Drugs: The Sacred Mushroom

By R. Gordon Wasson

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Dear Mr. Vice President

AT HOME ABROAD

Drugs: Case for Legalizing Marijuana

Is the Long Run It Would Save Lives And End Hypocrisy

Drugs: In a Nether World

A Sobering Report On Lives Ruined By Premature Laws

Drugs: The Sacred Mushroom

Hallucination Wine And Religious Tales As Accepted Customs

The New York Executives

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Not long ago The New York Times carried a dispatch from Mexico tell ing about the descent of hippies on Huautla de Jimenez in quest of the “sacred mushrooms.” With the dis patch appeared a photo of a priestess of the rite, Maria Sabina.

Such articles make me wince. On the night of June 29-30, 1955, Maria S,abina invited me not only to attend the mushroom rite but to partake of the mushrooms on the same footing as the Indians. This was the first time, so far as the records show, that any outsider had done so. It proved to be a profoundly moving experience, revelation. I wrote it up for Life (May 13, 1957) and it drew wide attention.

Huautla, when I first knew it as humble out-of-the-way Indian village, has become a true mecca for hippies, psychopaths, adventurers, pseudo research workers, the miscellaneous crew of our society's drop-outs. The old ways are dead and I fear that my responsibility is heavy, mine and Maria Sabina's.

In 1953 when I first arrived in Huautla in quest of the sacred mush rooms no one would speak to me about them. Some said they had never heard of them. Others suggested that the cult survived four or five valleys away, or declared that it had become extinct. I quickly learned that the only way to arrive at information was to talk to the old folks, a man or woman, alone, at night, by the light of a candle; in a whisper. The mushrooms were steeped in what anthropologists call “mana.” They were gathered before dawn and never exposed to the light of day. They did not change hands for filthy lucre in the market-place.

How often was I told that the mush rooms were very dangerous—son muy delicados! The priestess well knew the consequences that might ensue when a psychically disturbed person took the mushrooms. When we were gathered together in some but on the outskirts of town, the doors were shut and we were warned not to leave until dawn.

The hallucinogenic experience is best regulated by religious sanctions, not by crude laws enforced by the police and magistrates. In Huautla virtually every one believed in the mushrooms and ob served the rules. In India, among the ancient Aryans, “Soma” was consumed only by the priests and “Soma” was, contend, an hallucinogenic mushroom, the fly-agaric.

The Mexican mushrooms are mem bers of a cluster of hallucinogens that the chemist Dr. Albert Hofmann of Basel has thoroughly studied. This family embraces peyote of our South west, a dozen or so species of mush rooms belonging to three genera that Professor Roger Helm of Paris and located, described and named in Mex ico, the seeds of two morning glories, and finally LSD. All of these are likely to have bad effects when taken by psychically disturbed individuals. LSD is so potent that the standard pure dose is only a speck. With the mush rooms, the dose is a hundred times that speck. With peyote it is a hunared times as much again. But the difficulty is that in the black market, which our laws with their in terrorem penalties have brought into existence, one has no way of knowing what one is get ting. One does not know the amount or even whether the desired drug is delivered.

None of this group of hallucinogens is addictive. That is, there are no dif ficulties in breaking away from them.

And so I revert to what I said at the outset. Last spring, at Carnegie Hell there was performed what the pro moters dubbed a “tragifonfa” entitled “Marfa Sabina.” The author and com poser could have made an artistic suc cess of Maria Sabina's tragedy had they entered more fully into her village life.

Marfa Sabina is a grave woman, with an inner dignity that she never loses, with long sleek hair reaching down to her feet. She is respected and beloved by the villagers—except for a few jeal ous ones—who say of her that she is sin mancha, immaculate, without stain. Her tragedy, and mine also, is that she revealed to me the secret of the Indians. In a play written about her, the villagers, while still loving her, could fairly have condemned her for her disclosure, and as she ascends the scaffold at’ the end of -the play, she should have sung a powerful threnody to the divine mushrooms, repeating the musical themes that I have taped from her own singing.

As for me, what have I done? I made a cultural discovery of importance. Should I have suppressed it? It has led to further discoveries the reach of which remains to be seen. Should these further discoveries have remained stul tified by my. unwillingness to reveal the secret of the Indians’ hallucino gens?

Yet what I have done gives me nightmares: I have unleashed on lovely, Huautla a torrent of commercial ex ploitation of the vilest kind. Now the mushrooms are exposed for sale every where—in every market-place, in every village doorway. Everyone offers his services as a “priest” of the rite, even the politicos. In 1955 Marfa Sabina asked me hesitatingly for 13 pesos as the price of her services for a night's work. I have heard that now strangers pay sometimes between 500 and 1,000 pesos for a “performance.” The whole of the countryside is agog with the furtive movements of hippies, the com ings and goings of the “federalistas,” the Dogberries with their blundering efforts to root them out.