

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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A Mushroom Omelette III: Hongos Colombianos

Pasto  
Colombia

December 8, 1972

Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
535 Fifth Avenue  
New York, New York 10017  
U.S.A.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

One of the most interesting pieces of news to come out of South America recently is the discovery of psilocybin mushrooms in Colombia. Some species, especially Stropharia cubensis, had been reported outside of Mexico, but it was assumed that their use was confined to Oaxaca and neighboring territories. Then, about five years ago, stories began to reach the U.S. that students in Colombia were getting high by eating mushrooms.

Colombia is a sort of cornucopia of psychoactive plants. In addition to producing a multitude of exotic Amazonian drugs (such as yagé), it is the main source of potent marihuana in western South America and a large coca producer as well. And now, it seems, it is a second home for psilocybin mushrooms. Stropharia cubensis -- the San Ysidro of Mexico -- has established itself in many parts of the country and is being consumed by many people. Interestingly enough, there is no tradition for use of mushrooms as intoxicants by South American Indians, so that knowledge of use of this species must have come from outside. Quite probably, it was brought by hippies -- North American, South American, or European -- who knew the mushroom from the Huautla area of Oaxaca and recognized it in Colombia. In some cases these people have recently introduced

Colombian Indians to the drug -- the reverse of the usual order of things.

Stropharia grows in open cow pastures, in manure, and likes hot weather. Many stories about it circulate among travelers in Colombia. One is that it grows wherever volcanoes, fireflies, and avocados occur together. Another is that it follows Brahma cattle (which were imported into South America in this century because of their resistance to heat). But it seems to be growing all over the place without regard to any particular conditions and has even been reported in great numbers in central Florida and along the Gulf Coast of the United States, where volcanoes, at least for the moment, are not much in evidence.

Nearly every major Colombian city has a mushroom field not far from it. There is a big one at La Miel ("Honey"), reachable by bus, milk truck, and footpath from Bogotá; one in the hills above Medellín; another just at the edge of Cali. After rains, when the hongos are plentiful, these fields are full of young people picking and eating the magic plants. The mushrooms are growing all through the fertile Cauca valley and in the Amazon basin as well. And now, other species, such as Psilocybe mexicana, previously known only in Mexico, are turning up, too -- one of them right in the streets of Bogotá. Yet so far, they have not been seen outside of Colombia; for example, no one has found them in Ecuador, Peru, or Venezuela.

Because Colombia has such a concentration of drug plants and because it is also the easiest place in South America to reach from the U.S., great numbers of North Americans come to sample the fruits of the land. And very few of them seem to be disappointed with the mushrooms. In fact, I have heard almost no stories of "bad trips" with mushrooms. Few persons get sick with them, and few have anything but good things to say about them. They are talked about with a kind of respect that one does not often hear from long-time users of many drugs.

I first ate Colombian mushrooms outside of Cali in an idyllically beautiful field, with clumps of woods, a clear river, and enormous, gray, hump-backed Brahma cows lying peacefully in the bright-green grass. It was the beginning of the dry season, but there were enough hongos to bemushroom a group of us, and we ate them as we found them. To eat them fresh from the ground was a great treat to the senses: how good they taste and how full of energy they seem! And how rare it is to come across something completely natural, fresh, and beautiful that not only gets you high with minimal physiological discomfort but also tastes delicious!

We sat in the grass, about ten of us, and let the mushrooms transport us to a realm of calm good-feeling, in which we drank in the beauty of the setting. There were color visions, as I had experienced before with San Ysidro in Mexico. But in Mexico I had eaten the mushrooms late at night, in darkness and secrecy, in the very shadow of menacing police authority. Now it was broad daylight, the open country, with no one but friendly fellow-travelers around. In Mexico I had felt like an early Christian pursuing the sacrament in a catacomb, wary for the approach of Roman legions; here everything was above-ground and open. The Indians of the Sierra Mazateca say that mushrooms cannot be eaten in the daytime -- that they must only be eaten at night. But here we were in full daylight having a wonderful time. In general, I prefer to take psychedelic substances in the daytime when their energies are more in harmony with the rhythms of my body, and I feel that way about mushrooms, too. Is it possible, I wondered, that the Indian habit of eating mushrooms at night is not so traditional as it appears but dates back only to the arrival of the Spanish and the persecutions of native rites by the Church?

After several hours, we wandered back through the imperturbable Brahma giants, across the river, and to the road where we had left our truck. Another nice thing about the mushrooms

is that they wear off, gently, after four to six hours -- in many ways a much more convenient duration of action than the twelve-hour trips of LSD, peyote, mescaline, MDA. We had some extra mushrooms still with us, and these we dried for later use. (They can also be preserved by packing them in honey.) Some days later, on the deserted shore of a lake in the eastern Andes, near the border of Ecuador, a few of us shared these dried mushrooms and again felt their magic. But though they still tasted good, it was not nearly so pleasant to eat them this way as fresh.

I strongly believe that psychedelics merely trigger or release certain experiences that originate in the human nervous system and that one can learn to have these experiences without taking drugs. But I also believe that psychedelic substances are useful in certain people at certain stages of development. And I think that when used properly they have enormous potential for bringing about medical as well as psychological cures of morbid conditions. Of all the psychedelics I am familiar with, none approaches mushrooms in overall desirable qualities, such as ease of consumption, lack of toxicity, and manageability of effects.

I am about to leave Pasto for Cali, a trip that will take me through the main mushroom area of southwestern Colombia. It is raining now, and I expect the fields will be bearing heavily. If I come across any more information about these magic hongos colombianos, I will forward it to you posthaste.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Andrew T. Weil". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name.

Andrew T. Weil