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Anna Lutkajtis

Lost Saints: Desacralization, Spiritual Abuse and Magic Mushrooms

Anna Lutkajtis is a postgraduate researcher at the University of Sydney, Australia. Her research focuses on mysticism, the dark night of the soul, and the healing potential of altered states of consciousness.

N413, Woolley A20
University of Sydney
NSW 2006
Australia
anna.lutkajtis@sydney.edu.au

Abstract

Mushrooms containing psilocybin have been used in Indigenous healing ceremonies in Mesoamerica since at least the sixteenth century. However, the sacramental use of mushrooms was only discovered by Westerners in the early to mid-twentieth century. Most notably, the meeting between amateur mycologist Robert Gordon Wasson and Mazatec *curandera* María Sabina in 1955 resulted in the widespread popularization of ingesting "magic mushrooms" in the West. To Sabina and the Mazatec people, psilocybin mushrooms were sacred and only to be used for healing. However, Western "hippies" viewed mushrooms as psychedelic drugs which they consumed with little regard for cultural sensitivities, rendering the mushrooms desacralized. This article argues that the desacralization of psilocybin mushrooms constitutes a form of spiritual abuse that has had far-reaching and long-lasting consequences at individual, local and global levels. Further, acknowledging and understanding the desacralization of psilocybin mushrooms as spiritual abuse has important implications for restorative justice and the understanding of psilocybin as a sacred medicine.

Keywords: psilocybin; magic mushrooms; R. Gordon Wasson; María Sabina; desacralization; spiritual abuse.

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Introduction

This article discusses the history of the uptake of psilocybin mushrooms by Westerners following the uncovering and publicization of their significance in the healing rituals of the Indigenous people of Mexico after American banker and amateur mycologist Robert Gordon Wasson met Mazatec *curandera* or healer María Sabina in the town of Huautla de Jiménez in 1955. Andy Letcher (2008: 84–85, 102) writes that Wasson was immediately struck by Sabina, considering her to be "a woman of rare moral and spiritual power" and that he dismissed the other *curanderos* as "second rate, practitioners of a degenerate tradition". In Mazatec culture, hallucinogenic mushrooms are not just ingredients in religious rituals, but channels for the divine. In ceremonies called *velada*, mushrooms, sometimes called "little saints" or "children", are ingested by ritual specialists to cure the spirit, communicate with Mazatec deities, ask profound questions and seek guidance from an "ultimate source" (Flores 2018). However, the influx of Western spiritual seekers into Mexico during the hippie era saw the contamination and desacralization of these powerful cultural icons and practices, which the following discussion argues is a form of spiritual abuse.

The previously isolated town of Huautla became more accessible in the 1950s with the constructions of roads and the Papaloapán hydroelectric project—a project that had as one of its goals the integration of Indigenous inhabitants of the Mazatec region (Feinberg 2003: 69)—and Wasson and his wife Valentina Pavlovna Guercken travelled to the remote region early in the decade to discover more about the use of sacred mushrooms. The Wassons were not the first Westerners to engage with mushroom rituals in Huautla: since the 1930s, Protestant missionaries had tried (although not particularly successfully) to convert the Mazatecs and to replace traditional mushroom rituals with Mazatec-language Christian Bibles (Faudree 2015: 840). After the publication of Wasson's mystical encounters with mushrooms, this town quickly became associated with mysticism and shamanic activity. Viewed through the eyes of the outsider, Huautla is "a 'magical world', one whose inhabitants live harmoniously in a metaphysical dream time" (Duke 1996: 139), and the site saw unprecedented tourist interest as Westerners flocked to experience the spiritual and psychedelic opportunities of the mushrooms. By the 1960s the "mushroom trip" had the celebrity endorsement of various rock stars and musicians who were rumoured to have travelled to Huautla, including Pete Townsend, John Lennon and Bob Dylan (Letcher 2008: 97).[1] The damaging effects of Western

1. Letcher (2008) argues that whether these rumoured celebrity visits to Huautla were factual or not, they still served as a form of celebrity endorsement.

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tourism on Huautla resulted in an official response from the government but the impact on Mazatec religion was profound and long-lasting.

After providing an overview of sacred mushrooms in Mexican culture and the interaction and influence of Wasson and Sabina, the article moves on to a discussion of desacralization and spiritual abuse. There is a potential problem that exists when applying the term "sacred" to Indigenous cultures; that is, the word may contain Anglo-Christian Western assumptions about religiosity that may not pertain to Indigenous contexts. However, this article takes the view that the term "sacred" as defined by Émile Durkheim (that is, something that is set apart from the profane) can be applied cross-culturally (Durkheim 1995 [1912]). Some further extrapolation of the term "spiritual abuse" is also warranted. While "spiritual abuse" is a contemporary term, the practices that it describes are documented as having existed throughout history and across religious traditions (Oakley and Kinmond 2013: 8). In this context, the abuses are perpetrated not by leaders of the spiritual community but by the Western seekers from outside the community who have misappropriated Indigenous sacred practices and diminished their power for the original practitioners. The outcome of such abuses was acutely felt by Sabina, who was heavily persecuted for her role in introducing outsiders to their spiritual traditions, as she recounted: "I had revealed the ancestral secret of our native medicine to foreigners. It's true that before Wasson nobody spoke so openly about the *children*. No Mazatec revealed what he knew about this matter" (Estrada 2003: 56; original emphasis). Eventually acknowledging his role in this cultural destruction, in a piece written for the *New York Times* in 1970, Wasson admitted: "I, Gordon Wasson, am held responsible for the end of a religious practice in Mesoamerica that goes back far, for millennia. 'The little mushrooms won't work anymore. There is no helping it'. I fear she spoke the truth" (quoted in Rothenberg 2003: xvi).

Little Saints: María Sabina, Gordon Wasson and "Magic Mushrooms" in Mexico

Currently there is a renewed interest in psychedelics as potential treatments for a variety of mental health conditions. In particular, recent studies have demonstrated that the psychedelic compound psilocybin (the psychoactive ingredient found in hallucinogenic "magic mushrooms") may have a promising role to play in the treatment of anxiety and depression (Garcia-Romeu and Richards 2018). In clinical trials, the healing effects of psilocybin are positively correlated with a psilocybin-induced mystical experience; that is, people who have a mystical experience tend to have better treatment outcomes.[2] Given that the most popular Western discourse sur-

2. Clinical trials use synthetic psilocybin, not mushrooms.

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rounding mushrooms containing psilocybin is that of taking a "recreational drug", this finding may seem surprising. However, Gastón Guzmán (2008: 405) notes that references to sacred mushroom use in Mexico are found in the very earliest written documents or codices produced in the Spanish New World. In these documents mushrooms have been referred to as *teonanácatl*, meaning "flesh of the gods".[3] After the Spanish Conquest, mentions of ceremonial mushroom use completely disappeared from the literature for approximately 400 years, a period Benjamin Feinberg (2003: 127) refers to as "The Long Silence". Some scholars have suggested that during this interlude, from the colonial period to the early twentieth century, ceremonial mushroom use was suppressed by, or strategically hidden from, the Spaniards.[4]

The long silence was broken in the early twentieth century when a number of ethnobotanists, anthropologists and linguists reported that Mazatec Indians in the town of Huautla de Jiménez (hereafter Huautla) in northern Oaxaca were using hallucinogenic mushrooms in Indigenous healing ceremonies or *veladas* (Letcher 2008: 78–80). During a mushroom *velada*, the *curandero* (healer or shaman) uses the mushroom to diagnose and treat illness. Generally, both the healer and the patient ingest mushrooms (although there are documented instances of only the healer taking mushrooms), while the healer facilitates the passage of the mushroom's "spirit" to the patient's afflicted area through prayers, chanting, massage and other techniques (Duke 1996).

In 1938, one of the first Westerners to witness a mushroom *velada* was anthropologist and linguist Jean Bassett Johnson (1916–1944), who wrote: "The *curandero* (healer), while under the influence of the hallucinogenic mushroom, divined the patient's illness; and it was the mushroom that gave instructions on how the sick person should be cured" (cited in Letcher 2008: 79–80). According to *curanderos*, psilocybin mushrooms grant access to, or are literally seen as, spirits with whom the healers can form a relationship. The mushrooms reveal information, or speak through the healer in improvised, poetic chants believed to have healing power (Letcher 2008: 83–84). The names given to the mushrooms by the

3. Some scholars have argued that archaeological evidence (such as mushroom carvings and effigies found in Guatemala, Ecuador and Southern Mexico, some dating back to 1000 BCE) suggest that sacramental mushroom use has an ancient history; however, this cannot be definitively proven (Letcher 2008: 25–48).

4. It is unclear whether ceremonial mushroom practices continued during this period, although some scholars argue that it is likely that mushroom use continued in secret in remote mountainous villages (Guzmán 2008). Feinberg (2003: 71) argues that the mushroom tradition was preserved because of the stubbornness of the Mazatecs and the geographical remoteness of the region: physical isolation from social and commercial traffic "left the Sierra outside national progress".

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Huautecos—"little saints", "saint children", "holy children"—are indicative of the spiritual significance this group has attributed to psilocybin mushrooms.

Although the mushroom *velada* was known to Westerners at the beginning of the twentieth century, the rediscovery of psilocybin mushrooms is commonly attributed to R. Gordon Wasson (1898–1986), a banker, scholar and amateur mycologist who made it his life's work to investigate the possible connection between hallucinogenic mushrooms and the origins of religion. Wasson was the first person to travel to Huautla specifically to study and experience the Indigenous use of mushrooms, and in 1955 he met with renowned *curandera* María Sabina (1894–1985). Wasson convinced Sabina to allow him to participate in a *velada*, making him one of the first Westerners to ever intentionally eat the sacred mushrooms.[5] Awestruck by the resultant ecstatic mystical experience, Wasson claimed "the mushroom holds the key to a mystical union with God" (Riedlinger 2005: 78). Wasson published his experience with the mushroom in both *Mushrooms, Russia and History*, an expensive limited edition volume aimed at private collectors and universities, and the popular weekly magazine *Life*.[6] The *Life* article, sensationally titled "Seeking the Magic Mushroom: A New York banker goes to Mexico's mountains to participate in the age-old rituals of Indians who chew strange growths that produce visions"[7] was published on May 13, 1957 and read by an audience of millions (Letcher 2008: 86).

While the *Life* magazine article attempted to conceal Sabina's identity by giving her the pseudonym "Eva Mendez" and referring to the locality of Huautla as the "Sierra Mixeteca", within months Sabina's true identity was discovered and her location became public knowledge.[8] As a result, a mass of mushroom-seeking Westerners descended upon Huautla with the aim of having a mushroom-induced spiritual experience. In the early 1960s, the mushroom "trip" (both the literal journey to Mexico and the metaphorical psychedelic experience) became fashionable and, by the late 1960s, a permanent camp of hippies existed approximately three miles below Huautla (Letcher 2008: 97). Andy Letcher (2008: 97–98) describes the problematic effect that this had on the small town:

> Used to seeing psychedelics as drugs not deities, commodities not conscious entities, many expected to be able to buy and consume mushrooms as and when they desired, irrespective of local sensibilities. They certainly did not want to

5. Wasson was accompanied by society photographer Allan Richardson, who also ate the mushrooms (Letcher 2008: 85).

6. *Mushrooms, Russia and History* was co-authored with his wife Valentina Pavlovna.

7 The term "magic mushroom" derives from this *Life* article.

8. Letcher (2008: 97) notes that Sabina's name and location were disguised in the *Life* article but not in *Mushrooms, Russia and History*. Feinberg (2003: 52) suggests that Sabina's identity was first discovered by a photographer who traced her location based on the identifying patterns on her *huipil*.

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> be bound to the *curandero*-led *velada*, or to the archaic mores and strictures of an animist peasant culture. One American hippy visitor was recorded as saying: "Look, man. You can go for that *curandero* shit if you like but it's not my bag. I don't need an old hag mumbling in Mazatecan to turn me on. I don't dig this Indian doctor jazz. I turn myself on. It's not my culture. You just score the mushrooms ... we'll do the rest."

In this context, the residents of Huautla were either invisible to the Western mushroom seekers, or they were viewed as mere obstacles to be overcome in the search for mushrooms. Further, the Western hippies did not adhere to traditional rules and protocols regarding the consumption of mushrooms and blatantly violated several religious and cultural taboos. Specifically, they consumed mushrooms during the daytime, in the street, and with alcohol, and they broke important prohibitions regarding sexual activity.[9] Dawson (2015: 121–22) writes: "They brought no money and were lazy, dirty; they begged for food and sought only drugs and sexual pleasure. Worse still, their lack of respect desacralized the little saints, destroying their power."[10] Such activity was viewed by the local community as a defilement of their culture and tantamount to spiritual abuse. Consequently, in 1968 the municipal president asked the government to remove the outsiders (Feinberg 2003: 131). By the 1970s, many of the foreigners who travelled to this part of Oaxaca ended up harassed by the army and federal police and the number of hippies making the pilgrimage to Huautla had considerably diminished (Feinberg 2003: 131–32). However, the resulting desacralization of the "little saints" had an enduring and significant impact on Sabina, the Huautla community, and the global reception of "magic mushrooms".

Desacralization and Spiritual Abuse

Defining spiritual abuse is difficult because it is a relatively new construct that has only emerged in the literature over the past two or so decades. Initial attempts at defining spiritual abuse focused on the actions of the abuser, who is usually specified as a religious leader or spiritual teacher. For example, Ken Blue (1993: 12) writes: "Spiritual abuse happens when a leader with spiritual authority uses that authority to coerce, control or exploit a follower, thus causing spiritual wounds". More recent definitions have not specifically identified the abuser but are instead

9. The need to abstain from sexual activity for four to five days before and after consuming mushrooms is, according to most Huautecos, absolutely essential (Duke 1996: 175).

10. Duke writes: "a popular genre of stories in Huautla concerns outsiders—often Japanese—who, either deliberately or out of ignorance, flaunt the prohibitions associated with mushroom usage and consequently descend into madness, or else are robbed of the ability to speak" (Duke 1996: 175–76).

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concerned with the role of power and coercion in a spiritual setting. For example, Demaris Wehr (2000: 38) suggests "spiritual abuse is misuse of power in a spiritual context". More recently, Lisa Oakley and Kathryn Kinmond (2013: 21–22) have formulated a definition of spiritual abuse that centres on coercion and control and also highlights the effects on the victim or survivor of the abuse:

> SA [spiritual abuse] is coercion and control of one individual by another in a spiritual context. The target experiences SA as a deeply emotional personal attack. This abuse may include: manipulation and exploitation, enforced accountability, censorship of decision making, requirements for secrecy and silence, pressure to conform, misuse of scripture or the pulpit to control behaviour, requirement of obedience to the abuser, the suggestion that the abuser has a "divine" position and isolation from others, especially those external to the abusive context.

Definitions of spiritual abuse generally derive from studies that examine the phenomenon in contemporary Western contexts: institutionalized religions, new religious movements, spiritual communities and quasi-spiritual contexts such as psychotherapy (see, for example, Blue 1993; Ward 2011; Wehr 2000). However, such settings provide only a partial representation of spiritual abuse. Specifically, they fail to consider a form of spiritual abuse that occurs most commonly in Indigenous contexts, but can, as this article will argue, also occur in the modern West; that is, the desacralization or contamination of sacred objects and practices. Desacralization is defined as the reverse of sacralization, and occurs when a formerly dedicated sacred object is used for another purpose outside of the particular religious setting which dedicated it for a sacred purpose, hence rendering the object desacralized. Contamination of a sacred object can also occur when the object is touched or used without permission, or when traditions regarding the specific handling of the sacred object are disrespected (Gray, LaBore and Carter 2018: 5). Both desacralization and contamination interfere with the integrity of the sacred object and damage its functional spiritual or religious value.

An experience of the sacred is an integral component, if not the central component, of religious experience; however, references to desacralization and contamination are surprisingly absent in definitions of spiritual abuse. Recently, Jacqueline Gray, Kathryn LaBore and Paula Carter (2018) developed a cross-culturally appropriate definition of spiritual abuse based on the historical context of abuse within Native American communities. They define spiritual abuse as: "actions that damage one's subjective experience and personal practice of the sacred, creating a severe disconnection with a higher power or other spiritual sources of meaning and resulting in harm to one's spiritual integrity, lack of access to spiritual resources to cope, and/or an inability to pursue spiritual growth" (Gray, LaBore and Carter 2018: 4). This definition of spiritual abuse includes three components, two of which refer to sacred objects and practices: "(a) abuse from trusted spiritual leaders or mentors,

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(b) limitations of access to sacred objects or ceremonial practice, and (c) contamination of sacred objects or practice" (Gray, LaBore and Carter 2018: 4).

The authors argue that the contamination of sacred objects and practices "constitutes spiritual abuse through degrading the sacred nature of an object or spiritual integrity of a practice" (Gray, LaBore and Carter 2018: 5). Specifically, the contamination of a sacred object or practice may have various harmful consequences for an individual's spiritual life. For example, contamination may result in direct harm or misfortune for the owner of the sacred object. Additionally, contamination may negatively impact an individual's connection to their God or higher power, resulting in a diminished ability to derive satisfaction from spiritual practice and an impaired sense of spiritual worth.

Research indicates that the impact of spiritual abuse can be very damaging. On an individual level spiritual abuse may lead to feelings of anger, fear, blame, powerlessness and distrust, and sometimes have a negative impact on faith (Oakley and Kinmond 2013: 61–70). In Indigenous contexts, denial of access to ceremonies and desacralization of spiritual objects and practices prevents spiritual satisfaction and can directly impact well-being (Gray, LaBore and Carter 2018: 6). Spiritual abuse also impacts communities. For example, a study by Peter Gubi and Rachel Jacobs (2009) reported that counsellors who treated spiritually abused individuals experienced symptoms of secondary traumatic stress and questioned their own spiritual beliefs and practices. Further, there is the potential for a continuing cycle of spiritual abuse. It has been noted that spiritually abused individuals frequently feel powerless to confront the abuse, hence take no action against their abuser, and a cycle of abuse continues (Oakley and Kinmond 2013: 71–72).

It is important to emphasize that spiritual abuse is "real abuse". Not only do spiritual abuse survivors describe their experiences as abuse, both explicitly and implicitly, but characteristics of spiritual abuse as described by survivors are remarkably similar to characteristics of other documented forms of abuse such as physical abuse or emotional abuse (Oakley and Kinmond 2013: 56). However, spiritual abuse is also a distinct phenomenon and is distinguished from other similar forms of abuse by the fact that the primary target of abuse is one's spiritual life (Gray, LaBore and Carter 2018: 5–6). Hence, spiritual abuse cannot simply be incorporated into pre-existing categories of abuse, as there are features of survivors' experiences which are clearly distinct from other forms of abuse; most notably the spiritual context within which the abuse occurs and the ensuing effects on the survivor's spiritual life. Oakley and Kinmond (2013: 69) posit that lack of acceptance and recognition of spiritual abuse by others is one of the key reasons that spiritual abuse can have such a long-term negative impact on people's lives. Additionally, in the case of Indigenous spiritual abuse, Gray, LaBore and Carter (2018: 6) argue that

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efforts to assimilate experiences of spiritual abuse into other Western categories of abuse (for example, "by attempting to categorize experiences of spiritual abuse involving the selling of spiritual objects as financial exploitation, sexual acts during ceremonies as sexual abuse, and denial of access as neglect") disregard the centrality of spirituality in Indigenous life and perpetuate colonization. Hence, it is essential that spiritual abuse be accepted as a separate and legitimate category of abuse.

María Sabina: Stereotypes, Symbols and Saints

Spiritual abuse primarily affects individuals and one of the people who was most obviously impacted by the Western discovery of magic mushrooms was the *curandera*, María Sabina. Despite being a leading figure on the topic of psilocybin mushrooms, relatively little has been written about Sabina's life. Of the texts that do exist, *María Sabina: Selections* is of particular importance as it contains Sabina's oral autobiography. *Selections* was compiled by Álvaro Estrada, a Huautla resident and Mazatec speaker who engaged Sabina in a series of recorded conversations, which he then translated into Spanish. The autobiography provides a first-person account of Sabina's life as a *curandera*, her meeting with Wasson and her relationship with psilocybin mushrooms. It is clear from this text that the mushrooms, which she refers to primarily as "little saints", "saint children", or just "children", held great spiritual and religious significance for Sabina. She repeatedly describes the mushrooms as being "like God" (Estrada 2003: 14), stating "the mushrooms have power because they are the flesh of God" (Estrada 2003: 28) and "I take *Little-One-Who-Springs-Forth* [mushrooms] and I see God" (Estrada 2003: 29). Sabina notes that during her vigils she speaks to the saints, "to Lord Santiago, to Saint Joseph, and to Mary" (Estrada 2003: 37) and describes her devotion to being a *curandera* as being partly due to her desire to be close to God:

> I gave myself up for always to wisdom, in order to cure the sicknesses of people and to be myself always close to God. One should respect the little mushrooms. At bottom I feel they are my family. As if they were my parents, my blood. In truth I was born with my destiny. To be a Wise Woman. To be a daughter of the *saint children*. (Estrada 2003: 14)

The Western encounter with the mushrooms and the arrival of mushroom tourists to Huautla had many damaging consequences for Sabina; she was harassed by the authorities, falsely accused of selling cannabis, and her house was burned down. Additionally, there was the negative impact on Sabina's spiritual life: her role as a *curandera* and her personal spiritual relationship with the mushrooms. In her autobiography Sabina states that before Wasson and the hippies arrived, no one took the mushrooms purely to "know God" (that is, for a "spiritual experience"); rather they were taken within the context of a healing ceremony, in order

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to cure the sick (Estrada 2003: 49). Sabina considered the ingestion of mushrooms outside of this specific healing context as disrespectful and inappropriate:

> These young people, blonde and dark-skinned, didn't respect our customs. Never, as far as I remember, were the *saint children* eaten with such a lack of respect. For me it is not fun to do vigils. Whoever does it simply to feel the effects can go crazy and stay that way temporarily. Our ancestors always took the *saint children* at a vigil presided over by a Wise One. The improper use that the young people made of the *little things* was scandalous. (Estrada 2003: 64)

Further, as a consequence of this desacralization, Sabina believed that the mushrooms had been contaminated and had lost their power: "But from the moment the foreigners arrived to search for God, the *saint children* lost their purity. They lost their force; they spoiled them. From now on they won't be of any use. There's no remedy for it" (Estrada 2003: 69). She also comments on the effect of the desacralization on her own personal spiritual life: "Before Wasson, I felt that the *saint children* elevated me. I don't feel like that anymore. The force has diminished. If Cayetano hadn't brought the foreigners ... the *saint children* would have kept their power" (Estrada 2003: 69).

Sabina's description of the desacralization and contamination of the mushrooms has clear parallels with contemporary descriptions of the effects of spiritual abuse. Firstly, the contamination and inappropriate handling of the sacred mushrooms led Sabina to believe that the mushrooms had lost their power and their ability to be effectively used in healing vigils. Secondly, the desacralization of the mushrooms resulted in damage to Sabina's subjective experience and personal practice of the sacred, creating a sense of disconnection with a higher power or spiritual source of meaning. Wehr (2000: 46) argues that the most profound consequence of spiritual abuse is that the individual is traumatized with regard to the most central relationship of their life: that with God, or whatever is considered to be most sacred. With spiritual abuse, the individual's relationship with God or with the sacred object or practice, as well as the psychic capacity for such a relationship, becomes damaged. Sabina's comments clearly indicate that her spiritual relationship with the mushrooms (her "family", "parents" and "blood") was negatively affected so that she could no longer effectively perform her healing role as a *curandera* or obtain the feelings of spiritual satisfaction that the relationship with the mushrooms previously afforded her (Estrada 2003: 14).

Spiritual abuse also involves coercion and control (Oakley and Kinmond 2013: 21–22). Specifically it may present as pressure to conform, or manipulation and exploitation—both of which are evident in the relationship between Wasson and Sabina. For example, quotes from Sabina's autobiography suggest that she felt pressured to perform the first *velada* for Wasson, against her better judgement, because it was ordered by her friend Cayetano García, a *síndico* (government

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official). Sabina writes: "The day that I did a *vigil* for the first time in front of foreigners, I didn't think anything bad would happen, since the order to give a *vigil* for the blonde ones came directly from the municipal authorities at the recommendation of the *síndico,* my friend Cayetano García" (Estrada 2003: 68).[11] There is also evidence to suggest that Wasson used manipulative tactics to gain access to healers in Huautla. Letcher (2008: 100) notes that Wasson had been dishonest in his interactions with other *curanderos*, using a false story regarding concern for the health and well-being of his son as a pretext to partake in a *velada* with another healer. Later he admitted that the story had been a deception in order to gain access to the *velada* (Letcher 2008: 100).

Further, there is much controversy surrounding Wasson's documentation of Sabina's mushroom *veladas*.[12] Inti García Flores, a Mazatec from Huautla and researcher of Mazatec culture, argues that Wasson's filming and recording of the *velada* was done without Sabina's consent (*The Psychedologist* 2018). Duke (1996: 99) argues that Sabina *did* consent to the photography but stipulated that the photographs should not be viewed by anyone but Wasson's most trusted friends, and that to show them to anyone else would be a betrayal. However, "in an absolutely breathtaking example of meta-textual double talk", Pavlovna and Wasson defended their decision to publically disseminate the photographs by stating:

> We are doing as the Senora [María Sabina] asked us, showing these photographs only in those circles where we feel sure that she would be pleased to have them shown. In order that she might not be disturbed by the importunities of commercially-minded strangers, we have withheld the name of the village where she lives, and we have changed the names of the characters in our narrative. (Wasson and Wasson 1957: 304)

While such actions can be read as the result of post-colonial power imbalances, in this case they also constitute spiritual abuse. Specifically, the brazen mainstream broadcasting of Sabina's *velada* not only led to the influx of tourists to Huautla, but it directly contributed to the contamination of the mushroom. Before Wasson, the mushrooms were not spoken about openly due to their sacredness. Sabina states: "It's true that before Wasson nobody spoke so openly about the *children*. No Mazatec revealed what he knew about this matter" (Estrada 2003: 56). By exposing the details of the healing practice to the general public, the mushrooms and

11. Although Sabina said that in retrospect, even if Wasson and the Westerners had come without recommendation from the authorities, she would still have shown them her wisdom "because there is nothing bad in that" (Estrada 2003: 57).

12. Along with the book *Mushrooms, Russia and History*, and the *Life* magazine article, Wasson made two separate recordings of Sabina's *veladas*, one of which was released to the public and one for an academic audience (Letcher 2008: 86).

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the *velada* were desacralized.[13] Further, Flores (2018) argues that while Wasson gained critical and financial acclaim for his "discovery" of the mushroom, Sabina was never given the recognition she deserved; she was never compensated financially and she lived and died in extreme poverty.[14]

Finally, a number of emotions are raised by the experience of spiritual abuse, including anger, blame, fear and distrust. In particular, anger is a common response to spiritual abuse (Oakley and Kinmond 2013: 61–62). Despite being idealized as a symbol and a saint—Wasson described her as "Religion Incarnate"—the evidence suggests that towards the end of her life Sabina harboured a large amount of anger towards those she believed had benefitted from her knowledge and fame without adequately acknowledging or compensating her (Letcher 2008: 102). Shortly before her death, Sabina wrote a book in cooperation with her godson and translator, Juan García Carrera, which documents the final five years of her life.[15] Duke (1996: 135) writes that in this book "we meet a woman who is filled, not with the melancholy and spiritual gravity she displayed in Estrada's book, but with a barely contained rage against all those who she and García perceive to have slighted her, both Huauteco and outsider alike". According to Duke, Sabina's anger was partially due to the reduction of her complex identity to a familiar stereotype: "that of the Indian shaman, at once grave, stoic and ethereal, whose knowledge and poetry are 'cultural', and thus in the public domain" (Duke 1996: 139). Towards the end of her life, Sabina began to resent being treated as a symbol rather than as a human being. The narratives collected around spiritual abuse present it as a "deeply emotional and intensely individualized experience" that contains a "depth of personal pain" (Oakley and Kinmond 2013: 14). Hence, the romanticized stereotype of Sabina as a saint, cultural icon and object of study makes it difficult to appreciate the very real psychological effects of the spiritual abuse that she possibly suffered.

Huautla de Jiménez: Shamans and Charlatans

Spiritual abuse also affects communities, and the desacralization of mushrooms has had several negative consequences for the community of Huautla. Both Duke

13. In a piece written for the *New York Times* in 1970, Wasson admitted his role in this desacralization, writing: "I, Gordon Wasson, am held responsible for the end of a religious practice in Mesoamerica that goes back far, for millennia. 'The little mushrooms won't work anymore. There is no helping it'. I fear she spoke the truth, exemplifying her *sabiduría* [wisdom]" (quoted in Rothenberg 2003: xvi).

14. Sabina died as a result of "her age, pernicious anemia, pulmonary emphysema, advanced malnutrition, chronic bronchitis, and nose bleeding" (Aridjis 2003: 169).

15. Written in cooperation with her godson and translator, Juan García Carrera, the book is titled *The Other Life of María Sabina* (*La Otra Vida de María Sabina*).

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(1996) and Faudree (2015) have written about the impact on the Huautla community post-Wasson, and a key theme that emerges from their work is the local sense of despair and loss over the cultural degradation of the mushroom *velada* (Duke 1996: 269). For many Huautecos the mushroom *velada* is a ritual of particular significance as it is often viewed as a last resort for healing; people turn to mushrooms to heal serious illnesses that have not responded to other treatments. However, Duke (1996: 160–61) argues that in Huautla there is a sense that the mushroom ceremony has been contaminated by commercialization:

> many older people were adamant about the fact that, prior to the arrival of the *jipis*, mushrooms were never sold because "they are a gift from God", given to the Mazatecos because they were too poor to afford patent medicines. Many older Huautecos clearly feel a certain nostalgia for those times before the *velada* and the mushrooms were commoditized.[16]

Similarly, Faudree (2015: 840) notes:

> I once mentioned to a friend that on my trips to Huautla people tried to sell me mushrooms. "You mean, they just walk around selling them in the street?" she asked. "¡Ska-le! [That's crazy!]. Treating sacred things like they were plastic buckets!"

The commodification of psilocybin mushrooms began with hippie tourists in the 1960s, and while the hippie era has now passed, there is still a mushroom tourism industry today. People travel from all over the world (in particular, from urban Mexico, the United States and Europe) to visit Huautla and have an "authentic" mushroom experience. As a result, many Huautecos feel that the commercialization of the *velada* and the non-ritual use of mushrooms have angered God and that this has resulted in the mushrooms growing less plentifully today than they did in the past (Duke 1996: 160–61).[17] Feeling betrayed by, or disconnected from, God can be one of the outcomes of spiritual abuse. For example, Wehr (2000: 46) posits that in all forms of spiritual abuse, the spirituality itself becomes contaminated by the abusive experience and "in the aftermath, spiritual abuse feels like a betrayal from God, or whatever is held to be sacred". Similarly, Oakley and Kinmond (2013: 66) note that some individuals who have experienced spiritual abuse find they distrust God and do not continue to have a personal faith. The literature on contamination of sacred objects also speaks to the Huauteco belief that

16. Not all Huautecos feel this way. Feinberg (2003: 147) notes that some Mazatec people remember the 1960s nostalgically as a time when they assumed a central role in world history.

17. Duke (1996: 161) notes: "Others feel that the diminution in the availability of mushrooms, and their concomitant transformation into objects of commerce, is not so much a punishment from God as it is the result of certain landowners denying access to their fields".

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the mushrooms grow less abundantly because of God's anger. For example, some Indigenous communities, such as the Native American Zuni people, believe that when a sacred object is contaminated there may be misfortune for the owner (Gray, LaBore and Carter 2018: 5–6). Such examples illustrate both the power of the sacred object and how its contamination may have negative consequences for an individual's spiritual life.

Spiritual abuse damages the spiritual integrity of sacred practices and this is evident in local beliefs regarding the efficacy of the mushroom *velada*. For example, some Huautecos believe that as a result of commercialization the mushrooms have lost their "force" and because of this there is a still a cultural taboo regarding the sale of mushrooms (Duke 1996: 118–19). Duke notes that some older, more traditional healers will not charge a fee for their services as they believe that if they accept money the mushrooms will not have a curative effect (Duke 1996: 164). Additionally, some Huautecos have reported hearing the mushroom speak to them directly during a *velada*, and warning that they will lose their potency if they are sold.

In addition to loss of power, some Huautecos fear that due to commercialization, healers are now unable to communicate with the mushroom. In traditional Huauteco healing contexts it is believed that the mushroom has a "personality" which speaks through the healer, revealing the cause and the remedy of an illness. Hence, the capacity to diagnose and cure is based on a healer's ability to effectively commune with the mushroom (Letcher 2008: 82). However, in a conversation with Estrada, one healer noted that the mushroom can no longer be understood as it now speaks English:

> "What is terrible, listen, is that the divine mushroom no longer belongs to us. Its sacred Language has been profaned. The Language has been spoiled and it is indecipherable to us..."
>
> "What is the new Language like?"
>
> "Now the mushrooms speak *nqui lé* (English)! yes, it's the tongue that the foreigners speak." (cited in Duke 1996: 119)

The commercialization of the *velada* has also changed the way Huautecos view local healers and the practice of healing. Specifically, the overall reputation of Huauteco healers has been damaged; healers who charge for their services are viewed as being inauthentic and most Huautla residents tend to seek out healers from other communities, rather than those residing in their own town. Duke (1996: 248–49) notes: "Shortly after the death of a widely respected local Wise Person, for example, I asked a neighbor who was well-versed in such matters if there were any true *curanderos* left in Huautla. 'One or two', he said, 'but most are charlatans'."

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Finally, the international consumer interest in magic mushrooms and the popular portrayal of Huautla primarily via its mushrooms and its most famous healer, María Sabina, has led to what Faudree (2015: 840) describes as a "representational hangover" that affects both the community and the region. Outsiders (tourists, anthropologists, linguists and other scholars) often portray the region in a way that causes significant challenges for locals (Faudree 2015: 840). One key issue is that while María Sabina is seen as an authentic healer, the community objects to her being the sole symbol of their regional culture. Huautecos feel that "neither local medical practices in particular nor regional culture more generally can be completely subsumed by the *velada*, nor by its most famous practitioner, María Sabina" (Duke 1996: 200). While many Huautecos consider Sabina to be a source of local pride, they do not necessarily believe that she should symbolize all of Mazatec healing culture.[18] Some locals have noted that while Sabina was the most famous healer in the region, there were other *curanderos* who were actually more effective in healing illness. Duke (1996: 198–99) cites the example of a local man who was unsuccessfully treated by Sabina but cured by another *curandero*: he noted that "thanks to Wasson" María Sabina gained worldwide acclaim while the healer who successfully alleviated his back pain remained unknown. Other Huautecos object to the fact that to most outsiders, Mazatec healing is now equated with psilocybin mushrooms, thus ignoring the important work carried out by other types of traditional healers who do not use mushrooms, such as bone setters, midwives, *chuperos* and *brujos* (Duke 1996: 199–200).

Global Cultural: From Sacrament to Drug

Paradoxically, the desacralization of the *little saints* in Huautla was paralleled by their re-sacralization in the modern West. Psilocybin mushrooms made their way from Mexico into the Western counterculture, which had already embraced psychedelic ("mind manifesting") compounds such as mescaline and LSD. In 1958 Albert Hoffman, the Swiss chemist who discovered LSD, successfully synthesized psilocybin and psilocin (Letcher 2008: 86–87). This initiated scientific research into the psychological effects of psilocybin, and in 1960 psychologist Timothy Leary founded the Harvard Psilocybin Project. While the project was initially designed to test the effects of psilocybin on personality, it soon became apparent

18. Feinberg (2015: 514) notes that Sabina is considered a symbol of local pride "as a native woman who interacted as an equal with experts and rock stars". Taxi companies and businesses display Sabina's image and are named after her, and there has even been some local pressure to change the name of the town from Huautla de Jiménez to Huautla de María Sabina.

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that research participants who took psilocybin were having religious and spiritual experiences (Letcher 2008: 201). The project's most well-known study, the Marsh Chapel Experiment, supported the idea that psilocybin could reliably induce mystical experiences and that the compound had a definite sacramental quality.[19] The creation of a number of countercultural "mushroom sects" and new religious movements during this period (for example, The Fane of the PSILOCYBE Mushroom Association; The Church of the Golden Rule; Church of the One Sermon) further attests to the profound religious and spiritual effects that people found in both synthetic psilocybin and psilocybin mushrooms (Stuart 2002). Additionally, by 1973 the term psychedelic had largely been replaced by "entheogen", meaning "that which engenders God within". This term was coined by a group of academic and amateur scholars (including Wasson) in order to emphasize the spiritual effects of psilocybin and to "distance their own practices from recreational and non-medical psychedelic mushroom use" (Letcher 2007: 84).

By the mid-1960s there was a moral panic and backlash regarding the use of psilocybin mushrooms in the West. This was driven partly by sensationalist and often exaggerated media stories about people who had allegedly "lost their minds" or "gone mad" after taking psychedelics, in particular LSD.[20] However, Letcher (2008: 202) argues that the panic was likely less about personal health risks (a recent study by David Nutt, Leslie King and Lawrence Phillips [2010] ranks mushrooms as the least harmful of illicit substances[21]) and more about a rising concern that an increasing number of people were taking psychedelics and losing their motivation to work. Regardless, in the United States a federal law that specifically banned psilocybin and psilocin was enacted on October 24, 1968; mushrooms containing psilocybin were made illegal and their status was officially changed from sacrament to illicit drug. Following this, the psychoactive compounds psilocybin and psilocin were listed as Schedule I drugs (defined as having a high potential for abuse and no recognized medical uses) under the United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Substances (1971). Scientific research into the psychological and

19. Also known as the "Good Friday Experiment", this study was run by Leary's PhD student, Walter Pahnke.

20. Psilocybin mushrooms were caught up in the general moral panic regarding LSD. The media celebrity and prophesying of Timothy Leary (who was encouraging people to take LSD and to "turn on, tune in, drop out") and political concerns linking psychedelics to anti-war protests ("drop acid, not bombs") also did not help the mushroom cause. See: Breaking Convention, "Dr David Nutt – Banning Psychedelics – the Worst Censorship of Scientific Research Ever?", *YouTube*, August 28, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=oAkC9jTlXy0.

21. LSD comes in as third last. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/47635105_Nutt_DJ_King_LA_Phillips_LD_Drug_harms_in_the_UK_a_multicriteria_decision_analysis_Lancet_376_1558-1565/figures.

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medical effects of these compounds ended and those who wished to use mushrooms containing psilocybin for spiritual or religious purposes were no longer legally able to do so.

Gray, LaBore and Carter (2018) argue that denial of rights is at the core of spiritual abuse; that is, spiritual abuse occurs when there is limitation of access to sacred objects or ceremonial practice. Limitation of access may occur by actively denying an individual access to a sacred object or ceremony, by taking a sacred object from an individual without permission, or by neglecting to provide opportunities to retrieve the materials needed for spiritual practice (Gray, LaBore and Carter 2018: 4). Arguably, classifying psilocybin mushrooms as an illegal drug of abuse is the most extreme possible form of desacralization, and the most absolute and effective way to limit access.[22] Scholars such as Charlotte Walsh (2011) posit that the widespread restriction of entheogens (many of which, like mushrooms, have a rich history of Indigenous use) is a denial of sacramental freedom; spiritual abuse has escalated to religious persecution.[23]

The classification of psilocybin mushrooms as a drug not only has implications for spiritual and healing use in the West; it has also affected Indigenous use in Mexico. Currently it is illegal to possess, cultivate or sell psilocybin in Mexico and the re-categorization of psilocybin mushrooms from "sacred medicine" to "drug" has had negative consequences for the traditional spiritual and healing use of mushrooms. For example, Feinberg (2003: 96) describes a conversation with two Mazatec teachers who lamented that foreigners were destroying Mazatec Indigenous culture and the *velada* by treating the mushrooms as drugs: "To us they are not drugs. They are sacred", they repeated. Indigenous communities in Mexico must now choose to either continue their sacred mushroom practices in a context of global prohibition and become "criminals", or forego these practices entirely and rely upon Western biomedicine for healing and other sources for spiritual fulfilment.[24]

22. In the modern West, like in the high mountainous regions of the Sierra Mazateca, there exists an underground culture of spiritual and therapeutic mushroom use, which includes healers, therapists and other spiritual practitioners. However, the fear of prosecution likely deters many from pursuing a spiritual practice that involves psilocybin mushrooms.

23. Further, Walsh (2016) argues that the decriminalization of entheogens is a human rights issue and that there is a need to move beyond seeking exemptions from drug prohibition based on religious freedom; rather there should be a broader right to take these compounds based on cognitive liberty and freedom to explore consciousness.

24. While these laws are rarely, if ever, enforced against Indigenous users of mushrooms, people who partake in traditional mushroom ceremonies are still technically committing a crime.

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Conclusion: Intentionality and Restitution

Scholars have argued that there are common characteristics associated with perpetrators of spiritual abuse. For example, spiritual abusers might instigate abuse because of their own insecurities (Oakley and Kinmond 2013: 16), in order to gain significance by dominating others (Blue 1993) or because they have been abused themselves (Wehr 2000). However, Oakley and Kinmond (2013) did not find any evidence to suggest that spiritual abusers conform to a particular personality type; rather they found support for the idea that spiritual abuse is largely informed by the culture in which the abuse occurs (Oakley and Kinmond 2013: 14–15). Further, the authors found that spiritual abuse is not necessarily deliberate; abusers may intend to behave in a particular way but are often unaware of the abusive nature and consequences of their behaviour (Oakley and Kinmond 2013: 18). These findings have important implications for the roles played by Wasson and the hippies in the desacralization of psilocybin mushrooms. While the focus on the "self" within Western culture leads to a tendency to blame individuals for their actions, wider cultural conditions and expectations must also be taken into account.[25] For example, Letcher (2008) observes how Wasson's background as a banker informed his business-like approach to his scholarly work: "He treated knowledge as a commodity, something that could be bought, sold or treated as an investment—quite literally offering money for information—with all the concomitant effects on Sabina and others that that was to have" (Letcher 2008: 111–12). It is also possible that given Wasson's position as an elite member of society and the distance he kept between himself and the *hoi polloi*, he may have underestimated the extent to which *Life* magazine readers would want to seek the mushrooms themselves and the havoc this would cause for the community of Huautla (Letcher 2008: 96–97).[26] Finally, it is important to note that Wasson was operating within the Western context of academic and scientific progress; it seems he genuinely believed that by recording the *velada* and making it public, he was helping to document and preserve an important Indigenous ritual before it was destroyed by modernity.[27]

Similarly, Letcher (2008: 97) describes how the post-colonial attitudes of the hippie tourists informed their behaviour:

> The trouble was that hippy culture arrived with a very different set of ideas and outlooks from those that prevailed in traditional indigenous Oaxaca. For

25. For example, psychologists suggest there are a number of psychological and social factors which may result in immoral acts being committed by otherwise moral people (Zimbardo 2007: 196).

26. Letcher (2008: 96) writes that Wasson "had little time for hippy culture, hated being treated as a psychedelic guru, and expressed nothing but contempt for Timothy Leary".

27. "What else", he implored, "could we have done?" (Letcher 2008: 99).

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> hippies, the mushrooms were "psychedelic", which meant that they were bound up with notions of authenticity, freedom, individualism, bohemianism and rebellion.

While Wasson and the hippies were not entirely ignorant of the rules and expectations surrounding the Mazatec spiritual context, it is unlikely that they could have conceived of the negative effects their actions would have on Sabina and the Huautla community. While this does not justify the behaviour or undo the suffering that was caused, it does raise questions regarding the intentionality of abusers and illustrates the greater systematic forces that are at play in spiritual abuse.

Spiritual abuse often has long-term effects. For example, Oakley and Kinmond (2013) describe a "revolving door" and continuing cycle of spiritual abuse. A review of the abuse literature suggests that other forms of abuse are cyclical in that abused individuals sometimes become abusers themselves.[28] However the cyclical nature of spiritual abuse is different, in that the spiritually abused do not generally become abusers. Rather a cycle of spiritual abuse occurs because of a culture of silence that surrounds the abuse: "spiritual abuse remains unrecognized and unchallenged and, thus, it continues" (Oakley and Kinmond 2013: 72). Oakley and Kinmond (2013: 55) argue that in order to break the silence around spiritual abuse and prevent future abuse, there must be recognition of spiritual abuse discourses.

However, it is important to acknowledge that there is a potential problem with categorizing desacralization as spiritual abuse; that is, there is the risk of imposing a contemporary Western category onto Indigenous peoples and cultures. In fact, one of the issues this article raises is the problematic way that Westerners have attempted to force María Sabina (and other Mazatec healers) into Western ideas and preconceptions of what an Indigenous healer should look like. Further, regarding the desacralization of mushrooms, there is an additional problem, in that Sabina's autobiography is not entirely reliable. Firstly, the text is based on conversations with Sabina that were conducted in Mazatec and translated into Spanish, Italian, and then finally English. Secondly, Estrada allegedly edited the text, at Wasson's suggestion, to make it sound more "primitive". As such, it is not possible to know exactly how Sabina felt about the mushrooms and the events that transpired (Letcher 2008: 107).[29]

While acknowledging that these problems exist, this article has attempted to demonstrate that identifying desacralization as a form of spiritual abuse works pragmatically in situations of cross-cultural dialogue. In their discussion of spiritual abuse in Native American communities, Gray, LaBore and Carter (2018: 7) argue

28. For a review see Oakley and Kinmond (2013: 72).

29. Letcher (2008: 107) notes that Estrada could "provide a great service to scholarship by publishing the transcripts of his interviews verbatim".

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that "it is important to explore how these experiences may look similar or different across other Indigenous peoples around the world". This article has taken up the authors' suggestion by attempting to do this within a Mazatec context and also a modern Western context. As noted above, defining desacralization as spiritual abuse also helps to identify and challenge abusive behaviour, and could possibly contribute towards ending cycles of spiritual abuse across various Indigenous and non-Indigenous contexts.

Finally, naming and acknowledging spiritual abuse is potentially a critical step towards healing historical trauma within communities. Specifically, within Indigenous communities identifying spiritual abuse may serve as a form of sacred justice. Diane LeResche (1993: 893–94) defined the term "sacred justice" based on a Native American perspective of justice that is concerned with the healing of broken relationships:

> Sacred justice is concerned with reconciling, mending broken relationships, providing healing solutions, and addressing the underlying causes of a disagreement (which are often perceived as indicative of someone's failure to live according to prescribed spiritual ways) ... It seeks to help people reconnect with the higher spirits; to transform intense, hurtful emotions such as anger and see in perspective the conflict with higher purposes. Sacred justice goes beyond the techniques, rules and procedures for handling conflicts; it is spiritual.

Sacred justice requires taking steps to restore balance and repair broken relationships for individuals and communities. It is based on an understanding of the spiritual; in fact, spirituality permeates all aspects of the process (LeResche 1993: 895). Further, "sacred justice is found when the importance of restoring balance to relationships has been acknowledged" (LeResche 1993: 893). Flores (2018) describes how it is important to the Mazatec people that there is acknowledgement of the legacy of violence that has marked the Mazatec culture. He argues that despite a history of forced religious conversion and desacralization, the Mazatec people have continued to preserve the mushroom *velada* and consider it to be as sacred and significant as any other rituals that are found in the world's religions. Hence, it is important that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people respect the mushrooms and the contexts in which they are consumed. Understanding that psilocybin mushrooms hold a significant place in many people's spiritual lives is a critical step towards restitution.

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