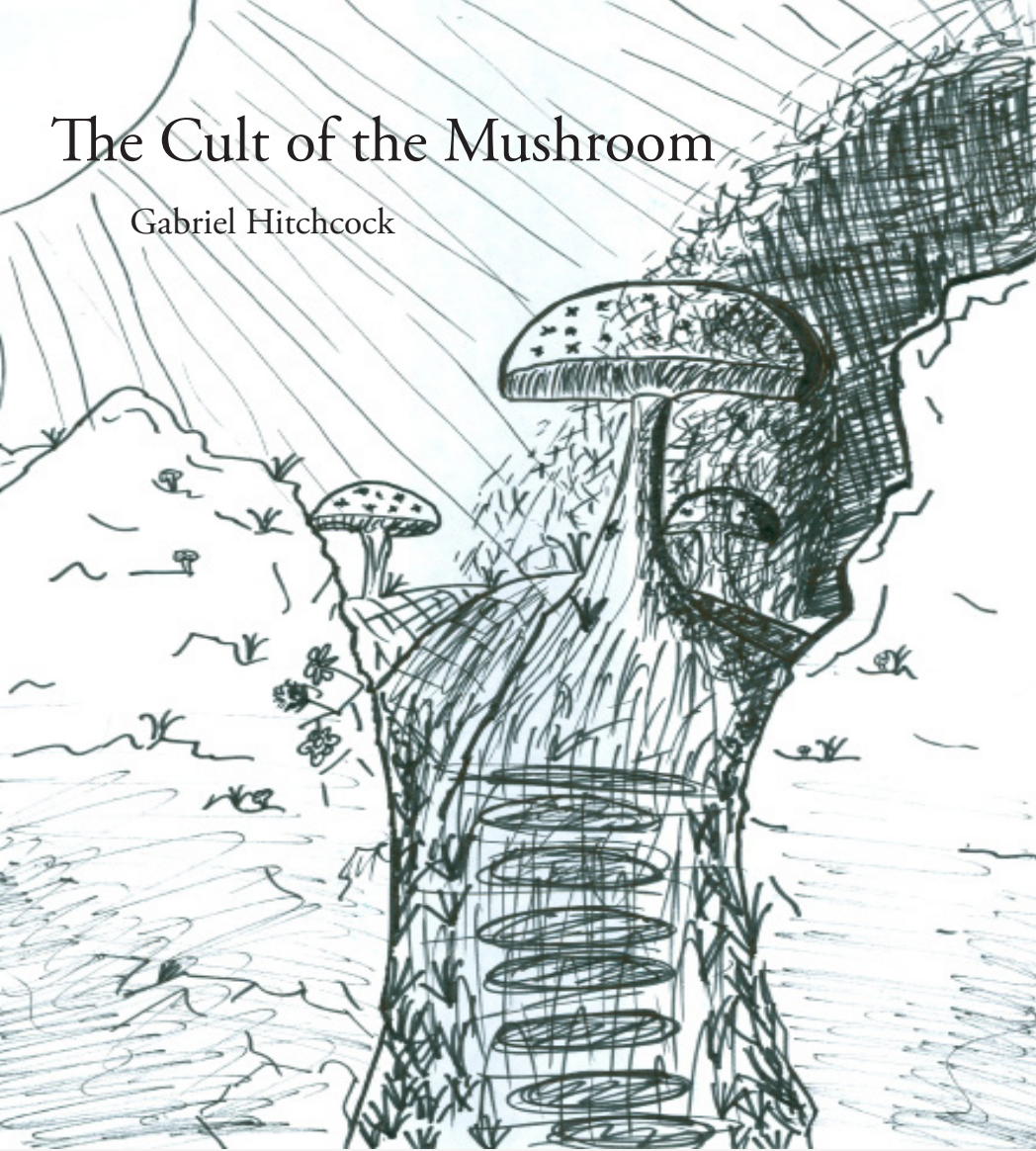


The Cult of the Mushroom

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air and igniting the patches of vegetation they touch. A black form, its coat rippling from the protraction of its considerable musculature, moves slowly through the undergrowth, side-stepping the beams. The jaguar abruptly ceases its prowling and perks its ears at the unexpected crack of a snapped twig, its yellow eyes scanning the forest floor. Not far away, dark shapes move through the dense vegetation, their passage obvious to the keen sight of the giant cat. The creatures follow a twisted but well-worn path through the jungle that leads from their village to a neighboring tribe's. Rather than traditional spears and *macuahuitl*, these figures carry satchels packed with goods and trinkets for trade. These are the pioneers of what will soon become an industry of trade among the Mayan people. The jaguar, uninterested, slinks off into the shrubbery.

First raw materials such as obsidian, clay and herbs are exchanged between tribes. Later, as necessity demands, simple tools and weapons become desirable as communities continue to expand and complexify. Not long after, trade takes on a new commercial significance as demand for prestige goods and religious artifacts increases among tribal leaders. An economy is born and, from that, growth begins to flourish in many societal sectors. Stone blocks are crafted and stacked to create places of religion and state, a calendar is contrived in the Northwest,

But first, an etymological consideration:

Some categorizations elude succinct definition. Not because they are inherently flawed, but because the categories themselves can become so convoluted and warped by time and circumstance that they take on a meaning all their own, thereby losing their objective utility. The word “cult” is one such term. Whatever notions you have about this word, whatever negative connotations you have garnered, you had better take a moment and rid yourself of them.

Done? Ok. Here is our new, unadulterated definition of a cult.

• Cult, n. A system of religious veneration and devotion directed toward a particular figure or object.

Nestled between the Sierra Madre mountains of the Guatemalan Highlands live many historically isolated tribes of Mayan people. The year is 1000 B.C. and, at this point in the Early Preclassic epoch, complex societal structures have begun to take their shape. These are the formative years of the Mayan civilization; the age during which they lay the foundation of the mighty empire to come.

Deep within this jungle, under the thick canopy, the only sound is that of dripping leaves and buzzing insects. Beams of light perforate the leaves overhead, slicing through the humid



obscure religious beliefs are melded into homogenous institutions, and mushrooms are venerated. That's right, mushrooms. While inhabitants of the neighboring Kaminalyuyu settlement were busy building temples, enthroning emperors and establishing a sewage system, one tribe was producing mushroom-themed sculptures at a prolific rate.

It is no secret that early civilizations made a habit of aggrandizing natural entities to the status of gods. Most people have heard of Ra, the Egyptian god of the sun, or at least Apollo, his Greco-Roman counterpart. You may have even heard of Aranyani, the Hindu deity of forests or Perkele, the Finnish god of thunder, but you would be hard pressed to find a non-Mesoamerican culture that glorified fungus. I know; I tried.

There is something comforting in anthropomorphizing inexplicable occurrences. It gives someone to attribute

At this point we need a bit of biochemistry to set the stage for this argument.

Distributed throughout the human brain are chemical receptors called gamma-aminobutyric acid receptors (GABAAR) which, when bonded to by the proper molecule (agonist), result in hyperpolarization across the cellular membrane. That is to say, they produce an inhibitory effect on the neuron. Now, wide spread inhibition can have some fairly bizarre effects on the central nervous system (CNS), perhaps the most salient being auditory and visual hallucinations. Enter muscimol, the primary constituent of *Amanita muscaria*, the most likely model for our fungus-loving forbearers. Muscimol is a potent, selective GABAAR receptor agonist and altogether

dissociative psychedelic compound. When consumed, muscimol passes easily through the blood brain barrier into the CNS. Similarly, many *Psilocybe* mushrooms contain considerable amounts of the serotonin-imitating psychotomimetic (psychosis-mimicking) constituent psilocybin. Psilocybin, while operating along a different biochemical pathway, produces a similar hallucinogenic state as muscimol.

The 70 year long study and classification of these myco-centric idols, as well as the research of the mushroom motif in Mesoamerican art, was done primarily by two researchers, a father and son. Dr. Stephan de Borhegyi, a Hungarian emigrant, discovered the "mushrooms stones" while cataloging the extensive collections of the Guatemalan National Museum in 1948. Though Dr. Borhegyi spent the remainder of his career dedicated to the study of the peculiar statues, his son, Carl de Borhegyi, completed the final analysis and subsequent publication. In his paper *Breaking the Mushroom Code: Mushroom Symbolism in Pre-Columbian Art* Borhegyi argues that the mushroom motif extends beyond the themed miniatures and is a ubiquitous symbol present in a myriad of Pre-Columbian artistic mediums. He goes on to posit that the inclusion of the motif is indicative of a culture that considered the mushroom, specifically *A. muscaria* and others of the genus *Psilocybe*, on a par with the ancestral Mayan gods.

In his blog Borhegyi writes:

"The accidental ingestion of these hallucinogenic substances could very well have provided the spark that lifted the mind and imagination of these early humans above and beyond the mundane level of daily existence to contemplation of another reality. Mushrooms

were so closely associated with death and underworld jaguar transformation and Venus resurrection that I conclude that they must have been believed to be the vehicle through which both occurred. They are also so closely associated with ritual decapitation, that their ingestion may have been considered essential to the ritual itself, whether in real life or symbolically in the underworld."

Entheogens are naturally derived chemical substances used in a religious, shamanist or spiritual context. Their use in ritualized contexts for the past thousands of years is indisputable, given strong historical and anthropological evidences. From the smoking of *Anadenanthera* beans in Argentina in 2130 BC, to the henbane tinctures (*Herba Apollinaris*) used by the priestesses of Apollo as early as the 8th c. BC, to the *Salvia divinorum* quids of early Mazatec shamans, mankind has been altering their collective consciousness for as long as they obtained it. These cultures, however, never venerated these substances in the same way that the Mayans did. To them, such compounds merely assisted in the opening of the gateway to spiritual transcendence, but to these early Mesoamerican tribes the mushroom was the lock, key, hinges and frame of the gateway.

If you are skeptical of this take on Mesoamerican art then I challenge you: the next time you are in a museum take a stroll into the Early South American art exhibit and look for yourself. I am confident you will not be displeased. ●