

Mushrooms for Life among the Jotĩ in the Venezuelan Guayana¹

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Mushrooms for Life among the Jotĩ in the Venezuelan Guayana. This paper explores the relevance of mushrooms in mythology and daily life among the Jotĩ, an indigenous group inhabiting the rain forests of the Venezuelan Guayana. It is reported here how a personal experience of the author in the field stimulated deeper research into the religious symbolism surrounding mushrooms and their role in Jotĩ cosmology, ritual, and life dynamics. Different categories of mushroom usage are described, including edible, medicinal, and ritual uses. Mushrooms seem to be more important to the Jotĩ than to most Amazonian groups. Most significantly, certain species of mushrooms are key ingredients in medicinal and ritual preparations used throughout the Jotĩ life cycle in ways that reflect their worldview and mythology.

Key Words: Jotĩ, Hotĩ, Amazonian Indians, Ethnomycology, Venezuelan Guyana, Guiana shield, Ritual mushrooms, Edible mushrooms.

Introduction

It was a sunny morning in the Venezuelan rainforest at the end of January 2002. I was surrounded by some four dozen mushroom samples collected the day before with Balujkojko—a jolly, slender Jotĩ boy. Lining up the samples on the soil, I planned to dry them under the blazing sun.

Immersed in my task, I did not hear the approach of Jkawile, Ijtĩ, and Jkai, three wiry Jotĩ men. They displayed broad smiles and reiterated our status as friends before getting down to the point of their visit: They had come to warn me to cease handling the mushrooms immediately, which naturally meant postponing or maybe even canceling my ethnomycological studies.

The Jotĩ (pronounced with a Spanish “j” and sometimes transcribed as Hotĩ) are an indigenous group of the Venezuelan Guayana (Fig. 1). In 1969, they were the last of Venezuela’s 30 indigenous ethnic groups to make contact with the western world. Most of the estimated 900 Jotĩ alive today are monolingual, speaking a language apparently affiliated to the Saliva family. My husband Stanford and I had been conducting ethnoecological research among the Jotĩ since

1996. Both the Jotĩ and their homeland, the Sierra Maigualida (between Amazonas and Bolívar states), were virtually unknown to scientists at that time, which stimulated our interest in developing a research project with an interdisciplinary approach. Maigualida is a mountainous formation of rugged terrain about 300 kilometers (km) long and almost 7,000 square kilometers (km²) in land area, reaching its highest altitude of 2,400 meters (m) at Cerro Yudi (Fig. 2). Dense and high forests (mostly pluvial, riverine, premontane, montane, and gallery forests) cover the entire mountain range, except above 2,000 m where tepui flora prevails (Zent and S. Zent 2004b).

Most of the 25 Jotĩ communities censused to a large degree maintain their ancestral subsistence strategies, despite the varying degrees of contact (with missionaries, scientists, tourists, miners, other ethnic Amerindian groups, soldiers, etc.), which has triggered disparate cultural change among them (E. Zent 2005). Despite recent changes in their settlement patterns due to this contact (see E. Zent and S. Zent 2004a), the Jotĩ still spend more than half of the year trekking between temporary campsites to hunt and forage.

In Maigualida, the Jotĩ live traditionally in small, dispersed, and isolated communities of about 5 to 35 people. They are organized in

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Fig. 1. Uli Jlae Juãe and a younger kinsman (*jluwena*) playing a kind of flute known as *jani jtawibo* (made from *Olyra micrantha* HBK reeds) on the bank of the Kayamá River during a hunting expedition.

highly mobile, egalitarian, temporary bands with relaxed kinship rules (S. Zent and E. Zent 2008). Jotĩ subsistence ecology consists mostly of the hunting and gathering of wild resources during frequent overnight forays and longer seasonal treks, intermingled with an incipient shifting agriculture and some fishing. Their settlement pattern consists of temporary shelters during the annual cycle, although each group might retain a sort of base camp where erratically tended gardens are kept. Gardening practices seem to be treated as merely one among multiple foraging strategies in an environment characterized by seasonally and spatially dispersed resources. The Jotĩ dedicate about 81% of their subsistence activity time to foraging and around 19% to agricultural tasks.

Using interdisciplinary, quantitative, and qualitative methodologies, we were investigating the detailed botanical and ecological knowledge of the Jotĩ (E. Zent and S. Zent 2002; S. Zent and E. Zent 2004). During our work, we had noticed the Jotĩ using mushrooms in various ways, and

because of the paucity of ethnomycological studies in the tropical lowlands of South America (Fidalgo 1965, 1968; Fidalgo and Prance 1976; Fidalgo and Hirata 1979; Prance 1984), we decided to explore Jotĩ mycological knowledge (E. Zent et al. 2004). (Note that the Jotĩ orthography used in the current publication reflects a recently standardized practical alphabet for the language developed consensually with Jotĩ communities, and differs from the orthographic conventions used in past publications.)

Our January 2002 fieldwork was the second expedition to collect Jotĩ ethnomycological knowledge, and was preceded by six years of fieldwork involving the collection of botanical specimens, quantification of food consumption, and other intensive scientific investigations. Yet, it was the first time that the Jotĩ had ever issued a warning for us to stop a research activity. Throughout our work, we had maintained respectful, jovial, and reciprocal interactions with our Jotĩ collaborators and hosts. Thus, I was very surprised when the

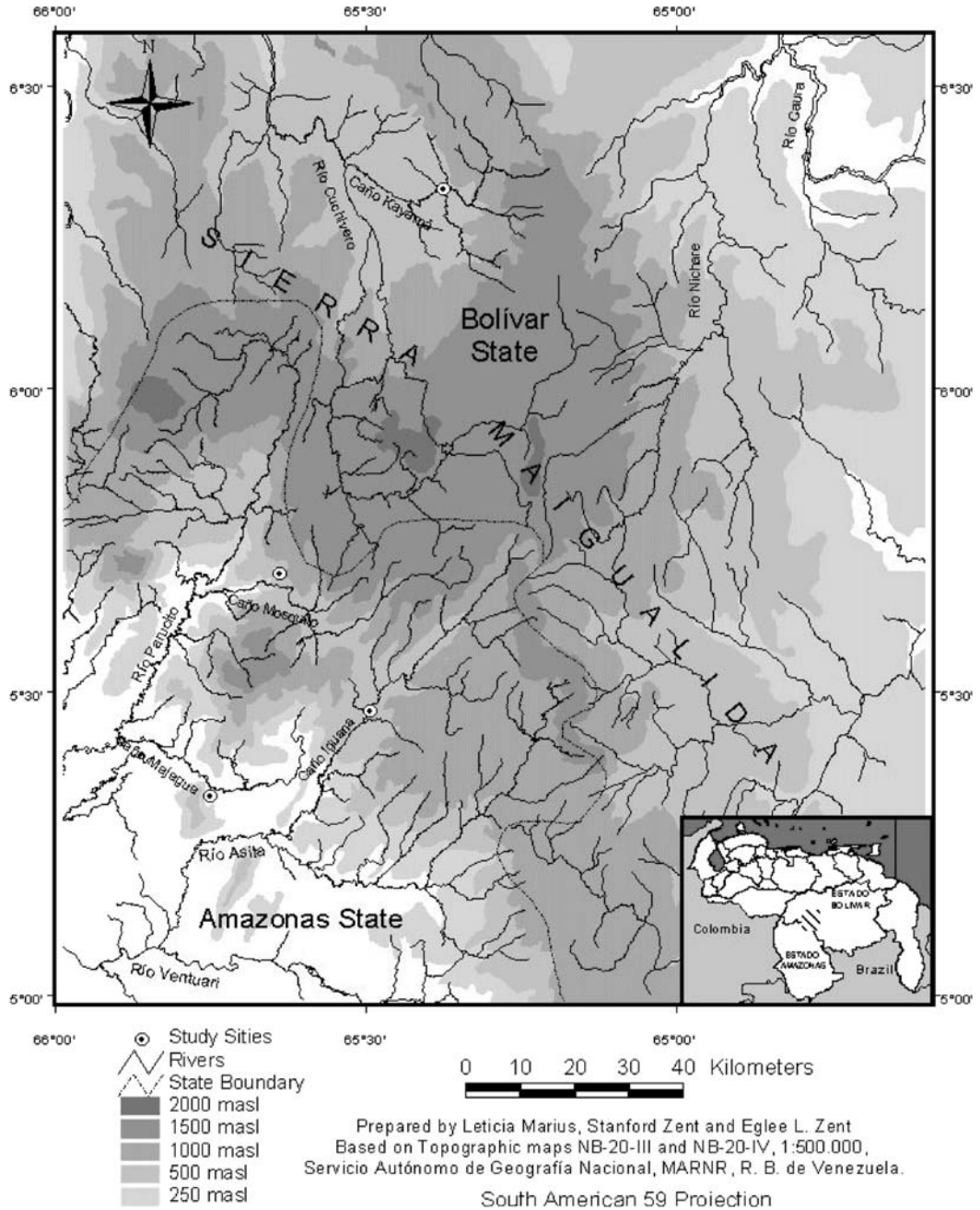


Fig. 2. Map of study area; *masl* meters above sea level.

three men arrived and essentially forbade me from continuing my work with mushrooms. I wondered to myself if I had inadvertently disturbed some sacred place, or violated a cultural taboo.

Speechless, I stared at their smiling faces.

Jkai touched my arm gently and said in the Joti language, “We want to protect you and your children.”

At the time, I had only one child, a two-year-old boy, so I understood even less.

Jkai looked straight into my eye and declared, “A hearth has been lit in your womb.”

Confused, I used my fledgling Jotī language skills to ask if he was implying that I was pregnant. Jkai and his two companions nodded in unison and continued smiling.

I listened respectfully as they advised me in a calm yet rigorous tone of voice as to the proper behaviors and taboo avoidances required of a Jotī woman during pregnancy. Mushrooms, they explained, are among the most crucial taboo items for a pregnant woman, lest fearsome, predatory spirits consume the *jnamodī* of the unborn child. I had heard about the predatory spirits (*awēladī*) during previous research, but had never before been told of the enigmatic spirit essences known as *jnamodī*. I was to learn later that the *jnamodī* are important spiritual components of people that are incorporated and maintained through specific ritual actions. In contrast to the soul (called *ijkwō ju* in Jotī), the *jnamodī* are multiple spiritual entities that are attached to humans both individually and collectively. Each person may have one to four *jnamodī*, of which a family may share one or more.

If I kept handling the mushrooms, Jkai warned, the *jnamodī* of my two-year-old son, and those of his supposedly gestating sibling, could be in jeopardy.

Ijtī suddenly grabbed a mushroom from the forest floor and said in an ominous tone, “Mushrooms are the food of the *awēladī*. Mushrooms belong to them.”

Jkai, sensing my skepticism, concluded, “I can see you don’t believe us. We’ll talk again when you come back on your next trip.”

Even though I doubted the enigmatic diagnosis of pregnancy, I decided it was better for the ongoing research project to heed their admonition, and so I canceled my ethnomycological investigations.

At home in Caracas two weeks later, a doctor confirmed the Jotī men’s pronouncement: I was six weeks pregnant. Humbled, I returned two months later to the Sierra Maigualida and sought out the same three men to teach me about mushrooms and the hidden dynamics of the Jotī cosmos. Although they had warned me about collecting or otherwise handling mushroom specimens for purposes of identification, I decided to continue my research using a modified research orientation. With the consultation and direction of these three men and other knowledgeable Jotī, eventually totaling 55

men and women over a three-year period, I began conducting systematic interviews and observations about the spiritual and religious world of the Jotī, in which mushrooms have a central role. Interviews as well as chants, musical instruments, and body decorations were recorded on digital audio or videotape. As I was to learn through these interviews, only people initiated through specific rites of passage are permitted to handle mushrooms (see E. Zent 2005; López 2006; readers please note that the author has published under her maiden name, E. López, and her married name, E. Zent).

Therefore, although we had been collecting some mushrooms and associated data since 1996, the mushroom collecting project was postponed, and would only be reinitiated at some future date after my husband and I have undergone the three to six months of initiation required before we can interact with this special category of organisms in the Jotī worldview.

This paper explores some of the meanings of mushrooms among the Jotī. Specifically, it examines certain Jotī myths and cosmological notions in order to interpret their current interactions with and beliefs about mushrooms, including the medicinal and ritual uses of some species.

Mushrooms: Food for People and Predatory Spirits

The general term for mushroom in Jotī is *yakino*. Scientific collecting (carried out prior to the enigmatic pregnancy diagnosis and ensuing prohibition) resulted in the identification of 58 different mushroom species named and distinguished by the Jotī. Among these, 8 mushroom species are considered edible for humans, 22 are eaten by some animals, 25 are considered the food of hypostatic or predatory beings, and 3 are named and recognized but have no direct cultural utility. An additional nine specimens of Jotī-recognized mushrooms that were collected have not yet been scientifically identified. Of the species not considered edible for humans, 11 are protective charms against malevolent forces, 8 are medicinal agents, 7 are esteemed as powerful mediums for hunting magic, and one is used as body adornment (E. Zent et al. 2004); the remainder have no use, at least not for humans.

Our data suggest at least three main categories are used by the Jotī to classify mushrooms. The first consists of edible mushroom species, or more

precisely, mushrooms used as food by the *Joti*, a category including people plus animals. A second and more numerous category, directly opposed to the first, consists of species considered to be the special food of the predatory *awëladì* spirits: *awëladì yakino*, or “mushrooms of the *awëladì*.” A third category consists of mushrooms used both medicinally and ritually, considered good and healthy (*jti jawa*) for people to use, but not considered to be the “food” of any entity, human or otherwise. This classificatory system challenges what would appear to be the straightforward utilitarian notion (see Etkin 1994) of edible versus non-edible mushrooms, because among the *Joti*, edibility per se is less important than *what category of being does the eating*. An alternative reading of the classification scheme recognizes three categories of “edible” mushrooms: Mushrooms used as food by people (*yakino jkwa jawa*), mushrooms used as food by the predatory spirits (*awëladì yakino jkwa jae*), and mushrooms used as food by animals (*jkyo jadi jkwa jawa*).

The *awëladì yakino*, or “mushrooms of the *awëladì*,” are considered the main food source of these powerful and dangerous spirits. Precisely for this reason, it is perilous for people—and especially people who have not undergone the various stages of initiation through ablution with mushroom essences—to handle mushrooms generally, because their *jnamodi* become vulnerable to predation by the *awëladì* spirits. In a more general sense, the *Joti* believe the manipulation of certain life forms without initiation jeopardizes the fluid connectivity and interactions among different entities in the biosphere. Hence, the enigmatic warning of the three *Joti* elders to cease collecting mushrooms came about because I (and my husband, my son, and my unborn child) had not undergone any of the rituals that would protect our fundamental spiritual essence from predation by these dangerous beings.

Some of the mushroom species considered “food of the *awëladì*,” however, are endowed with special medicinal and magical powers, protecting the user from attacks by the predatory spirits and renewing spiritual connections with the cosmos. Thus, a person who feels vulnerable to attack by the predatory spirits prepares baths or ablutions with certain “*awëladì* mushrooms” or may even consume a small amount of them. Such medicinal uses present the normally aggressive, predatory *awëladì* with a marker of connectivity to the user, thus preventing their attacks. For

example, the species known as “*awëladì*’s ear mushroom” (*awëla onejka dodo yakino*) is eaten in order to speak with these predatory spirits, pleading to be spared from their attacks and evil manifestations (E. Zent et al. 2004). In another sense, consumption or use of these mushrooms considered “food of the *awëladì*” serves to satiate the appetite of the spirits through substitution, thus protecting the person’s own *jnamodi* from predation. Finally, somewhat analogous to the modern biomedical notion of vaccination, the integration of “*awëladì* mushrooms” into human bodies through various stages of initiation (see below) provides protection against sorcery by enemy groups, whom the *awëladì* assist in their attacks on the *Joti*.

The third category of mushrooms used medicinally and ritually is employed with the specific intention of altering body conditions, changing mental or physical perceptions, and enhancing specific subsistence abilities (for example, hunting and gathering). These mushrooms are typically used in mixtures containing specific parts of mostly organic entities (plants, mammals, arthropods, fish) and a few inorganic components such as water and earth. In this context, it is important to consider the ubiquitous *Joti* notion of *au jkwa*, which might be interpreted as the “interpenetration” or permeation of different essences—both material and spiritual—in the constitution of the human body. The concept applies to foods as well as substances used medicinally and ritually. Ingesting or otherwise applying (through baths, ablutions, etc.) such substances allows their essences—considered good and healthy (*jti jawa*)—to penetrate and permeate the body and become incorporated into the integrated spiritual-material person.

Mushrooms in *Joti* Cosmology

FRUIT OF FIRST WOMAN: MUSHROOMS AND HUMAN ORIGINS

Mushrooms are an integral part of *Joti* cosmology. Similar to that of other lowland Amazonian peoples (see also Descola 1986:132; Viveiros de Castro 1998:11), the *Joti* cosmos is inhabited by diverse entities conceived of as persons or subjects: the Sun, Moon, and other eternal primordial beings as well as certain plants, animals, and mushrooms. All of these beings were originally human beings and then later were transformed through various mythical “speciation” processes, ultimately taking on the diverse forms and shapes of beings in the contemporary world. Many of

these beings continue acting as subjects endowed with morality, agency, and a point of view. Although their subjective and moral stance is not markedly different from that of the *nin joti*, or “true and complete people” (i.e., the Jotĩ themselves), their perspective of the world is provided by their differentiated and diverse bodies (Viveiros de Castro 1992, 1998). Mythical narratives describe the ontological processes that transformed these undifferentiated, primordial but quintessentially *human* beings into the diversity of biological species, human groups, and other beings that inhabit the cosmos currently. In most cases, these transformations are achieved through the individual will and volition of the primordial beings, who for various reasons choose to change their external morphological aspect into different kinds of plants, arthropods, vertebrate animals or mushrooms without, however, disposing totally of their underlying human essence.

According to Jotĩ mythology, mushrooms came from First Woman, *Yamulie jawĩ au*, who was carved from a piece of wood by Weightless Wise Being, *Jkajo jati*, after a period of chaos in primordial times. The piece of wood came from the large tree, *Apeiba schomburgkii* Szyszyl (Tiliaceae), known as *jitĩtimõ jyeĩ* (the “sonorous tree”) because its trunk produces an almost musical sound when it is struck. First Woman maintained vestiges of the woody condition inherent in her origin such that in her old age, the First Mushrooms (*yamulie yakino*) sprouted from her foot.

A summary of the Jotĩ myth of human origins sheds further insight into the role and significance of mushrooms in Jotĩ ritual and worldview.

As a result of cataclysmic events in the primordial ages, *Jtinewa*, the Sun, ceased his perennial walking and came to a standstill at the Zenith, bringing the cosmic movements of life to a halt. First Woman’s child, First Son, was sent to persuade the lethargic *Jtinewa* to keep walking. First Son ascended to the sky. Unable to persuade *Jtinewa* to resume his vital perambulations, First Son was forced to hunt and kill him. But *Jtinewa* was reborn and First Son made him undergo the proper rituals of manhood and taught him the correct path to walk around the earth. Through his act of hunting and predation, First Son imbued the cosmos with cyclical movement, renewal, and the dynamics of life and death (López 2006). After he completed this important deed, First Son descended to earth in

the shape of a bat. His mother bathed him with the First Mushrooms she harvested from her leg, transforming First Son into First Man, the first true and complete human being. The mushroom essences that permeated and penetrated First Son’s body and person were the primordial vehicle that endowed the first “true person” (*nin Jotĩ*) with agency, morality, and correct behavior.

MUSHROOMS, MONKEY BILE, AND JOTĨ HUNTING MEDICINES

Mushrooms constitute one of the means for restoring a person’s hunting and gathering skills—so essential for the continuity of Jotĩ life—when these skills are lost or weakened due to social and spiritual transgressions (e.g., violations of food taboos, selfishness, aggression, loud talk, etc.). Since both men and women among the Jotĩ hunt, butcher animals, and gather different forest resources, all are amenable to such use of mushrooms. Among the most serious transgressions a Jotĩ individual can commit, is the inadequate manipulation of *waña*, a yellowish green bile secretion found in the entrails of some animals (E. Zent 2005). When arboreal game animals, such as monkeys and birds, do not fall after a hunter shoots them with curare-tipped darts, or when fallen prey animals elude retrieval, the improper handling of *waña* is diagnosed.

As in the tale of human origins, a mushroom also figures prominently in the myth concerning the origin of *waña*. Spider Monkey (*uli jkwayo*) invented *waña* in the primordial time when he still possessed a human form. He invented *waña* for the explicit purpose of guaranteeing eternity for him and his kind. When hunters are careless in butchering their prey, *waña* ensures that they lose their hunting skills, thus providing spider monkeys (the paradigmatic game animal species for the Jotĩ) with a counter-predatory protective mechanism against their main predator, humans. In compensation, however, Spider Monkey also created the main species of medicinal mushroom, known as “spider monkey bile mushroom” or simply “bile mushroom” (*waña yakino*) to restore hunting skills. The mushroom’s color and texture are reminiscent of spider monkey bile, and it has the ability to restore a hunter’s lost stamina, skill, and luck (E. Zent et al. 2004). *Waña* is thus a material expression of the inter-connectedness of

different beings in the cosmos, and of the delicate balance in the relationships among them. *Waña yakino* epitomizes Jotī notions of connectivity in the cosmos: Used medicinally, the mushroom restores the fluid communication between different species and revitalizes the predator–prey relationship.

Specific mushroom parts (cap, flesh, or juices from the cap)—but usually not whole mushrooms of *waña yakino* and other medicinal species—are employed by faltering Jotī hunters in baths (*au ibi*), ablutions (*au dili*), libations (*au jwai*), or inhalations (*au iño jkwana jau*) to reconnect the individual to the intangible network of relationships that triggers movement and life (E. Zent 2005). As in the creation myth, the permeation of mushroom essences into the body causes a transformation: The tangible (bodily) and intangible (spiritual/cosmological) components of the person are reunited, thus restoring the fluidity and connectivity that permit people to interact with and manipulate different organic species, especially vital in subsistence activities such as hunting and gathering.

MUSHROOM ESSENCES, SPIRIT PREDATION, AND THE FABRICATION OF PERSONS

I had some notion about Jotī concepts of spirit predation prior to the ominous warning of the three Jotī men not to handle mushrooms. For example, I was aware of the class of spirits known as *awēladi*, whom the men warned could attack the spirit of my children. *Awēladi* refers to a diverse and polymorphic class of predatory spirits that assume different forms in different times and places in Jotī mythology and daily life. One essential form (hypostasis) is as a huge, black, profusely hairy person. A second, eternal form was left buried in the underworld during a prior cosmic chaos and collapse. A third, finite form of the *awēladi* is constituted through the transformation of a dead person's laziness, disease, or death pangs into certain (mostly nocturnal) animal species considered sinister by the Jotī, e.g., mice, opossum, deer, anteaters, and others. The *awēladi* can be perceived through unusual and unpleasant sensory experiences such as fetid odors, shrieking sounds, or a tactile feeling like wind on the skin.

However, that singular encounter with the three Jotī men marked the first time I had heard about

the enigmatic spirit entities known as *jnamodi*, upon which some forms of *awēladi* prey. I learned in my further investigation that the *jnamodi* are equivalent to the spiritual entities that entered the body of First Son when First Woman bathed him with the mushrooms growing from her foot, completing his transformation into the fully human form. The bath with the First Mushroom represents the fabrication of spiritual essences and the physical permeation of these into the body (López 2006), a process involving both tangible (material) and intangible (spiritual) elements.

The process of “fabrication” of the body among lowland South American indigenous peoples has been described and theorized by anthropologists since the late 1970s (Seeger et al. 1979; Viveiros de Castro 1979). Common among lowland indigenous cultures is the notion that sociological processes well as physiological ones are involved in the constitution of human beings. Significantly, failure to abide by specific behavioral restrictions and rules before, during, and after pregnancy (“couvade”) is thought to jeopardize not only the health but also the very humanness of the gestating and recently born infant (McCallum 1996; Rival 1998; Vilaça 2002). In this worldview, the human body, indeed human nature itself, is not a natural given, but results rather from intentional processes of body fabrication (Viveiros de Castro 1979:32), activated through the ingestion and permeation of particular substances and essences (Londoño 2004).

Although mushrooms are not the only essences used in constituting the *jnamodi*, they remain important in Jotī life cycle rituals. Fathers of newborn babies fabricate their child's *jnamodi* from specific parts of plants, arthropods, and mushrooms—the material components—while also praying to the primordial being *Jkyo ae* for the spiritual components. The father walks deep into the forest and fasts for three days, gathering and masticating these diverse organic materials into a mass that is stored in a special basket woven just for this purpose. Returning to the community, the baby is bathed with this mass, allowing the *jnamodi* to enter the newborn's body (López 2006).

Mushrooms remain important throughout the Jotī life cycle in rituals and medicinal treatments that symbolize the ongoing fabrication of human bodies and social individuals (Ingold 1991; López 2006). As illustrated in Fig. 3, medicinal baths of



Fig. 3. A young Jotí couple, Bae Baba and Au, with their son Janye and infant daughter Jtutea wearing protective body paint that includes mushroom ingredients.

certain mushrooms are given to infants to ensure ongoing health. Certain medicinal mushroom species are used to call back a soul kidnapped by forest spirits, or to treat specific disorders includ-

ing pain, discomfort, weakness, headache, anemia, and arthritis. Mushrooms remain important to the very end of the Jotí life cycle, when certain species are included among components of



Fig. 4. Nawi, a renowned hunter and leader, is painted with a mixture of various organic ingredients including mushrooms by one of his several wives in preparation for one phase of the Jotí initiation ritual.

medicinal baths used to cleanse and purify the bodies of people mourning a death in the family, thereby avoiding the anger and attachment of the deceased person toward living family members. As in the myth of First Son and First Woman, permeating the body with mushroom essences is essential to fabricating the integrated spiritual–material human person and ensuring the continuity of the life cycle.

Medicinal mushrooms are especially significant in the crucial three–month–long rite of passage that adolescents—like First Son in the primordial times—must undergo in order to complete the fabrication of their bodies (Fig. 4). The peak moment of the ritual calls for the piercing of the nasal septum—a permanent marking of the body—which is later submitted to a set of ablutions and baths with a preparation that includes mushrooms among its prominent components. Mushroom–derived substances are inserted in the nostrils and rubbed on the wooden plugs that are introduced into the pierced nasal septum. The Jotĩ explain that this nasal application guarantees an intimacy with mushroom essences that allows the initiate to manipulate and interact with all other mushroom species after initiation.

Except for a few edible species, no mushrooms should be touched (or in some cases, even looked at) by non–initiates. Reflecting back on that fateful encounter described at the beginning of this article, neither my young companion Balujkojko nor I had been properly initiated, and our ignorance, from the Jotĩ point of view, could have upset the complex system of interactions between human society, mushroom essences, and the spirit entities associated with them. Indeed, my ignorance could have caused some kind of cosmic collapse. No wonder the three men were so insistent that I not handle the mushrooms!

Discussion

In contrast to most lowland South American peoples studied to date, the Jotĩ show a remarkable inclination toward using and elaborating mushrooms in their subsistence economy, medical practices, and ritual life. The only other lowland South American groups reported to use a significant number of mushroom species, the Yanomami of Venezuela and Brazil (Fidalgo and Prance 1976) and the Nukak of southeast Colombia (Cabrera et al. 1999), are highly

nomadic foraging societies like the Jotĩ. Thus, environmental factors as well as subsistence ecology could be factors influencing the relative importance of mushrooms in indigenous diet and culture in South America. On the other hand, given that liminal or transitional status (e.g., in rituals, shamanism, social relations, cosmology) is especially important for lowland South American peoples (Jara 1996; Cayón 2002; Århem et al. 2004), the ambivalent status of mushrooms—plant–like in growth habit but having meat–like texture and flavor, and remarkable for their sudden appearance and ephemeral existence—may play a role in their cultural salience at least for the Jotĩ. The presence of bioactive and nutritional compounds, documented widely in mushroom species around the world, also certainly influences aspects of Jotĩ usage and belief. In brief, mushrooms are perceptually unusual life forms whose nutritional or medicinal properties may be especially significant for nomadic peoples living in an environment where food is seasonally scarce.

Mushrooms occupy a central role in Jotĩ understandings of the origin of humankind, their treatment of illness, their interactions with the spirit world, and in major life cycle rituals at birth, adolescence, and death. Mushrooms played an essential role in catalyzing the transformation of First Woman’s son into First Man, thereby marking the unique species *nin Jotĩ*, “true and complete human beings.” It is precisely for this reason that mushrooms remain important in Jotĩ medicine, rituals, and dietary and behavioral taboos. In sum, mushrooms were essential in the original constitution of humanity and remain vital in daily life for the reproduction of an eternal cycle that follows guidelines that were set down at the beginning of time. Although this paper has focused on mushrooms, it should be noted that the Jotĩ maintain similarly complex relationships with other organisms, creatures, and beings in their environment and cosmos. Far from representing an exclusive focus on or “worship” of mushrooms, the microcosm of Jotĩ beliefs described here forms part of a larger worldview in which the intentions and actions of many different entities (humans, biological organisms, primordial beings, etc.) are constantly re–shaping the cosmos. In this interrelated universe, Western dichotomies such as subject/object, spiritual/material, or dreaming/waking are inapplicable (Ingold 1991; Viveiros de Castro 1992).

Little did I know that a mushroom-collecting expedition, culminating in an enigmatic warning by three Jotĩ elders, would ultimately lead me to uncover profound and fundamental aspects of this society's mythology, cosmology, and notions about humanity and life itself. When I later asked Jkai how he was able to correctly diagnose my pregnancy before even I was aware of it, he answered, "I dreamed about you, and saw a fetus slowly taking human shape in your womb." He never revealed to me any further details about the dream and its prophetic powers. Mushrooms, however, opened a door for me into the Jotĩ's remarkable world.

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