

Some Spiritualistic Uses of Mushrooms

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Ethnomycology is the study of the use of fungi by humans, and it is a very broad subject that, according to Schultes and von Reis (1995), includes investigations into how fungi may have influenced “the development of cultures, religions, and mythology.” Within the framework of ethnomycology, we can address the various reasons that mushrooms receive attention, including their edibility, toxicity, and their potential for use as hallucinogens. Mushrooms can be indicators of ecological importance, as well, of course; and they offer both the amateur and the experienced the thrill of the hunt as different forms are encountered in different places and times throughout the year. Though many more reasons can easily be described, an often overlooked aspect that stirs interest in mushrooms is their ephemeral nature and the links that they may have with the spiritual world. This brief paper summarizes some of the work by Blanchette, Burk, Compton, and others, and provides a review of some of the spiritualistic aspects of mushrooms, maintaining a primary focus on select Pacific Northwest species that produce carpophores with macroscopic features. Included among the fungi noted in this paper are the plant pathogen *Exobasidium vaccinii* (Fuckel) Woronin, the brown rot *Fomitopsis officinalis* (Vill.:Fr) Bondartsev & Singer, and the puffballs *Abstroma reticulatum* G. Cunn, *Astraeus hygrometricus* (Pers.) Morgan, *Bovista dakotensis* (Brenckle) Kreisell, *B. tomentosa* (Vittad.) De Toni, and *Lycoperdon perlatum* Pers.

Fomitopsis officinalis

A brown rot of coniferous trees, this fungus reduces wood to chunks with a grainy texture through the use of cellulose-degrading enzymes. It produces a hoof-shaped, woody sporophore. The indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest called it “Bread of Ghosts” and used it to mark the graves of shamen (Blanchette et al., 1992). The Pacific Northwest shamen used sporophores of *F. officinalis* in various rituals, carving it to amplify its supernatural powers, and allowing it to be used to cure illnesses caused by supernatural forces. The shape of the carved sporophore often included mouth and/or stomach orifices, which gave the mushroom spirit-catching abilities. Marking a shaman’s grave with the Bread of Ghosts, which he had used ceremoniously, clearly relayed the message that the burial site was occupied by spirits and should not be approached. The use of *F. officinalis* is of particular interest because it was crafted and imparted spiritualistic power through shape and substance, rather than through hallucinogenic



Fungus Man and Raven: Fungus Man (with paddle) guides Raven (with spear) in a canoe past spiritual barriers. Drawing adapted from illustrations of a plate carved by Charles Edenshaw (plate housed in the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, IL).

or mind-altering means. Blanchette et al. describe a particularly interesting myth in which a Fungus-Man was created from a “tree biscuit”; it had the power to navigate a boat through spiritual boundaries, ultimately helping Raven (a capricious diety of great power) to create women.

Exobasidium vaccinii

An obligate plant pathogen, this fungus infects the undersides of leaves, stems, and flowers of Ericaceous plants (huckleberries, in this example), causing vegetative deformation. Pale rose-colored mycocecidia (basidia-covered galls) subsequently form. These galls have been consumed by at least nine coastal groups in the Pacific Northwest, who consider them “berries.” In the case of *E. vaccinii*, the knowledge of certain myths, by as many as three cultural groups, led backwards to its identification as the “berry.” The links were made in an interesting etymological, ethnomycological, and ethnobotanical investigation by Compton



Astraeus hygrometricus. Photo courtesy of M. Wood.

(1995). In the myths the berries factor in as agents used, again, by the god Raven to achieve his purposes of trickery. In addition, the berries are referred to as “Ears of Ghosts” or similar derivations in Tsimshian dialects and have been associated with a corpse-stealing, child-kidnapping creature (in cautionary and frightening stories told to children). According to myth, the creature blew his or her “nose and threw it and it hit those little bushes . . .” (Compton, 1995).

Puffballs

Other interesting spiritual or religious uses of mushrooms in North America involve puffballs of various types, as reported by Burk (1983). In general, he said that puffballs were burned as incense to ward off ghosts, and emptied of the spores and filled with pebbles to make spiritualistic rattles used by medicine men. He also noted that tepees were covered with figures of puffballs to protect them from spirits and also to ensure fire to those within the tepee. Finally, Burk reported that *Astraeus hygrometricus* was called “fallen stars” by the Blackfoot, who perceived them to be stars fallen to earth during supernatural events. Puffballs also figure in the British Columbian Indian spiritual world where they are regarded apprehensively as “ghost’s make-up,” “ground ghost,” and “corpse,” according to Compton et al. (1995). Available evidence demonstrates that *Abstoma reticulatum*, *Bovista dakotensis*, *B. tomentosa*, and *Lycoperdon perlatum* specimens were used in talismanic ways or as good luck charms (Compton, 1994; Compton et al., 1995).



The “typical” fungi that have dominated ethnomycological concerns are those that can induce hallucinations or act as so-called psychedelics. Much is known from empirical studies into the chemistry of *Psilocybe caerulescens* Murrill, *Panaeolus sphinctrinus* (Fr.) Quélet, and *Amanita muscaria* (L.) Lam, each of which is distributed in North America. Much is also known—or hypothesized—

of the contemporary and relatively recent history of the use of these species, thanks to the work of, among others, Lowy and Wasson (see, for example, Lowy [1971, 1972, 1974, 1977], Wasson [1968, 1980], and Wasson and Wasson [1957]).

The Pacific Northwest has a well-documented and rich ethno-biological history, and certain studies, including those presented in this review, have identified several very interesting items of ethnomycological interest. A unifying and interesting aspect of the fungi noted here is that while each were of spiritual importance, they were not used in an expected way (in an hallucinogenic or vision-inducing manner). Rather, the fungi carried significant symbolic power as agents to be used with spiritualistic or shamanistic ritual.

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