Religious Ritual in the Mixtec Culture: A Holistic Evaluation

Honors Thesis

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Thanks and Dedication

Dedicated to:

All my teachers...

in and out of the classroom

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Abstract

The highlands of western Oaxaca have been home to the Mixtec people since the Pre-Classical era. Indeed it is the mythical and cosmological location where their deity lifted the sky from the earth. They have left many artifacts, works of metallurgy, and the rare gift of fan-fold books called codices. The codices express their Mixtec story, through their Mixtec point of view. Much of what we now know has been retrieved from the codices. Although much research and data has been collected, the significance of mushrooms in Mixtec life has been all but neglected. In addition to a study of the relevant literature on the Mixtec as well global examination of mushroom consumption and ritual, this thesis examines the modern presence of mushrooms in the Mixtec areas. I was able to travel to western Oaxaca for a brief time, speak with locals, search for curanderas, and witness how openly mushrooms are accepted, even today. This study will take a holistic approach though evaluating the geographical location of the Mixtec, the economic impact of controlling mushrooms for trade, and the use of mushrooms in religious ritual. This paper will also make the connection between the control of mushrooms and power.
I. Introduction

The role of mushrooms has been largely neglected in Mesoamerican culture. Mushrooms served as a medium to communicate with gods and ancestors, and therefore power. This thesis will examine the economic and religious role of mushrooms by investigating; the geographic-cultural region known as Mesoamerica, with a focus on the Mixtec people, their religious practices, the importance of mushrooms in their religious ceremonies, the various types of mushrooms in Mesoamerica, the effect of psilocybin on the mind, the power that comes from controlling religious resources, and the battle for control of Mixtec valleys in highland Oaxaca.

II. Mesoamerica

Mesoamerica as a geographic area is a large land mass which extends from present day Panama to what is known as the American Southwest. It is bordered by the Pacific Ocean to the west and south, the Gulf of Mexico to the eastern

![Map of Mesoamerica](image.png)

Img 1: Mesoamerica as a geographic region
north; the Rocky Mountains and the Great Basin in the western north, and the Caribbean Sea to the east. It is host to a vast array of terrain and landforms. “All the climate extremes of our globe are found, from arctic cold near the summits of the highest volcanoes to the Turkish-bath atmosphere of the coastal jungles. Merely to pass from one valley to another is to enter a markedly different ecological zone” (Coe 2008: 10).

As a cultural region it extends from the southern rim of the Mexican Plateau, to present day Panama. Mesoamerica is one of the few geographic regions in the world where civilizations emerged. “Evidence has been found in the cave systems of Chan Hol, to hearths surrounded by mammoth patellas at Rancho La Amapola dating back to thirty thousand years before present” (Oxford Encyclopedia). There are different theories as to where the peoples of Mesoamerica came from.

One theory states that during the last glaciation period the inhabitants of the western hemisphere came on a land bridge across what is today the Bering Strait. Sea levels were much lower due to the fact that more water was retained in the glaciers. “At the maximum extent in the Pleistocene period, glaciers covered nearly a third of
Earth’s land surface” (Peterson 2009: 538). There is also the theory that people went along the coast of the Americas until arriving in present day Chile.

Inhabitants of the islands in southwest Asia, Europe, and Africa sailed across the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. Sea levels were lower at this time, allowing more opportunities to stop for needed supplies on islands and atolls, specifically fresh water. With the possibility of technologies coming from different areas around the world, it seems logical for Mesoamerica to be one of the major areas of influence throughout the world. Indeed this happened again in the seventeenth century as Mesoamerica become the middle point for merchants and trade, bridging the gap from the European West and the Asian East. “The growing number of sea ports on both coasts of New Spain attracted foreign merchants and the proliferation of contraband... Goods from the Orient (China) were brought to the capital from Acapulco, while European goods were brought to Mexico City from Veracruz” (Online reference #1). This is important because the land of the Mixtec, whom I address later have been at the crossroads of cultures to the east, south, to the north, and west for several centuries.
Mesoamerica was and still is an area rich with resources. Evidence for this has been located in elaborate tombs from many different cultures. Archaeologist have discovered gold, silver, copper, turquoise, ornate pottery, scarlet macaw feathers, sophisticated ritual attire, stone idols, rubber, various colors of obsidian, jade, and other precious stones throughout excavation sites across Mesoamerica. Many mines can be located throughout Mexico today, both in use and abandoned. In fact, Taxco is known throughout the world for producing silver of exceptional purity. “Nestled in the Northern hills of Guerrero lies the picturesque town of Taxco. The silver mines of Taxco have had their share of fame beginning with Cortez who sent plundered riches from the mines back to Spain” (Online Reference #2). The Spanish also mined heavily for silver in San Louis Potosi and Zacatecas in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.
The mountains of the highlands were not the only source of valuable resources; the rich fertile valleys gave the greatest gift of all, food. The sediment rich in minerals that eroded down from the mountainside, provided one of the breadbaskets of the world. Maize (corn), squash, beans, and peppers were all domesticated in the Archaic Period in Mesoamerica. These crops alone account for the staple food in many cultures around the world today. “In fact, it is difficult to imagine what the world’s cuisines were like before the discovery of Mexico” (Coe 2008: 31).

With advances in agriculture, the cultures located in Mesoamerica were able to support large and expanding populations. This led to the need and ability to possess a well-defined social hierarchy consisting of: A. elites, a true ruling class; B. merchants and military leaders; C.
craftsman/specialist; D. warriors E. farmers. The farming class made up over ninety percent of the population, and those born into a farming family possessed no chance of becoming anything other than a farmer. With the exception of the ruling elite, there was opportunity to earn a higher social status and advance in the society. These were true thriving civilizations with a clearly stratified society and the ability to manage a society. They were masters of economics, designed and built everlasting cultural landscapes, and had an inherent relationship with the natural environment around them.

II. The Mixtec

The civilization of Mesoamerica that this thesis will address is the Mixtec. “The Mixtec Indian people are concentrated in the northern and western parts of what is today Oaxaca, southern Puebla, and Guerrero. Their land is composed of a
succession of small, yet prosperous valleys surrounded by high mountains and dry deserts. The largest is called the Nochixtlán Valley” (Pohl 2009: 1). The name Mixtec translates as ‘The Cloud People’ which is an appropriate name for the climate and geography of their land. When visiting the area during later June and early July, it was cloudy the entire time and rained sporadically. The clouds also seemed to linger near the not too distant peaks often times hiding their crowns.

The Mixtec culture was established as early as the late Pre-classic era. They began the rise to power in the early Post-classic era due to the decline of the Zapotecs. They overran the Zapotec territories and the elites married into powerful alliances that controlled economically prosperous territories. They flourished from AD 900 until the conquest by the Aztec in 1458. It was the arrival of the Spanish in Oaxaca in 1521 that ultimately brought the end of Aztec control. The new rulers claimed to be the ‘sovereign rulers of the land’, and were indeed fascinated by the metallurgy of gold and silver by the Mixtecs. “The Mixtecs were very talented artists--they did exceptional work in gold and pottery--and they were also brave warriors. On top of all that, they were famous among
Mesoamericans for their knowledge of medicine, astronomy, history and geography” (Online Resource #3). It was the prosperous obsidian and gold, as well as their location in the trade routes that enticed both the Aztec and Spaniards. The Mixtec constructed large cities along the mountains and valleys, and built pyramids, markets, ball courts, and palaces. The city-states assembled alliances with neighboring city-states through marriage of elite offspring, to advance political and economic control of a geographic area. One of the determining factors was the location of which they controlled through the alliance. The Mixtec Alta is in a unique location, particularly when economics are taken into account.

The Mixteca Alta is located at the point where the Sierra Madre del Sur and the Sierra Madre Oriental converge. To the east is the Isthmus de Tehuantepec, which is a flat, narrow strip of land, and the closest link between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. It is also the unofficial boundary division from the Maya. The
Maya lands stretch from the Isthmus into the Yucatan Peninsula, along the Sierra Madre de Chiapas, through Guatemala, Honduras, and northern Nicaragua.

There is another rare physical feature that the Mixtec territory possessed, the continental divide. The continental divide separates watersheds, and is a string of mountains that connect like the spine of a human body. Each watershed possessed distinct cultures that interacted and traded with the Mixtec.

The largest watershed is Balsas or known locally as the Mezcalá, which is also the largest to come from the Sierra del Sur mountain range. The major upper reaches, or branches, are the Mixteco, which like the Nile River is a north flowing river before meeting up with Tlapanec, Atyoc, and Amacuzac Rivers. The last two mentioned rivers
originate from the towering Popocatépetl volcano, near present day Puebla. This towering, majestic volcano has been the center of attention for spiritual practices, an easily recognized landmark for trade from Veracruz on the Gulf, the basin of Mexico, and southern route to the Pacific, and territory boundary.

The Mezcala River stretches for an outstanding four hundred and seventy-nine miles and flows through six Mexican states, before entering the Pacific Ocean at Mangrove Point, which is the political boundary of present day states Michoacan and Guerrero. The historic city of Chilpancingo is located within this watershed, and its fertile valleys have been producing maize for as long as nine thousand years (Carroll, 2010 Online Resource #4). There are several different cultures living within this watershed, with access to its banks including; various Nahua peoples, minor tribes, and in the lower reach the Tarascan Empire.

The second watershed is the Papaloapan River (which translated from Nahuatl derives from Papalotl ‘butterfly’ and apan ‘river’.) Its headwaters begin near present day Tuxtpec, Oaxaca and they travel northeast into the Gulf of Mexico at Alvarado Lagoon, Veracruz. Traveling five hundred
and fifty-nine miles, absorbing and carrying heavy sediment along the way; the Papaloapan watershed “...covers forty-six thousand five hundred and seventeen kilometers squared (46,517 km²) the second largest in Mexico” (Brundell, 2006 Online Resource #5). The mouth of the river would be a different culture of people with different resources, than those of the other two watersheds. This river ends in the swampy lowlands of what was the mighty Olmec civilization.

The last watershed is the Verde River watershed which flows on a southern direction for two hundred and thirteen miles to the Pacific Ocean. It is composed of the Salacha, Polvareda, and Nochixtlan rivers. Most of the Mixteca population are within the Nochixtlan Valley including Suchixtlan, Jaltapec, Tilantango, and Yucunudahi. On its route to the Pacific Ocean, the river passes within five kilometers (three miles) of Tututepec; which plays as a major economic resource during the legendary Mixtec figure, Lord Eight Deer Jaguar Claw’s war campaign. This river system would also go through the Zapotec Empire, which ties them, with rivers and water systems alone into three large powerful empires and cultures. These empires each have access to different terrain and subsequently different significant resources.
The fact that waterways were (and still are) arteries of transportation, and the Mixtec possessed the territory of the highlands, the source of rivers that meander and zigzag through such a vast and strategically placed location, meant that geographically speaking, they were rich. In addition to the knowledge of water routes, they possessed access of the continental divide, canyons, and therefore trails, paths, and routes that connected the vast trade network of Mesoamerica. Being located between the Isthmus de Tehuantepec, the Maya territory, and those even further to the south (present day Nicaragua and Panama) to the heavily populated and prosperous Basin of Mexico were beneficial in the fact that most commerce went through their territory. This remained a focal point of trade until aviation was introduced to the trade market. This also exemplifies why
wealth and prestige was attributed to trade and owning access to trade.

The Basin of Mexico has been an area of intense trade since the Teotihuacan society established a dominant state. Materials and resources have been extracted from there since people’s arrival. “Throughout its existence, Teotihuacan was involved in trade with the lowland regions of Mesoamerica. Teotihuacan exports (green obsidian and Thin Orange Pottery) are not common at lowland Classic sites), but they are ubiquitous, occurring in sites on the Gulf Coast (such as Matacapan and El Tajín), in Oaxaca, in Maya sites in the Petén (e.g., green obsidian comprises 1% of all obsidian at Tikal, and in the Guatemalan highlands” (Smith 2010: 205). Once trade routes were established and geographic and economic data was compiled, the Mixteca Alta happened to be in the center of an extensive trade route extending from the (present day) Mexican plateau to (present day) Nicaragua and the Caribbean. How much knowledge the Mixtec possessed on their geographic location of a massive corridor is unknown. However, the fact that they sought to marry into alliances which allowed them to control access to travel routes and commerce indicates that they were aware of how to move up in social status amongst
the elite of not only their society, but other states whom had influence. In short they were well aware of the fact that goods of great value were being transported right through the heart of their territory, and the advantages from controlling that trade.

IV. Religion

Throughout Mesoamerica evidence can be found concerning the religious beliefs and customs of various cultures. These are primarily uncovered through archeological findings of artifacts, engravings on stelle, pyramids, temples, plazas, through ethnographic data, folklore, festivals, and through codices. Codices are fan-folded books, which contain elegant pictograms painted in a narrative form, usually following boustrophedon reading orders. The Mixtec as well as other civilizations, such as the Aztec recorded their perspective of their own history on leather and glossed with a gelatin substance. “These were (and are) great
treasures because the Mixtec Indians of Oaxaca were masters of codex painting, and the codices are even more precious now because so few of them remain” (Williams 2009: 30).

The principal god found throughout Mesoamerica is named Quetzalcoatl, the Plumed Serpent. For the Mixtec, Quetzalcoatl (depicted in codices as Nine Wind) is credited with holding the sky above the place of central interest to the Mixteca, Yucunudahui (Rain God Hill). The depiction of this event is found in the Mixtec Codex Vindobonensis Mexicanus I (Vienna) page 47.

“Codex Vienna describes the celestial creation of certain unique stones, the birth of Lord Nine Wind Quetzalcoatl from a stone knife, his descent to earth, and his holding up water and sky at Yucunudahui” (Furst 1978a: 109). There are other gods such as Tlaloc, the rain god of the Toltec; also known as Tzahui, to the Mixtecs” (Nicholson 1967: 98). Tezcatlipica, Tepeyollotl, Mictlantecuhtli, Xilonen, Tonantzin, Xochiquetzal, and Macuilxochitl are just a select few of other gods worshiped as well. These gods are listed to demonstrate the people of Mesoamerica had several gods, many of which are connected to the nature and natural phenomenon. However, Quetzalcoatl is “The Plumed Serpent, god of learning, the planet Venus
(which is related to war, birth, and time), the great sky god, God of Maize, and culture hero to the ancient peoples of Mesoamerica” (Nicholson 1967: 109). There were many other gods that served specific functions in Mesoamerican society, with just as much prestige and followers.

Another god that is of importance in this thesis is Seven Flower-Xochipilli. He was the god of dance, happiness, flowers, fertility, art, beauty, games, and craft. “To the Aztecs and Mixtecs, the scarlet macaw was the personification of a solar maize god named Seven Flower-Xochipilli. He was the patron of royal palaces and people whom produce crafts and art. He was also thought to be the god of royal marriages and sexual procreation, and as father of the gods, he presided over the thirteenth or highest heaven, where only the royal born were admitted after death. It is therefore not surprising that he was the patron of rituals involving hallucinogenic plants.
Participants in these rituals believed that they could actually visit the royal paradise to discuss matters of utmost importance with their deceased ancestors” (Pohl, 2001: 97).

The deceased kings and queens of the Mixtec were wrapped in sacred mummy bundles and placed in a natural sacred location. Often times these locations were mystic and holy caves. The ancestors’ mummies were consulted by living royalty and priests in important political affairs which guided the fate of Mixtec society. Even the doomed and unsuccessful Lord Two Rain of Tilantongo is sought out as a mummy for advice (depicted in Zouche-Nutall obverse page 8). Caves served as a medium for this communication to take place; therefore their functions should be examined further.

Caves were more than a geological feature for the Mixtec. They were an inherent part of the supernatural in life. To this day people still use caves for supernatural effects. In one example the Cave of the Angel or Cave of Sickness, is the supposed home of a devil near Huachino; yet people from Jaltepec go there to be cured of diseases and to ask for money. The folklore is associated with the location (the cave), and the belief that the supernatural
ability the cave possess, though described as a demon by western religion is seen and used as a remedy for positive in the seeker’s life.

Royal rulers have births from sacred geological landmarks. “Other progenitors were born from the trees at Apoala or Achiutla, or came down via cloud-ropes from cave openings in the sky. Some were born twice: first in the earth from a cave (Lord Eight Wind) and then from trees (Eight Wind) or from a stone knife in the sky (Nine Wind). It is then also fair to say that for some royal Mixtec families, caves and things associated with them were an inherent part of their genesis” (Williams 2009: 69).

Having experience in exploring and enjoying caves in both the karst topography in Texas and in Mexico’s highlands, I will express my experience and observations, and perhaps it will be helpful to understand the feelings or experience of being inside one. Caves allow for little or no light and sounds echo from many different directions. Caves are humid, home to large mammals, fish, birds, bats, and an extensive list of insects, and reptiles. Water disappears into voids and openings, it seeps from cracks, and often sits perfectly still and uninterrupted. Water can rush in, in forms from leakage to gushing. Sometimes it
collects in the deep recesses within, and most have walls that appear to ‘sweat’ from condensation. Water also drips from the ceiling forming stalagmites, stalactites, and columns and some caves are networks of forking, crossing paths. Sometimes they are dead-end labyrinths and others have several entry and exit points. Many which allow you to arrive in different valleys and bypass jungle, rivers, and mountains. Caves even without the mythological aspect of the Mixtec are impressive, wonderful, and at times scary geological havens.

High ranking priests enjoyed an elite status that was equal or superior to those of the Princes. In fact one of the most highly decorated heroes of the Mixtec, Eight Deer Jaguar Claw, was the son of a high ranking head priest and not a king at all. He went on to control more territory and resources than of any the Mixtec lords prior to him. The lineage founder of the Mixtec, Lord Eight Wind of Suchihtlan was also a high ranking priest. They also served administrative duties with economics in the form of handling the tribute taxes and markets.

The people communicating with deities and deceased ancestors would be specialized, trained shamans, which would resemble the western concept of a priest, especially
at the level of their society. Shamanism is “an ancient, worldwide religious tradition... based on the belief that the spirits of ancestors and the controlling forces of the natural world, or gods, can be contacted by religious specialists in altered states of consciousness” (Reilly 1996:30a).

There are several ways to enter altered states of consciousness, through meditation, dehydration, nutrition depravation, exhaustion due to physical strains, and forced chemical reactions in the mind induced by a wide variety of flora, animals, and fungi to name a few. The Mixtec as other cultures all around the world were well aware of how to achieve an altered state of consciousness. The Mixtec were familiar with the flora within the Mesoamerican realm, possessing several millennia of knowledge and history from ancestors living in Mesoamerica.
There is a certain select group of priests that possessed a higher level of supernatural ability; they are called the Yaha Yahui. The Yaha Yahui were the highest ranking priests and were usually regarded as semi-deities. The two principal figures in Mixtec history were Yaha Yahui, Lord Eight Wind Eagle Flints and Lord Eight Deer Jaguar Claw. The magical abilities attributed to the Yaha Yahui are extensive, including being able to fly through solid rock and to fly around the canyons of the Mixteca at night while appearing as balls of light” (much like a comet or occasional shooting star) (Pohl 1994:44). There are still stories of flying wizards in the mountains of Oaxaca to this day. They also served as ‘sacrificer’ to the gods which involved a knowledge and familiarity with anatomy. Markets are associated with them, both of which are important roles in the Mixtec society. When kings died they were taken by the four priests (the high council of the Yaha Yahui) for burial in the surrounding mountains.

“Clearly, an important aspect of Mixtec religious life was not only the worship of ancestors through the sacred bundles kept in the civic-ceremonial center, but also the veneration of the dead themselves who were located in various shrines throughout the natural environment.” (Hand out in ANTH 3376A: 47) The Yaha Yahui are associated
particularly with the reverence of the dead in caves. It is their ability to communicate with the dead which in turn allows for the manipulation of the future.

Communicating with the dead was an access to power and wisdom; of course this prestigious information was limited to select elite for the simple reason of empowerment. K. C. Chang states the importance of access to ancestors in Art, Myth, and Ritual, “They were born into the right clans and (especially) lineages, married the right partners, sat at the central places, were associated with the right myths, behaved in ways deserving popular support, and last but not least had access to the ancestral wisdom and foresight derived from ritual and art... How do I gain that access? The answer was: By controlling a few key resources” (Chang 1988: 95). There are a few key resources needed for communicating with the dead for the Mixtec, as well as other cultures in Mesoamerica: location, environment, timing, status, and mind-altering substances. One of these substances is hallucinogenic mushrooms.

V. Mushrooms

Mushrooms are a member of the fungi kingdom. There are many different types of mushrooms found throughout the world and their uses seem as endless as the various
species. The most common use for mushrooms is to be eaten for calories. They have also been used for dyes. “The chromospheres of mushroom dyes are organic compounds and produce strong and vivid colors, and all colors of the spectrum can be achieved with mushroom dyes. Before the invention of synthetic dyes mushrooms were the source of many textile dyes” (Mussak 2009: 184). The role of dye has an economic impact as well. Once the Aztec conquered the Mixtec they did what many ruling empires do to conquered territories, force tribute. The royal Aztec could wear an outfit only once before it was passed down to nobles. The Mixtec were forced to pay tribute of many items due to the fact their territory is so rich in resources. One of those items was elegant, multi colored dresses/outfits.

They are also known for possessing medicinal properties. Historically, mushrooms have long had medicinal uses, especially in traditional Chinese medicine. Currently, several extracts have widespread use in Japan, Korea, and China, as adjuncts to radiation treatments and chemotherapy. (Online Reference #6)

The mushrooms that are of importance in this thesis are those that have psychoactive properties. "There are according to current estimates, 209 species of
hallucinogenic mushrooms, of which most fall into two broad
groups; Amanita muscaria and Amanita pantherina. There are
currently 186 known psilocybin species— the figure is
rising all the time— of which 76 occur in Mexico alone. To
pick a mushroom at random in Mexico is to stand a very good
chance of picking a hallucinogenic one, which is probably
why it is one part of the world where there is a genuinely
old tradition of psilocybin mushroom usage” (Letcher 2007:
12-13).

The Fly-Agaric is a vivid and easily recognizable
fungus. In fact it looks like nothing else on earth and
even small children could spot it out as a mushroom
because it is the archetypal
mushroom. It is found on everyday art and is not strictly
associated with a counter culture as other mushrooms are.
It can be found almost anywhere in the world, and is
symbiotically associated with birch, pine, and fir forests.
The mushrooms are often depicted with popular lawn gnomes.
There are even connections between this popular mushroom and a childhood favorite character, Santa Claus. They both are adorned in red and white. He has powers closely related to shamans, and both appear from nowhere overnight. Evidence for this is found in ancient folklore of pre-Christian northern Europeans.

Odin, a Norse god, would ride on his chariot (the big dipper) through the air to go to his home on the winter solstice. It happens that his home is the fixed at the polar star, which all stars seem to revolve around. This star leads directly north to the North Pole. The traditional dress of red and white is due to that the shamans would wear red with white spots in their belief it would help locate the magic mushroom. Coca-Cola has drawn on this image and produced the image we most identify as Santa Claus in modern times. The Christians aligned religious holidays with pagan holidays so they may become more easily persuaded to convert. “To these early Christians, Saint Nicholas became a sort of "super-shaman" who was overlaid upon their own shamanic cultural practices. Many images of Saint Nicholas from these early times show him wearing red and white, or standing in front
of a red background with white spots, the design of the amanita mushroom” (Online Reference #7).

The effects of *Amanita muscaria* was documented by Mordecai Cooke in his work The Seven Sisters of Sleep. “At first it generally produces cheerfulness afterwards giddiness and drunkenness, ending occasionally in entire loss of consciousness. The natural inclinations of the individual become stimulated... Erroneous impressions of size and distance are common occurrences, a straw lying in the road becomes a formidable object, (requiring) a leap sufficient to clear a barrel of ale” (Cooke, 1860). He would later record this particular fungus could be deadly and focused on other fungi as he furthered his career as a mycologist.

One of the earliest and best, documented observations of religious practices involving mushroom usage in Mesoamerica comes from Bernardino de Sahagun whom spent close to sixty years studying and interacting with the indigenous populations during the sixteenth century. He produced a hefty volume of all his observations and experiences in the Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva Espana, also known as Florentine Codex. His accounts describe the consumption of mushrooms, peyote, tobacco, and
morning glory seeds. He describes the mushrooms as being very bitter and causing abnormal rate of the heartbeat, an increase in lust, and equal measures of terror and laughter. He describes a religious ritual involving mushrooms as, “at the hour of blowing conches and flutes, chocolate would be drunk and mushrooms eaten with honey taken to ease the bitterness. After dancing and weeping, mushroom influenced participants would have visions in which they might see their destiny, or even the manner of their death, before falling into a stupor. Later they would sit around discussing the meaning of what they had seen” (Online Reference #8). This, more or less, describes the actions and experiences felt by those that take mushrooms recreationally in today’s society.

The mushrooms being consumed were not only the Fly-Agaric, but also variations of Psilocybe which contain the
active ingredients psilocybin and psilocin. These are the most commonly used mushrooms to achieve altered states, hence called *magic mushrooms*. Two of the most widely dispersed and used magic mushrooms are the *Psilocybe semilanceata* (above) and *Psilocybe cubensis* (next page).

“The ability of hechizeros or wizards not only to fly but to prophesize is commonly attributed to the ingestion of mushrooms and other hallucinogens, enabling them to transform themselves and to fly to the ancestors, thereby receiving answers to their questions or even diagnosing disease” (Ravicz, 1961). Evidence of native Mesoamericans using mushrooms to induce trance can be found in codices, artifacts, ‘money’, and on pottery.
An example of a ritual is depicted in Codex Vindobonensis page 24, which involves the deity-patron of ancestors, the previously mentioned Seven Flower-Xochipilli. He is the first recipient of the mushrooms from Nine Wind Quetzalcoatl in which a bundle is then described. There are then seven seated figures holding the same motif designated as a mushroom until the depiction of a priest performing a dance ceremony and entering the underworld via a large body of water.

There is then another ceremony involving Lords Seven Motion and Seven Wind, whom is holding a different plant, possibly wild tobacco, datura, or other hallucinogenic plants; they consume the religious ritual plants which allow them to open and enter the portal to the underworld. This then permits them to converse with deities and ancestors. There is also a deity, possibly Nine Wind, or a priest with a man with mushrooms growing from his head. A similar example can be found in Lienzo de Zacatepec Number One. Codex Magliabechiano shows a seated man consuming magic mushrooms with Mictlantechtili, the Lord of
the Underworld, sitting behind him grasping his head with his talons. Copper mushrooms were also found in sacrificial victims in the Tenango Cave.

VI. Controlling Mushrooms

Thus far, this thesis has sought to provide an understanding in the history of Mesoamerica, the Mixtec people, their geography related to location and economics, their religious practices, rituals associated involving mushroom usage, the various uses and effects of mushrooms, and the commonality of psychoactive mushrooms in Mexico. Now I will attempt to make a connection between controlling mushrooms and the beginning of one of the most epic and legendary campaigns, in the entire western hemisphere, the feud between Lady Six Monkey Warrior Queen of Jaltepec and Eight Deer Jaguar Claw. This marked the beginning of his relentless war path and his legacy.

Lady Six Monkey was the daughter of a matrilineal royal family of the second dynasty of Jaltepec. Her life is most famously documented in Codex Selden on pages six, seven, and eight. She is the granddaughter of the great hero Lord Eight Wind, and was the fourth child and the first daughter. It is worth emphasizing the gender because all three of her older brothers were born and then
sacrificed just before her death at Chalcatongo. This female ruler in Jaltepec secures a political relationship with Chalcatongo.

A brief interpretation of these pages and a brief background of Tilantango are needed to understand the conflict between Lord Eight Deer Jaguar Claw and Lady Six Monkey. Lord Eight Deer of Tilantango was born in AD 1063, the son of a high ranking priest. Lady Six Monkey was born in AD 1073, heir to rule Jaltepec. The King of Tilantango Lord Two Rain was born in AD 1075, and ruled Tilantango before the age of six. (In fact at the age of six) In the year of four house (AD 1081) Tilantango, he orders Lord Three Lizard to attack Jaltepec, but does not succeed and is defeated. Lady Six
Monkey is led by Priest Ten Lizard on a journey for guidance and travels underground and confers with the oracle Lady Nine Grass. The contents of a ritual bundle are listed, a dance ritual, and a matrimonial bath with Lord Eleven Wind. Lord Three Alligator and Lady Six Monkey are on a journey carrying a bundle and 3 different plants (some of which seem to resemble mushrooms). Either at their arrival point or on the way of their journey they are insulted by Lords Six Lizard and Two Alligator. She then confers with the oracle Lady Nine Grass, whom instructs to attack. She does so and is successful; she captures both at Wasp Hill. She sacrifices Lord 2 Alligator at the temple in Jaltepec. Lord Two Flower then is seen carrying Lady Six Monkey, both of whom were painted with a smile to Hua Chino. Lord 3 Alligator, carrying the same plants leads Lord Six Lizard to Hua Chino and sacrifices him there.

Lord Two Flower then gives Lady Six Monkey a new garment, which represents the prestigious title of War Garment; she is now a Warrior Queen! Her history ends here, and Codex Selden does not mention the fact that Lord Eight Deer’s Revenge for Tilantango is the reason for her death. Codex Selden does little to add to Lord Eight Deer’s
Legacy, because it is a political document. For more data we will need to look at Codex Zouche-Nuttall.

Starting on Zouche-Nuttall reverse page forty-four, the epic narrative of Lord Eight Deer Jaguar Claw begins. His begins with the defeat of Tilantango at the hands of Jaltepec. Pictured in page four; is the dead mummy bundle of Lord Three Lizard, then a happy Lady Six Monkey with the warrior motif of a chevron and she is holding an incense burner, followed by a submissive Lord Eight Deer in priest regalia. This is a rare depiction of Lord Eight Deer’s defeat. Most other pages in Zouche Nuttall present him as being glorious and successful.

This is the beginning of Lord Eight Deer’s successful and illustrious campaign. Once Tilantango was shamed with defeat, he is burdened with restoring dignity to his city. Tilantango also lost the economic benefit of staying united with Jaltepec and maintaining “control over the southern
Nochixtlan Valley” (Pohl 2009: 19, Intro in Williams’ Book). That alliance went to Tilantango’s rival, Red and White Bundle, when Lady Six Monkey married Lord Eleven Wind and not Lord Two Rain of Tilantango. The royalty and high priest were all related to each other, so this is a family dispute much like the feuds of the royalty in Europe, but what were the Mixtec elite disputing over?

Certainly one of the major factors was its location in economic trade routes and access of the waterways (previously mentioned as an important factor). Another reason was the rich fertile valleys, which are still a prized possession today. Even after millennia of cultivation it remains an amazingly fertile and productive soil; the maize in image four was taken in the Nochixtlan Valley, July of 2012. Part of the reason the soil is so productive is the diligence of the abundant decomposers; fungus is one of the decomposers at work. A place which contains consistent humidity and is home of “The Cloud People” is ideal for growth. It is no wonder fungus did and still does thrive in the environmental and atmospheric conditions in the highlands of Oaxaca. Yet we now know that fungus, or more specifically mushrooms, played an important role in their religion and ritual. This thesis has also
stated the importance of having access to power, one of which was conversing with the gods and receiving counsel from deceased ancestors. Through controlling access to the desired mushrooms, specifically if they are confined to one region of the world, one would have a powerful stature in Mixtec Society.

Could one reason of maintaining control over the southern Nochixtlan Valley have been controlling access of the important magic mushroom? By controlling a significant ingredient necessary for religious ritual, in order to converse with gods and the high status deceased, they controlled an access to power. Everything put forth in this thesis has been to support this notion; much more time would be needed in the study of ethno botany and I would like more time with the Mixtec to have a better cultural understanding. I was able to spend
some time in Oaxaca, Taxco (in the current state of Guerrero), and the Nochixtlan Valley during my bus ride back to Texas from Panama.

During my time traveling, there were festivals taking place dedicated to mushrooms, or hongos, as they are known in Spanish. I also discovered street art on buildings, fliers for festivals, and at every place I stayed, the hosts were cooking mushrooms. When I asked why everyone was eating mushrooms, their response was, “it is because now is the time when the popular hongos de grande, were not poisonous, and everyone loves the taste of them.” The non-poisonous fact was repeatedly told to me due to my not wanting to eat them; not because I was fearful of them being poisonous, I do not enjoy the slimy texture in the caldo, or soup. However I could not be rude and am easily bothered by repetitive questioning, and I was ‘politely forced’ to eat several bowls of the mushroom soup which may be nutritious, but I did not find it delicious.

I was able to enjoy the beautiful culture, and gather information through direct conversation and interviews, search for curanderos, and simply observe the symbols and interactions of the society. More time would be needed to investigate the role of mushrooms in both current and
previous Mixtec customs. I believe there is sufficient evidence to pursue the proof of mushrooms being both an economic and religious resource for the Mixtec, and that it was an important aspect of controlling the southern Nochixtlan Valley.

Much of the data will come from further investigation of codices. Mushrooms were significant enough to be included in ritual, depicted in codices, and even the symbol for Jaltepec could be interpreted as a sprouting mushroom (although many have not identified it as a mushroom or anything, and it therefore remains a mystery). I have heard it described as a mouth vomiting sand, which interestingly, vomiting is an effect of mushrooms for many people. The Mixtec deemed mushrooms important enough to record it in this way, but possibly others as well; the problem with the codices is that the message was not meant for us. Therefore more data from articles dealing with mushrooms, religious practices of Mesoamerica, and ethnographic data of modern Mixtec people will need to be read and explored. Much of this data
is written in Spanish only and a better understanding of the language is required. I will need more time living within and amongst the Mixtec in small mountain pueblos and in larger urban areas.

VII. Conclusion

This thesis has put forth ample information to support the examination and role of mushrooms for the Mixtec culture through geographic interpretation, the role of mushrooms in religious ritual, and economics through trade. The definitive position is by controlling the area in which the desired mushrooms grows, one controlled the access to power. Controlling and possessing the mushrooms was an access to spiritual power, which in turn was power to rule, lead, and manage the Mixtec people while collecting and building monumental wealth. The significance and role which mushrooms played in the Mixtec culture has been all but neglected. Hopefully this paper has shed light on a topic that future anthropologist will find useful, and a new perspective has been revealed on mushrooms and their impact for the Mixtec.
Bibliography


Fields, V. (2001). The Road to Aztlan. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art


Princeton: The Art Museum, Princeton University


**Online References**

1. www.pasadena.edu/files/syllabi/djybarra_7617.doc


Photos and Images

Image 1 http://www.santarosa.edu/~mbond/Mesomapoutline.html

Image 2 Author’s photo – Taxco, Mexico

Image 3 Author’s photo – Maize tortillas, beans, and various peppers; a traditional Mesoamerican meal

Image 4 Author’s photo – Suchixtlan in the Nochixtlan Valley

Image 5 http://www.famsi.org/research/pohl/pohlmixtec1.html

Image 6 Author’s photo – Continental Divide, Cerro Chirripo

Image 7 http://www.mrburnett.net/3rdGradeBurnett/ColoringPictures/Aztecs.html

Image 8 http://www.crystalinks.com/aztecgods.html

Image 9 Codex Zouche-Nuttall page 1

Image 10 Codex Bodley page 9

Image 11 Author’s photo – Amanita muscaria

Image 12 http://www.shroomery.org/9571/Psilocybe-semilanceata

Image 14 Codex Vindobonensis page 24

Image 15 Codex Magliabechiano

Image 16 Codex Selden pages 6, 7, & 8

Image 17 Codex Zouche-Nuttall reverse page 4

Image 18 Author’s photo- Street Art: Oaxaca, Oaxaca

Image 19 Codex Selden page 6