



Gordon Wasson's

WOMAN OF THE NORTHWEST WIND

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Ojibwe (more properly, Anishinaabe) extraction, Ms. Peschel changed her name to Keewaydinoquay, which means “Woman of the Northwest Wind,” following a purported vision quest. Henceforth I will refer to her as Kee, which is easier on the tongue than Keewaydinoquay. It’s also the name by which she was known among her own acolytes.

The details of Kee’s life are vague before she met Wasson. She was probably born in 1919 in northern Michigan. She was a healer and herbalist, and maybe—according to Wasson—a shaman. For several years, she had been carrying on a lively correspondence with the banker-ethnomycologist, whom she called Waussung-naabe, “Shining-From-Afar-Man” (McKenna et al, 1990). At last, in 1976, the Shining-From-Afar-Man visited her on Garden Island in Lake Michigan, where she had been living a hermitlike existence. The next year he visited her again. This time she gave him several dried *Amanita muscaria* to eat because, Wasson wrote obliquely, “I was seeking guidance on a family matter” (according to a letter in the Tina and Gordon Wasson Ethnomycological Collection, Harvard University).

Probably due to his wealth, Wasson had a certain amount of clout at Harvard University, and in 1978 he helped Kee get a book entitled *Puhpowee for the People* published under the auspices of Harvard’s Botanical Museum (Keewaydinoquay, 1978). *Puhpowee*, according to Kee, means “to swell up in stature suddenly and silently from an unseen source of power.” Through traditional stories and Kee’s own experience, the book describes the Ojibwe culinary and nonculinary use of mushrooms. For example:

Panadja Mittigok, chicken of the woods, is cooked lightly (!) and served with meat or leftover gravy; *Mishimig Binakwan* (*Daedalea quercina*) “has a shape naturally convenient for currying the coats of horses;” small puffballs, “luscious little morsels;” are put into stews, “like dumplings;” smoke from *Fomes fomentarius* or *Piptoporus betulinus* puts a hive of bees to sleep; *Marasmius scorodonius*, “the little garlic mushroom,” flavors “winter menus;” *Ustilago maydis*, corn smut, is a secret medicine that facilitates childbirth; and so on.

At the end of the book, a glossary lists several dozen words and phrases either relating to fungi or to the Ojibwe use of fungi. Example: *Waw-but-to* is “pine wood shining with the mycelium of fungi.” Another example: *Wajash-Kwewabo* is “A mushroom drink made from mushrooms growing from a tree or the decayed part of a tree” (Keewaydinoquay, 1978).

Before you revel in the mycological acumen of Native Americans, consider Field Museum botanist Huron Smith’s *Ethnobotany of the Ojibwe* (Smith, 1932). In this comprehensive tome, Smith states: “The Ojibwe evidently have had disastrous experiences with mushrooms and do not use them as food.” He mentions a single “ethno” use of a fungus—to stop nosebleed, the Ojibwe stuffed pieces of *Oskwe’tuk* (*Calvatia craniformis*) up their noses. Likewise, in a 1919 article in *Mycologia*, J.H. Faull remarks on the fact that the vocabulary of the Ojibwe has virtually no names for species of fungi (Faull, 1919).

Ojibwe sources such as the celebrated artist Norval Morisseau indicate that mushrooms shouldn’t be eaten in this life, but might perhaps be a decent food in the afterlife (from a note referring

In 1957, Wall Street banker Gordon Wasson wrote a feature article for *Life* magazine about eating psilocybin-containing mushrooms in Mexico, thus inaugurating a global interest in magic mushrooms, so-called. A few years later, Wasson wrote a book entitled *SOMA* in which he argued that the holy substance in the Sanskrit classic *Rig Veda* was *Amanita muscaria*. In the 1970s, he co-authored a book suggesting that the Oracle at Delphi was high on ergot when she made her predictions.

A less likely magic mushroom aficionado would be hard to imagine. Wasson was a Vice-President of J.P. Morgan & Co. for twenty years, an arch-conservative in politics, and a millionaire many times over. You can imagine him interested in expensive truffles or omelets filled with porcini, but not, definitely not, psychotropic substances.

Wasson didn’t like to use the word psychotropic. Eventually, he decided that the appropriate word was entheogen, which means “god generated within” in Greek (McKenna et al, 1990). Because of his devotion to entheogens and also because he was known to have rather loose purse strings, he attracted acolytes not only among ordinary folks in search of a high, but also among such scholars as Richard Evans Schultes, Gaston Guzmán, and Roger Heim.

Enter a woman from northern Michigan named Margaret Peschel. Of

to Morriveau in the Tina and Gordon Wasson Archive, 1978). And some years ago, near Lake Nippissing in Ontario, I asked an Ojibwe elder what he thought of mushrooms. "All of them are poisonous," he told me. I also asked him what the Ojibwe word for mushroom was. He looked thoughtful for a moment, then said: "Mushroom."

But might Kee have been the last of the Ojibwe to possess any mycological lore? She did possess mycological lore, but she seems to have obtained it from written sources rather than, as she suggests, her own people. After all, she was an educated woman, and shortly after she met the Shining-From-Afar-Man, she began pursuing a doctorate in ethnobotany at the University of Michigan. At one of the university's libraries, she could have easily read that *Daedalea quercina* is commonly used to curry horses and *Fomes fomentarius* to pacify bees.

Let's now consider *Amanita muscaria*. Kee wrote a book on this iconic species entitled *Muskwedo*, but only one copy was ever printed, and that copy currently resides in Harvard's Wasson Archives and is unavailable for scrutiny, possibly because its accuracy is suspect. But these same archives have various drafts for *Muskwedo*, along with Wasson's scribbled notes on those drafts, and a researcher can study this material to his or her heart's content.

According to Kee, *muskwedo* means "Mighty Red Topped Mushroom Living with a Tree." In 1978, she claimed to have eaten this mighty mushroom for shamanic purposes for the past fifty years, which, if true, means that she would have begun eating it at age nine. In cultures where *A. muscaria* has any degree of ritual significance, it's usually only male elders who eat the mushroom, so the idea of a nine-year old girl eating it is somewhat surprising...

Other names for *A. muscaria* in Kee's drafts include *Osh-timisk* ("Red Head or Red Top"), *Kagigedebwein* ("Eternal Truth Giver"), *Kaia Kamisiwin* ("Short Cut to Eternity"), and *Mitumanishnau-omadens* ("Poor Indian's Little Bottle"). One draft includes a song surprisingly similar to songs that the Siberian Chukchi sing (or used to sing) about the delights of drinking the urine of a person who's eaten *wapaq* (*A. muscaria*). Here are a few lines from the

song as cited by Kee:

"I have a cure to alleviate your ills,
To take away all your unhappiness.
If only you will come to my penis
And take the quickening waters
flowing from it
You, too, can be forever happy."

Kee's writings suggest that red-capped *A. muscaria* — *A. muscaria* var. *muscaria* — virtually blanket Ojibwe country, but the opposite is true: they hardly occur there at all. In western or southeastern North America, yes; but not in northern Michigan. It would appear that Kee had read ethnographic studies like Waldemar Bogaras' *The Chukchi of Northeastern Asia* and borrowed information from those studies without bothering to consult any distribution maps (or their equivalent) that might display the locations of several varieties of *A. muscaria*.

You might wonder where she obtained the dried specimens she gave to Wasson. Probable answer: either from one of the doubtless many dealers in psychotropic substances who would have hung out on the Ann Arbor campus in the 1970s or maybe from a West Coast acquaintance via the U.S. Postal Service. She would not have collected those specimens on Garden Island, however.

Since Wasson found the use of *A. muscaria* in virtually every nook and cranny in the historical woodwork, Kee would have been only too glad to inform him that the Ojibwe used the mushroom, too. For what better way to gain the attention of the Shining-From-Afar-Man than to seize upon the supreme object of his interest and inform him that your own people also believe in the potency of that mushroom, indeed drink the urine of its partakers? In fact, Wasson got Kee a gig at a 1978 conference on psychoactive drugs in San Francisco, where she told a rapt audience that the sacred quality of *A. muscaria* is passed on through urine, a drink of choice among her own people.

In *Shroom*, Andy Letcher writes that Kee and Wasson "appear to have been lovers" (Letcher, 2007), but anthropologist Reid Kaplan thinks Wasson's age and health (several strokes) would have made him an unlikely lover (www.singingto-theplants.com/2008/02/hallucinogen-in-north-america/). Such opinions notwithstanding, love

can take on a remarkable variety of guises. Whatever the nature of Kee's relationship with Wasson—and I would argue in favor of an inextricable mix of romance, careerism, and Wasson's bank account—a goodly part of their correspondence at Harvard can't be viewed until the year 2025. The reason for such secrecy is anybody's guess—erotic declarations? Kee's desire to promote herself? Wasson's not always judicious nature?

Kee offered Wasson Ojibwe fungal lore in fits and starts, also in unfinished drafts. Andy Letcher says that she knew Wasson had mixed feelings about her, so "she drew out the process of providing him with anecdotes and stories ... in the hope that her affections might eventually be reciprocated" (Letcher, 2007). To which I might add: the more material you give to a well-situated person like Wasson, the higher your star will rise in the ethnographic and/or entheogenic firmament ... and if you give that material to him slowly, the Shining-From-Afar-Man might think you have a bottomless trough of it.

These days Native Americans are often placed on pedestals because they're considered highly spiritual individuals with vast amounts of wisdom to impart. Kee knew exactly how to get herself installed on this sort of pedestal. Her installers called her "Grandmother" (anon., pers. com.), a tribute to her putative wisdom, and when she died on Garden Island on July 21, 1999, they honored her with a ceremony. I suspect that very few of those who attended that ceremony were Ojibwe.

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