7. RITUAL USE OF HALLUCINOGENS IN MESOAMERICA: NEW EVIDENCE FOR SNUFFING FROM THE PRECLASSIC AND EARLY CLASSIC

im: K.J. LITVAK & T.N. CASTILLO (Eds.), Religión en Mesoamérica XII Mesa Redonda, Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología, México, 1972, pp. 64-68

It was the practice of ritual snuffing in the West Indies that first drew the attention and, soon after, the horrified approbrium of the early European explorers to the widespread religious use of hallucinogenic plants among American Indians.

For a time there was some confusion of hallucinogenic snuff with tobacco, but this was soon corrected. Today we know that tobacco is indeed so used in some areas, either by itself or as an additive to other chemically active plants. But the principal botanical sources for the potent hallucinogenic snuff powders employed at the time of the Conquest, and still so employed today, are two species of Anadenanthera (members of the Mimosa family), and Virola, whose seeds and/or bark contain powerful psychotomimetic alkaloids (Schultes, 1972; von Reis Altschul, 1972).

Curiously, while snuffing was widespread throughout Central and South America, as well as the Caribbean Islands, it seems not to have been practices in sixteenth century Mesoamerica—at least not prominently enough to attract the attention of such early observers of the hallucinogenic phenomenon as Sahagún, Durán or, a century later, Ruiz de Alarcón and Jacinto de la Serna. On the other hand, as we know, the Spaniards were well aware of the religious and magical use of many other important hallucinogens—among them above all the sacred mushrooms, or teonanacatl; the peyote cactus; morning glory seeds, or oloınıquı́; datura, known as toloatzin, among other names; certain mints, such as Salvia divinorum, and so forth. Several species of mushroom were in use, as were several varieties of morning glory. All of these plants and many more are, in fact, still employed today; here it might also be noted that the sacred mushrooms, once thought to be restricted to the Maztec region, are now known to be employed also among the Maya, specifically around Palenque, Chiapas, and in the Usumacinta valley.

The various plants the Spaniards observed being used hallucinogenically in Mexico were eaten whole, brewed or macerated into beverages, smoked, chewed, sucked, and, in the case of tobacco, also ground up into a fine green powder that was applied externally in curing ceremonies. But of snuffing, through special tubes or nose pipes, as in Central and South America and in the West Indies, we have no early accounts.

Nevertheless, we have now identified considerable archaeological evidence that snuffing was indeed practiced in Mesoamerica, and for a very long time, even though it seems to have died out by the time of the Conquest. This brings up a number of interesting problems to which I shall return presently. First let us look at the evidence.

We owe much of our knowledge of Central American and South American snuffing paraphernalia to the studies of S. Henry Wassén, and I would here like to acknowledge my own debt to our Swedish colleague in this area of
research. It was a paper by Wassén, published in 1967, that first set me on the track of a possible snuffing complex in Mexico. Specifically my attention was drawn to the so-called Brazilian litos—a class of small effigy stone carvings, usually in the form of birds, with shallow oval or circular depressions that made them look like receptacles of some kind. A number of these were discovered in the shell middens of Santa Catarina, in Brazil. Wassén thought it likely that these bird-effigies might have served as tablets for hallucinogenic snuff, rather like the wooden archaeological snuff tablets which have been found in such numbers in the Peruvian and Chilean desert, and the snuff tablets of Amazonia.

Subsequently I raised the question of the use of hallucinogens by the Olmec, suggesting that perhaps the well-known Olmec jade artifacts usually called "spoons" might be, like the Brazilian litos, snuff receptacles (Furst, 1968). At least some of the Olmec "spoons" seemed to me to represent long-tailed birds in flight, seen in profile. In any event, like some South American snuff tablets, some Olmec jade spoons are decorated with bird-jaguar motifs, a common symbolic theme in South American use of psychotomimetic plants to achieve ecstatic trance states.

Five years ago, however, this was still highly speculative. There was no direct evidence that the Olmec had used snuff or any other hallucinogens; for that matter, there was no archaeological proof that the ritual use of psychotomimetics in Mesoamerica was any older than the oldest of the so-called mushroom stones—that is, from the end of the Middle to Late Preclassic. All that could be said was that it would be surprising if the Olmec had used no such substances, considering what we knew of the antiquity and wide distribution of the hallucinogenic plant phenomenon in the New World. To mention only snuffing—the earliest known archaeological snuffing implements are a whalebone snuff tablet and associated birdbone snuffing tube which Junius Bird of the American Museum of Natural History excavated at Huaca Prieta in Peru. These are dated at approximately 1300-1700 B.C., equivalent to the beginning of the Early Preclassic in Mexico. Thus we see that nearly four thousand years ago, South American Indians on the Peruvian coast were using snuffing implements similar to those used to the present time. Today, scholars concerned with this problem suspect that the use of botanical hallucinogens as a religious phenomenon in the New World goes back thousands of years earlier still—perhaps to the earliest arrival of Paleolithic and Mesolithic hunters and gatherers out of northeastern Asia.

The first evidence that snuffing was practiced in ancient Mesoamerica, if not at contact time, at least around the birth of Christ, came in the form of a small hollow redware Colima figurine of a seated man with a horn on his head and a gourd-shaped snuffing pipe held to one nostril. Subsequently I came across a second hollow Colima effigy figurine, larger and sculpturally more sophisticated, likewise depicted in the act of using a gourd-shaped nose pipe.

In addition we were able to identify, in various collections, a small number of pottery snuffers or nose pipes from West Mexico that closely resemble the well-known Costa Rican snuffers illustrated by Wassén. Especially interesting in this respect is a red-slipped snuffer with bifurcated stems, one for each nostril, from the Ixtlan del Río area of southern Nayarit. The Ixtlan snuffer is actually a highly conventionalized bird effigy, with
nubs at the side of the bowl to indicate wings and a projection at the front for the head or beak. Such bird symbolism is common on Costa Rican pottery snuffers. That this is hardly fortuitous was pointed out by Wassén; birds and bird spirits are widely connected with the ecstatic trance experience and with shamanism.

These West Mexican examples seemed, for a time, to be all there was. Smuffing thus appeared to be an isolated phenomenon in time and space, associated with the shaft tomb cultures of the west coast. The close similarity of the West Mexican pottery snuffers to those from Central America, and their restricted distribution close to the Pacific coast, suggested a somewhat short-lived trait, perhaps introduced from a southerly source, that failed to take hold alongside other, longer-established cultic practices with indigenous psychotomimetic plants, such as peyote.

However, West coast snuffing was not to remain the isolated and short-lived phenomenon it appeared to be from the lack of artifacts that could be identified with ritual smuffing. New evidence has come to light in 1971—this time from what appears to be an Early Middle Preclassic context, at the site known as Xochipala, Guerrero. The dating of Xochipala is still somewhat uncertain; there have been suggestions that it represents the very "origins" of Olmec art, predating even the San Lorenzo phase (Gay, 1972). Nevertheless, the association of the sophisticated and sometime astonishingly lifelike figurines from Xochipala with typically Olmec incised bowls and other characteristic Early Middle Preclassic Olmec artifacts suggest dates equivalent to the San Lorenzo phase or David Grove's Early Preclassic material from Morelos and Nexpa, Guerrero,—i.e., ca. 1300-1000 B.C.

The uncontrolled looting at Xochipala, with its remarkable assemblage of some of the finest Preclassic ceramics to be found in Mesoamerica, is a scientific tragedy of major proportions. We can only guess at the evidence that has become forever lost; nevertheless, it has been possible to study and verify the authenticity of a number of pieces from this site now in private hands or museum collections. Among these are smuffing implements, far earlier than those of the shaft-tomb phase, approaching in age the earliest smuffing paraphernalia found on the Peruvian coast.

The first of these to be so identified was a small, undecorated bowl with horizontal perforated stem. If one compares this small pottery snuffer with examples from Central America, it is clear that except for its characteristic local paste and the thin lime encrustation typical of ceramics from the Xochipala burials, the little Mexican snuffing pipe could be mistaken for examples from Guanacaste or Linea Vieja, Costa Rica (Wassén, 1965:25). As in the case of the Nayarit snuffer, it is difficult not to postulate a genetic connection between them, although the known Central American pottery snuffers and that from Nayarit are considerably later than this Early Middle Preclassic piece.

A second Xochipala snuffing pipe I was able to study in detail is considerably more complex. It is an effigy pipe, measuring 4-3/4" in length, representing a human figure of indeterminate sex, lying on its back with
knees drawn up—a position somewhat reminiscent of the post-Classic Chacmools. In a recent museum catalogue this piece was mistakenly described as an effigy bowl in the form of a kneeling person (Gay, 1972). But that would place the nosepiece at the top and the opening of the bowl to the front, which hardly seems logical. Once the piece is recognized for what it is—a snuffing pipe—the location and curve of the nosepiece alone dictate a supine position for the figurine, as does the placement of the rim of the bowl.

Still another effigy snuffing pipe from Xochipala represents a human figure on its stomach, with the bowl in the back and a horn-like nosepiece on top of the head. The sex of this second effigy appears to be male.

On the basis of this evidence, then, we can postulate a snuffing complex of considerable duration and antiquity at least on the west coast, with the earliest evidence dating to ca. 1300-1000 B.C.

A recent examination of early pottery from Oaxaca shows that this ritual practice was not limited to the Guerrero Formative or the shaft-and-chamber tomb phase of coastal northwestern Mesoamerica. I have only just begun checking through collections and the literature on Monte Albán ceramics, but already it appears that the evidence for snuffing in both the Late Formative and Early to Middle Classic is substantial. Thus far we have been able to identify approximately a dozen spouted miniature effigy vessels as probable nose pipes; of these some are rather similar in construction, if not in style and paste, to those from Xochipala.

One interesting little polished black snuffing pipe, possibly transitional Monte Albán I to II, appears to symbolize transformation, in this case from human into a duck-like bird with a rounded body and flipperlike feet. The forward half is human, with the hands held palms together to the chin; the rest of the body appears to be that of a duck. A conical perforated horn on the head forms the nosepiece, as in effigy pipes from Xochipala.

Space limitations preclude detailed discussion of duck symbolism, but it should be noted that chimereal or anthropomorphic ducks are not uncommon in prehispanic art, especially that of the west coast. Ducks are also prominent at Tlatilco and in Olmec art in general. A study of duck mythology in the Southwest and beliefs about the duck as a supernatural among the Cora-Huichol may throw light on the problem; a Duck Person is a prominent figure in Huichol myth, as it is among the Zuní and other Southwestern Pueblo Indians; ducks seem to be messengers of the gods or else a form the gods assume when they travel. Also, ducks are associated with shamanism, perhaps because as wide-ranging water birds they appear to inhabit several planes at once.

Of even greater interest culturally—historically is a Monte Albán effigy snuffing pipe of grey clay, representing a deer lying on its stomach, with legs drawn up and head turned to the right. Cloven hooves leave no doubt about the zoological identification. What makes this piece especially fascinating is that it holds an unmistakable peyote cactus in its mouth.
We are greatly indebted to Miss Julie Jones of the Museum of Primitive Art who recognized the significance of the deer-peyote association in relation to Huichol belief and who drew my attention to it on that account. As though this were not enough, the same object turned out to be also a characteristic snuffing pipe. In this case, the nose piece is formed by the deer's erect tail.

Such choices on the part of the ancient artists cannot be considered to have been arbitrary. If I may venture some guesses, the horn atop the head as nosepiece may be related to the well-known and widespread concept of horns --both single and double--as symbol and even source of shamanic or supernatural power (Furst, 1965). Single horns on the front of the head are a characteristic of some Colima effigies, but they also occur elsewhere in Mesoamerica (e.g., Tlatilco, Chalcatzingo, Xochipala, Monte Alban, etc.). As for the nose piece of the deer effigy pipe, this may well have to do with the concept of the deertail as magical power object in some North American and Mexican shamanic practices and beliefs. Among the Huichol, the deertail is an important part of the shaman's sacred paraphernalia, as it is in Papago shamanism. Likewise, it is hardly insignificant that the name of one of the principal Huichol supernaturals is Tamátsí Máxa Kwaxi, Elder Brother Deer Tail.

The association of deer, hallucinogen and shaman which we recognize archaeologically in the Monte Albán snuffing pipe and ethnographically in Huichol religion is itself an important culture-historical problem that remains to be seriously explored. Andean art dating to the fifth or sixth century A.D. suggests that there was something very like these Mesoamerican associations in Peru. A common theme on Moche IV ceramics, for example, is a ritual deer hunt, in which the hunter is clearly not meant to be an ordinary human, but rather a god, culture hero, or shaman. Moche painters consistently depict the deer together with a shrub or tree which, though to some degree conventionalized, is identifiable botanically as Anadenanthera colubrina, a member of the Mimosa family, with the long, bean-like seed pods characteristic of this family. The seeds are widely made into a potent psychotomimetic snuff, called Willka in the Andes; they are also ingested in an alcoholic drink and, in some highland villages, play an important role in the making of llampa, a sacred substance used in cattle increase and other rituals.

The deer, in any event, is often a semi-divine celestial animal for American Indians, connected with Sun, Fire, sky beings, and shamans. Among the Huichol it is the shaman's spirit helper and companion; a pair of feathered ceremonial arrows he wears on his head in ritual contexts symbolize deer antlers; the basket of shamanic power objects (takwatsi) is identified with the divine Deer Person, Káuyumari; certain gods are deer and vice versa; the deer is mount and guide on the shaman's celestial quests and flights; deer is peyote and peyote deer, and the "principal deer" is guardian and guide on the peyote hunt.

Such concepts remind one of the role of the deer in Paleo-Asiatic or Siberian shamanism. In Siberia, too, the deer is the celestial mount that carries the shaman to the Upperworld and its spirit rulers. In parts of Siberia, moreover, there is direct association between deer--in this case
the reindeer—and a sacred hallucinogen used by shamans: the Amanita muscaria, or fly agaric mushroom, for which the reindeer is said to have an inordinate predilection and which some scholars regard as the Paleolithic or Mesolithic prototype for the Mexican mushroom cult.

It is, in fact, difficult to escape the conclusion that the esteem, not to say veneration, with which some American Indians regarded the deer, represents a survival from an ancient archaic shamanistic substratum—a substratum that forms the underlying basis of American Indian ideology, including that of Mesoamerican civilizations, and that has its ultimate roots in the religion of Old World Paleolithic and Mesolithic hunting and gathering culture. The curious association of deer as celestial mount and the sacred hallucinogens that are employed to aid in that supernatural quest could well be a part of this very ancient belief system.

There remains the problem of identifying potential sources for the hallucinogenic snuffs used in prehispanic Mexico. South American snuffs are well known botanically and chemically—for Mexico, on the other hand, we remain woefully uninformed for the present. However, there are some indications of the direction future research might fruitfully take.

First, tobacco cannot be ruled out. Several species of Nicotiana are used as snuff in South America, either alone or in combination with other psychotropic species.

Secondly, there is no reason why some (though not necessarily all) of the better-known Mesoamerican plant hallucinogens, should not be as psychotomimetically effective—and perhaps even more so—when taken as snuff through the nasal membranes than when they are assimilated through the stomach. For example, Dr. Richard Evans Schultes, the leading expert on New World hallucinogens, tells me that in South America the bark of Banisteriopsis caapi, usually brewed into a powerful hallucinogenic drink, is sometimes pulverized and inhaled as snuff.

Whether or not peyote and other native hallucinogens were used as snuff, there is an extensive Mesoamerican population of shrubs and trees of the Mimosa family that should be investigated for possible hallucinogenic properties. Included are two close relative of the South American Piptadenias; the seeds and bark of many of the latter are known to contain psychotomimetic constituents. The Mexican species are Piptadenia flav., found also in Colombia and Central America, and Piptadenia constricta. Both are found along the Pacific coast from Sinaloa and Jalisco in the north to Guerrero in the south. To my knowledge neither have been tested for psychotomimetic alkaloids. There are also more than sixty species each of Mimosa and Acacia in Mexico and some of these may, like some related South American species, contain hallucinogenic chemicals.

Some concluding thoughts: in the study of the indigenous Mexican hallucinogens—peyote, mushrooms, ololiuhqui, etc.—a great deal has already been accomplished by ethnobotanists, ethnologists, pharmacologists and other scholars. That prehispanic Mesoamerica seems now also to have shared in a wider, pan-American complex involving the use of snuff opens up a host
of new possibilities for culture historical research. It also poses a whole series of new questions.

Obviously, multidisciplinary study of what now appears to have been a substantial anufling complex in ancient Mexico is important in and of itself. At the same time, it might provide answers to questions of external relationships, especially with South America. It is to be hoped that a better understanding of the ethno botany of potential native Mexican sources for snuff, and of the iconography and symbolic meanings, as well as the spatial and temporal distribution, of ritual paraphernalia connected with their use, will help clarify some of these problems. Not the least of these is a fundamental one: the nature of the cultural currents that contributed to the origins and flowering of Olmec civilization.

We may yet discover that the tropical forest-like traits some students profess to recognize in Olmec culture appear so precisely because they originated in the South American tropics. On the other hand, we may conclude that whatever the degree of external contacts, some of these similarities, especially in iconography, signify more than anything else the fundamental ideological unity of much of aboriginal America.

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