

MUSHROOM CEREMONIES OF THE MAZATEC PEOPLE

BY INTI GARCÍA FLORES



THE MAZATECS are an indigenous people of Mexico who inhabit the Sierra Mazateca in the northern part of the state of Oaxaca, as well as some nearby regions in the adjacent states of Puebla and Veracruz. Mazatec traditions include the use of psychoactive plants and fungi in magico-medicinal and religious-ceremonial rituals. These traditions predate the Spanish conquest of Mexico and are an essential part of Mazatec culture.

The sections below depict various aspects of a Mazatec ceremony as described by Inti García Flores, a member of their community. It is important to recognize that the Mazatecs are not a monolithic culture; rather, their traditions are diverse and encompass multiple variations and expressions of these practices and rituals.



The Preparation of The Ceremony

According to the ritual-agricultural calendar of the Mazatecs, the season for collecting sacred mushrooms (*ndí-xijtho*) begins during the *Chan-sinda* (the “Period of Toil”), which roughly goes from late June to mid-July. The mushrooms should be collected in the early morning and during a full moon. According to Mazatec traditions, the sacred mushrooms miraculously sprout in clean soil and are a gift from the gods, sent from their domains through thunder (*Nai-Chaon*).

The *curanderos* or *chjota chijné* (which roughly translates to “people of knowledge” in Mazatec) are usually accompanied by a boy or girl when collecting the sacred mushrooms and while the child picks the mushrooms, the *chjota chijné* recites a prayer. After collecting them, the mushrooms must be transferred immediately to the altar where they will remain until they are used for the ceremony (*velada*). No one else can see these mushrooms until the moment they are to be used. During their way back, the child and the *chjota chijné* have to avoid bad encounters, such as seeing a pregnant woman, dead animals or a funeral procession, because the mushrooms can become contaminated and lose their purity.

There are different species of sacred mushrooms that grow in the Sierra Mazateca. One of the most popular varieties is com-

monly known as “*Derrumbes*” (landslides) [this is a general term that could refer to either *Psilocybe caerulescens* or *Psilocybe zapotecorum*]. These mushrooms tend to grow on disturbed areas, such as landslides, thus their name. Other varieties known to be used by *chjota chijné* are “*San Isidro*” [*Psilocybe cubensis*], which grow in cow dung, and “*Pajaritos*” (little birds) [*Psilocybe mexicana*], that sprout in mossy areas and in humid meadows.



The sacred mushrooms embody the profound essence of the Mazatec spirit and are employed in ceremonies when patients seek their guidance for the recovery from physical, emotional or spiritual afflictions. The mushrooms speak through the *chjota chijné* and take the healer and the patients where they need to go during the ritual to find the answers they need or the cure for their illnesses. The mushrooms help the patient find their spirit if it is lost or if it has been taken by the *chikones*. The *chikones*

are the beings that gave life to everything, the guardians of the Mazatec mountains, caves, roads, streams, wells and caves. They are the spirits that reside inside and outside the Earth and they can heal and fix all that is wrong. Through the mushrooms, the *chjota chijné* can also communicate and negotiate with the *chikones*, and through the offering of gifts, convince them to release the spirit of the patient.

Apart from the sacred mushrooms, there are other objects and elements that are required for a proper *velada*:

Copal incense: it is one of the main elements of the *velada*, since copal is used by the *chjota chijné* to open a channel to communicate with the *chikones*. Through the use of copal, the *chikones* understand us better and have patience to listen to our requests. Copal is a way of showing reverence to these sacred beings.

Turkey eggs: they are wise and have the strength and power to solve any issues through the intervention of the *chikones*.

Creole chicken eggs: they have the ability to negotiate and dialogue with the *chikones*. They're an offering for the owners of the world.

Cocoa: it represents wealth, kindness, and love. With cocoa, the

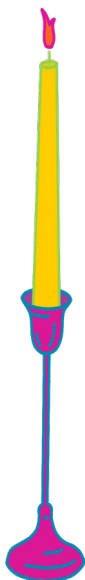
chikones are paid. It can also be used as a drink during the *velada*, only in necessary cases that warrant it.

Pure beeswax candles: they are an offering to the altar and represent us humans during the *velada*. Candles are the life that leads humans. The candles speak for us, they manifest what we dare not say.

White flowers: they represent purity, joy, love and tenderness, and are a way of showing respect for the ritual, specifically for the altar and the mushrooms.

Pixiate or pizietl: Pixiate (now also called “*San Pedro*” by some *curanderos*) is a powder prepared in June from tobacco leaf, limestone, garlic and spring water. It represents strength, light and protection. It also allows the spirit to travel well during the *velada*.

The altar or table: in Mazatec, it is called *yami' xha'tze* (which translates to clean / transparent / silver table). The altar must be oriented towards the east (never towards the west) and it is meant to hold the instruments and offerings for the *velada* (mushrooms, candles, eggs, images of saints...).



The Performance of the Sacred Mushroom Ceremony or *Velada*

The *velada* always begins at nightfall. The patients are received with copal and with branches to cleanse them as they enter the sacred space. After entering the room, the *chjota chijné* closes the door and windows, stands in front of the altar, grabs the Pixiate and draws crosses with saliva on the door and windows to bless the space. After that, the *chjota chijné* sprinkles Pixiate in a circle around the patient, and blows it into the four corners of the room to prevent other beings from interrupting the healing ritual.



At the beginning of the *velada*, the *chjota chijné* lights a candle and takes the mushrooms in pairs, one male and one female, and separates the portions for the patient and for themselves.

After this, the *chjota chijné* smokes the mushrooms with incense and talks to the *chikones*. During this conversation, the *chjota chijné* mentions the name of the patient and consumes the mushrooms. A few minutes later, the *chjota chijné* grabs the Pixiate again and marks with saliva the patient on the back of their elbows, wrists, throat, above the navel and on their forehead to release the spirit of the person so that it can travel with the *chjota chijné*.

The sacred mushrooms allow the spirit of the patient and the *chjota chijné* to travel and reveal whether there is a remedy for the patient's illness. In the event that there is no solution for the illness and the patient is destined to die, the *chjota chijné* helps the patient accept their fate.

A crucial part of the velada is the singing ritual. The sacred mushrooms like songs and offerings, and behave like children, that's why they are known, among many names, as "*niños santos*" ("sacred children"). Through songs the *chjota chijné* negotiates with the *chikones*. These beings ask for a payment in exchange for their help to heal the patient, which can be a turkey, a chicken, a goat or cocoa beans, for example. The negotiation process is long and in many cases, requires more than one ceremony, usually 5 to 6, depending on what the mushrooms decide.



When the *velada* is over, it is customary for the *chjota chijné* to smoke a cigar made from a local variety of tobacco and blow smoke on the person and fill the room with it. After that, the *chjota chijné* gives the patient precise instructions on how to take care of themselves and when the next ceremony shall be. The *chjota chijné* must accompany the patient throughout the whole process until the patient heals completely. To aid in the process, the *chjota chijné* also prepares two pouches with Pixi-ate to protect the patient from witches, wizards and evil spirits. One for them to take with and one to place where they sleep. There are other types of pouches that the *chjota chijné* might prepare to heal their patients, which could contain tobacco, cocoa beans, copal or macaw feathers, depending on the specific needs of each patient. If the mushrooms request it, sometimes a renewal ceremony with cocoa beans, chicken or turkey blood is required for their organs to recover and for the patient to be born again.

The sacred mushroom ceremony or *velada* of the Mazatec people is a deeply spiritual and intricate practice that involves the use of sacred mushrooms, rituals and songs. This ritual is a profound expression of the Mazatec culture, showcasing their connection with nature, spirituality, and the pursuit of well-being.

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