegro, *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*, London, 1970.

world. In the land of 'classic shamanism'[4] the obvious candidate for being a hallucinogenic agent is a mushroom: the fly-agaric,[5] probably known to the inhabitants of that region from time immemorial. The commonest of all, the brilliant red mushroom with its familiar white spots, is known to grow in many parts of the Eurasiatic continent, usually near birch or pine trees in the autumn. It would have been easily spotted by people who lived mostly by gathering their food, including mushrooms, in forests. The hallucinogenic properties of archaic man's divine mediator were not known to Europeans until, after the Russian expansion into Siberia,[6] they had the opportunity of making direct contact with these archaic peoples. The first known eyewitness account referring to the habit of eating fly-agaric dates from 1658 — among the Ob-Ugrian Ostyak.[7] It was not, however, until the middle of the eighteenth century that detailed accounts began to appear in the major European languages (Strahlenberg, 1730; Krasheninnikov, 1755; Steller, 1774; Georgi, 1776; Lesseps, 1790, and many later accounts),[8] indicating with varying degrees of reliability and detail the occurrence of mushroom-eating by the Voguls, Ostyaks, Lapps, Samoyeds and other Siberian peoples. Apart from scanty scholarly references, the connection between the shaman's 'trip' and mushroom-eating was not firmly established until, in 1907, in the course of publishing his *Collection of Vogul Heroic Songs*, Munkácsi brought to light decisive evidence provided by the Heroic Songs,[9] supported by the observations of two

[4] Idries Shah not only claims that shamanism originated in Central Asia, but suggests a direct link with the practices of the Amerindians based on analogies and also suggests that the Scandinavians learnt much from the Finns and Lapps. See the preface to his *Oriental Magic*, New York, 1956.

[5] *Amanita muscaria*/Fr. ex L./French: tue mouche, German: Fliegenpilz, Russian: мухомор, Hungarian: légyölő galóca. It is known to contain *muscarine* and *muscimol*, both proven hallucinogenic agents: see C. H. Eugster, 'Isolation, Structure and Synthesis of Central-Active Compounds from *Amanita Muscaria*/L ex F/Hooker' in D. H. Efron, ed., *Ethnopharmacologic Search for Psychoactive Drugs*, Washington, 1967, pp. 416–18 and P. G. Waser, 'The Pharmacology of Amanita Muscaria', in ibid., pp. 419–39.

[6] Missionaries to Mexico had noticed the Indians taking various mushrooms, but their discovery was forgotten, and ridiculed by modern scholars at the beginning of this century. See V. P. Wasson and R. G. Wasson, 'The Hallucinogenic Mushrooms' (*The Garden Journal*, New York, 1958).

[7] A. D. Kamieński, 'Dyarusz więzienia moskiewskiego, miast i miejsc' in A. Maryański, ed., *Warta*, Poznań, 1874, p. 382. The reference is in an entry in the diary of a Polish prisoner of war; there was no contemporary edition.

[8] For the bibliographical details of these early references and the relevant quotations see R. G. Wasson, *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality*, New York, 1968 (hereafter *Soma*). Material from Hungarian sources was collected with the assistance of the Vogul scholar, J. Gulya.

[9] B. Munkácsi, '"Pilz" und "Rausch"' (*Keleti Szemle*, Budapest, 1907, pp. 343–44 (hereafter '"Pilz" und "Rausch"')) see also his *Vogul Népköltési Gyüjtemény*, Budapest, 1910, vol. 2, pt. 2, pp. 0375–76, where quotations from the heroic songs indicate the importance attached to the fly-agaric: 'ecstasy caused by seven one-footed notch-edged fly-agarics' (vol. 2, p. 314); 'in the ecstasy caused by seven fly-agarics with spotted heads' (vol. 2, p. 362); and a hero, the oldest son of a Kami woman, not being able to achieve intoxication, asked his wife 'to bring him three fly-agarics that had been dried in the sun' (vol. 1, p. 114).

Russian scholars, S. K. Patkanov (1897)[10] and A. A. Dunin-Gorkavich (1904).[11] The Heroic Songs collected by Reguly in the 1840s and supplemented by Munkácsi, contain 'fly-agaric songs', composed under the influence of the mushroom.[12] In spite of this decisive evidence, the notion that the trance of the shaman is often, if not exclusively, induced by hallucinogenic agents was ignored in anthropology and in works devoted to shamanism. Professor M. Eliade, for example, finds that 'the magico-religious value of intoxication for achieving ecstasy is of Iranian origin' and also that the use of intoxicants is a recent innovation, pointing to a decadence in shamanist technique.[13] Géza Róheim claims that the shaman's state of trance was achieved by the use of drums.[14] Knowing the increased sensitivity to music, and particularly to rhythm, caused by hallucinogenic agents, it is easy to understand how Róheim came to this conclusion. The turning point in the attitude towards the fly-agaric was the publication of R. G. Wasson's ethno-mycological monograph *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality*, in 1968.[15] Wasson's undeniable merit is his systematic collection of the understandably scanty but decisive evidence, both anthropological and linguistic, for demonstrating the origins and practice of using fly-agaric for shamanist trances in Siberia, particularly among the Finno-Ugrian people.

One question, however, remains open. Did the Hungarian shaman, the *táltos*, use fly-agaric in his *révülés* (*rejtezés*), or *viaskodás*?[16] Apparently we have no evidence, and the early writers on Hungarian mythology (Cornides, 1791; Horvát, 1817; Ipolyi, 1854; Csengery, 1857; Kállay, 1861; Kandra, 1897, etc.) did not seem to possess

[10] S. K. Patkanov, *Die Irtysch-Ostjaken und ihre Volkspoesie*, 2 vols, St Petersburg, 1897. The author asserts that fly-agaric is taken before sorcery or before performing heroic songs (vol. 1, pp. 54–55) and fly-agaric is used to achieve a state of trance (vol. 1, p. 121).

[11] A. A. Dunin-Gorkavich, *Tobol'skiy sever*, St Petersburg, 1904, p. 95,

[12] I. Sonkoly, 'A vogul és osztyák zene' (*Néprokonsági Dolgozatok*, no. 7, Budapest, 1940): 'The Ostyak folk-music contains . . . heroic songs, so called 'fly-agaric' songs (*galócaének*)' (p. 6). It is impossible to ignore the analogy of 'peyote songs' known for a long time among the mescalin using Indians of Mexico. See David P. McAllester, *Peyote Music*, New York, 1949 and B. G. Myerhoff, *Peyote Hunt: The Sacred Journey of the Huichol Indians*, Ithaca, 1974.

[13] M. Eliade, *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*, Paris, 1951, pp. 360–61, 200–204.

[14] G. Róheim, *Magyar néphit és népszokások*, Budapest, n.d. [1925], p. 10. Scholars are generally vague on this point, namely on deciding whether the use of drums is causative or merely instrumental in producing a state of trance. See D. Pais, *A magyar ősvallás nyelvi emlékeiből*, Budapest, 1975, pp. 95–100, 109–16.

[15] Wasson's main thesis consists in identifying the fly-agaric with the Soma of the Indian *Rig-Veda*.

[16] J. Balázs, 'A magyar sámán réülete' (*Ethnográfia*, Budapest, 1954, pp. 416–40) refers to the use of a 'narcotic agent' without commentary (p. 424). V. Diószegi, 'Adatok a *táltos révülésére*' (*Ethnográfia*, 1953, pp. 303–11), asserts that *révülés* (trance) is a precondition of becoming a 'man of knowledge' but apparently has no information as to how this state is achieved. See also S. Szücs, 'Időért viaskodó táltosok' (*Ethnográfia*, 1951, pp. 403–409).

any data regarding the use of hallucinogenic drugs. Recent authors, including Diószegi, give no indication of any such practice,[17] while J. Balázs, when talking about the ecstasy of the *táltos*, discusses the habit among Finno-Ugrian peoples and the Siberians[18] of employing fly-agaric as an inebriant. If he is right in claiming that Hungarian shamanism goes back to the Ugric period, an opinion held by many authorities, then the *táltos* can be supposed to have brought his ancient technique with him into Hungary.

It is often asserted that the Hungarians acquired their love of mushrooms from the Slavonic tribes living in the Carpathian basin at the time of the Conquest.[19] This claim is supported by the etymological evidence of the Slavonic origin of many popular names for mushrooms, including the generic name *gomba* itself. While not disputing the correctness of the etymology, certain reservations should be made about this far-reaching conclusion. First of all, as all Finno-Ugrian people were familiar with the mushroom there is no reason to think that the Hungarians were different. Secondly, all Finno-Ugrian words of the generic name go back to a common stem (scholars agree about this fact),[20] which in the final analysis may or may not be an archaic loan-word. The curious fact remains, however, that Hungarian lacks a Finno-Ugrian word for mushroom. Theoretically, there are three possible explanations for this phenomenon: 1. the accepted etymology of *gomba* is incorrect; 2. *gomba* quietly suppressed the native word; and 3. the ancient word was or became a taboo word which, with the decline of shamanism, fell into oblivion.

The phrase automatically associated with the cult of mushrooms is *bolondgomba*. Since idioms like *bolondgombát evett* ('he has eaten mad mushrooms') have variants in dialects[21] linked to other plants (*bürök*, *maszlag*, *nadragulya*) of known hallucinogenic properties, the

[17] V. Diószegi, *A pogány magyarok hitvilága*, Budapest, 1973.

[18] J. Balázs, 'Über die Ekstase des ungarischen Schamanen' in V. Diószegi, ed., *Glaubenswelt und Folklore der Sibirischen Völker*, Budapest, 1963, pp. 57–83.

[19] Most recently F. Gregor in his *Magyar népi gombanevek*, Budapest, 1973, p. 3, claimed that the nomadic Hungarians were taught by the Slavonic female population to eat mushrooms. His concept is based exclusively on the etymology of the names of mushrooms, quoting Michal Markuš, 'Zberné hospodarstvo na Horehroní' (*Slovenský národopis*, Bratislava, 1961, p. 226) and disagreeing with B. Gunda, *Ethnographica Carpatica*, Budapest, 1966, pp. 51–52. Yet the etymology of *galóca* is doubtful (see L. Benkő, ed., *A magyar nyelv történetietimológia szótára*, vol. 1, Budapest, 1967, p. 1021, hereafter *TESZ*).

[20] Munkácsi in '"Pilz" und "Rausch"' derives it from old Iranian; T. E. Uotila, *Etymologioita*, Helsinki, 1930, pp. 176–77, gives the stem as **pŏnkŏ*; J. Balázs in 'A magyar sámán réülete' is doubtful about Munkácsi's suggestion of an old Iranian origin. Etymologists often point out a semantic content referring to intoxication in some variants of the word.

[21] G. O. Nagy, *Magyar szólások és közmondások*, Budapest, 1966, gives b962 'nem ettem bolondgombát!'; b1392 'Talán bürköt ettél?'; m481 'nem ettem maszlagot!'; n33 'nadragulyát evett'. Among the gipsies of Hungary plants with hallucinogenic agents (*lindrado drab*) are still being used. See M. Lakatos, *Füstös képek*, Budapest, 1975, pp. 28–30, 176–77.

modern cliché is undoubtedly a reference to a long-forgotten practice of taking hallucinogenic plants. A similar phrase exists in Austrian German only, and in Slovak, but not in the other Slavonic languages, where poisonous mushrooms are referred to by employing metonymy, associating them with 'toad' — a common practice in most of the European languages.[22] Furthermore 'bolondgomba' means 'mad' mushroom only in modern Hungarian since the adjective in earlier usage referred implicitly to its intoxicating effect, a slight but very important nuance.[23]

The first scholar to study mushrooms in Hungary (in fact, the very first mycologist), Charles de l'Écluse (1526–1609), when identifying a species as 'Narrenschwammen' remarked that he was unable to discover its Hungarian name, which might signify only the ignorance of his informant,[24] for the various properties of 'mad mushrooms' were definitely known and utilized in witchcraft practices as late as 1654,[25] while scholars studying witchcraft in western countries deny the use of mushrooms in such practices.[26] If the *táltos* did use the fly-agaric, the practice must have been based on a jealously-guarded secret.[27]

[22] In Viennese: 'Er hat verrückte Schwammerln gegessen'. See V. P. and R. G. Wasson, *Mushroom, Russia, History*, New York, 1967, p. 239 (hereafter *Mushroom*). In Slovak: '*Salané hubý*', but in Ukrainian '*zhaba'ychyy hryb*' ibid., p. 78: the association of fly-agaric with a loathsome concept (toad) seems to indicate an ancestral curse or a taboo in European languages: ibid., p. 35. Since verbal traces of the notion 'madness' seem to exist only in languages in direct contact with Hungarian, the notion may have been derived from it. (*Soma*, p. 193).

[23] *TESZ*, vol. 1, p. 333.

[24] Carolus Clusius, *Rariorum plantarum historia*, Antwerp, 1601, reproduced in Gy. Istvánffi, *A Clusius-codex mykologiai méltatása*, Budapest, 1900. Hungarian names were supplied by Boldizsár Batthyány (1538–1590) and István Beythe (1532–1612) and Hungarian terminology is often missing. This is not surprising, for expertise in mushrooms has never been a part of general knowledge. 'Hungaricum nomen nullum intellexi, sed Germanicum est *Narrenschwammen* ac si diceres fatuum vel fatuorum fungum, quoniam forte, si quis vescatur, mente turbetur', writes Clusius. From the picture of genus XI in the codex Wasson believes he can identify 'amanita vaginata': *Mushroom*, p. 239.

[25] F. Schram, *Magyarországi boszorkányperek*, Budapest, 1970, vol. 1, p. 454. I have not culled material from the highly controversial *Kassai kódex*, published, or rather summarized by J. M. Fehér, *Középkori magyar inkvizició*, Buenos Aires, 1968. Further evidence from folklore: the *javas asszony* used mushrooms for love philtres (see Wasson, *Soma*, p. 239). Gy. László in his *Vértesszöllőstől Pusztaszerig*, Budapest, 1974, pp. 21–23, argues that anthropology might produce conclusive evidence for the use of drugs, since their continuous use causes lasting effects in the bone-structure which can be recognized in bones obtained from ancient burial-sites.

[26] M. J. Harner, 'The Role of Hallucinogenic Plants in European Witchcraft' in *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, New York, 1973, pp. 125–50.

[27] The Voguls believed it harmful to anyone else except the shaman: see *Vogul Népköltési Gyüjtemény*, vol. 2, pt. 2, p. 0375. Only the shaman can eat it with impunity: see K. Donner, *Ethnological Notes*, Helsinki, 1933, pp. 81–82; T. Lehtisalo, *Entwurf einer Mythologie der Jurak-Samojeden*, Helsinki, 1924. Wasson's experiments produced disappointing results: see *Soma*, p. 75. The decline in the practice, besides being due to the obvious harassment by the Church of all pagan rites, in Hungary might have been the result of a shortage of supply on the Alföld, where it was unlikely to be found. In recent times the use of fly-agaric was discontinued in many places in Siberia due to the authorities frowning upon it and also as a consequence of alcoholic beverages gaining ground ever since the nineteenth century.

In Hungarian folklore there is a recurring reference to the *táltos*'s habit of appearing on the doorstep and asking for milk. The reference, often ignored as a curiosity or given a psychological significance,[28] seems to make sense when corroborated with the evidence of the Russian scholar Dunin-Gorkavich, who observed among the Vogul the drinking of milk to counteract the toxic impact of fly-agaric,[29] and modern pharmacology confirmed his evidence: milk is a powerful detoxicant for both muscarine and muscimon.

While widespread use of hallucinogenic drugs among Hungarian shamans cannot be conclusively established by the above circumstantial evidence, the possibility of such occurrences should not be excluded when a re-examination of linguistic sources[30] and the recording of the remaining traces of folk-medicine are undertaken, for these are the essential features and the most promising aspects of a new interdisciplinary approach.

[28] S. Solymossy, 'A magyar ősi hitvilág' in *A magyarság néprajza*, 4 vols, Budapest, 1933–37, vol. 4, 1937, p. 433. He links the occurrence with a Christian tradition: the popular tales in which the *táltos* is denied what he asks for (milk) seem to prove a borrowed Christ legend punishing the heartless host (p. 436); G. Róheim, op. cit., p. 27; G. Istvánffy, 'A borsodmegyei palócok' (*Ethnographia*, Budapest, 1911, p. 298); F. Gönczi, *Göcsej*, Kaposvár, 1914, pp. 174–75; L. Kálmány, 'Összeférhetetlen tátosainkról' (*Ethnographia*, 1917, pp. 262–64); J. Jankó, *A balatonmelléki lakosság néprajza*, Budapest, 1902, p. 408; G. Versényi, 'Felvidéki népmondák' (*Ethnographia*, 1895, p. 232); S. Szücs, op. cit., p. 406.

[29] A. A. Dunin-Gorkavich, 'Ocherki narodnostey Tobol'skogo severa' (*Izvestiya Imperatorskogo russkogo geograficheskogo obshchestva*, St Petersburg, 1904, vol. 40, p. 44).

[30] The question of the relevance of semantically cognate phrases in modern Turkish needs elucidation: e.g. 'mantar atmak': to tell lies, 'mantara basmak': to be duped, both connected with the mushroom (H. C. Hony, *A Turkish-English Dictionary*, Oxford, 1957, p. 229), or 'göbek mantari': navel mushroom (*Soma*, p. 50); also Chuvash 'kămpa': mushroom, cow's genitalia.