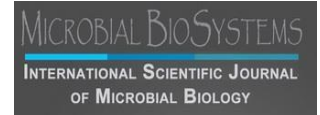


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The Quimbayas and mushrooms: A fertility cult of frogs and mushrooms related to a goddess among the Quimbayas in prehispanic Colombia

Juan Camilo Rodríguez Martínez *

Sociedad Colombiana de Micología, Bogotá, Colombia.



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ABSTRACT

The mystery around the indigenous Quimbaya tribe who lived in prehispanic Colombia is deep and it has not been resolved till now. Systematically exterminated by the Spanish crown there is not much information that exists about them. There is no knowledge about their mythology and the gods they worshipped are unknown. Very few books and research about this subject in comparison with other indigenous Colombian tribes. The first study on mushroom cult between the Quimbayas were published by Schultes and Bright (1979). In this research we discussed more observations to reconfirm the ideas proposed by Schultes and Bright from different samples examined at museums of gold and archaeology in Bogota. This will bring new insights around the possible use of mushrooms by the Quimbayas in Prehispanic Colombia.

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Introduction

The science of mycology and its rising interest among the Colombian Academy has increased in the last years. Ethnomycology is a branch of mycology that studies the relationship between human beings and fungi, and its cultural implications. The interest in fungi has transcended local academic circles and is gaining fans every day around the world and in Colombia.

Recently, a large number of studies on the taxonomy and biology of fungi have been carried out by Colombian researchers, while ethnomycology studies are overlooked and all mycological research has been carried by academics.

The purpose of this paper is to trace clues in the available Quimbaya archaeological legacy that suggest a

possible mushroom cult in prehispanic Colombia and rituals that were practiced in the past by this tribe.

Materials & Methods

An analysis has been made of the scarce Quimbaya archaeological materials at museums of gold and archaeology in Bogota.

Museo Arqueológico MUSA (Museum of Archaeology) is located in Bogota and very close to the Plaza de Bolívar (Bolívar Square). The Museum is housed in old house of Marquis San Jorge; a popular, well-known character of Bogota aristocracy in the XVIII century. The palace is fabulous, and one is instantly transported to another dimension not only by the museum collection but also because of the beautiful architecture of the place.

* Corresponding author

E-mail address: sociedadcolombianademicologia@yahoo.com (Juan Camilo Rodríguez Martínez)



The Quimbaya section inside the museum is not that big, but two pieces attract attention regarding the subject of this paper and suggest neurotropic mushroom usage by the legendary Quimbayas.

Results

1. Two pieces in the Museo Arqueológico (MUSA)

The first analyzed piece shows what it seems to be a little man crowned with a mushroom head (Fig. 1). I don't know the functional use of these pieces but I suspect they were used to print patterns and ornaments in blankets and other textiles manufactured by the Quimbayas.



Fig 1. Very close up of man crowned with a mushroom.

Their artistic creations were very famous and in a moment their prices and quality exceeded the Muisca ones. This type of ornamentation may reflect the importance of mushrooms in the Quimbaya culture in a similar way to how the Paracas in ancient Peru represented mushrooms in their art.

The second Quimbaya piece analyzed showed ornamentations that suggest mushrooms and patterns that resemble the hallucinogenic visions obtained under the effects of sacred mushrooms after ingestion. This also can be

said from the first piece already analyzed. It looks like some kind of mushroom primordium is portrayed. A mushroom in its early state of development (Fig. 2).



Fig 2. Ornamentations that suggest mushrooms and patterns that resemble the hallucinogenic visions.

Both examined pieces are giving clues regarding a mushroom cult that was probably practiced by the Quimbayas.

2. The entheogenic frog goddess of the Quimbayas (Fig. 3)



Fig 3. A golden entheogenic frog goddess.

As aforementioned information, there is little known about the Quimbayas and I suspect they worshipped a Goddess. It was possibly the principal deity in the Quimbaya pantheon dominated by female figures and I suspect it was also a frog. In a personal communication with Clark Heinrich the famous researcher of *Amanita muscaria*, he suggested that the emblematic Quimbaya poporo exposed in the Museo del Oro, represents a frog. It could be represented entheogenic goddess in the form of a frog for the ancient Quimbayas. The collection of the Museo del Oro (Museum of Gold) was initiated with this peculiar piece which found near the vicinity of Yarumal in Antioquia, Colombia.

The poporo is a receptacle that serves to store the lime that is used in coca leaves chewing practice strengthening its effects. This device is still in use by actual indigenous tribes and is a practice that goes back to ancient prehispanic tribes.

I'm agree with Clark Heinrich comment and the piece is representing a frog where the spherical bulging eyes and the wide mouth formed by the receptacle lid. The moon and also the female fertility deity adored by the ancient Quimbayas and many other cultures worldwide in antiquity. To this same goddess coca leaves and mushrooms were consecrated. Probably all kinds of entheogens were offered to make spiritual connections with the deity.

The use of parts from frogs and toads as entheogens by prehispanic indigenous tribes in America also could had been related to the cult of this frog goddess. This is just a suggestion and in no ways pretends to be the final word around the subject. More research must be done.

Also, a popular name to the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom is the toadstool. Frogs and toads (Fig. 5) like to hang around and sit on top of mushrooms and very curious fact to note. A toadstool is a mushroom (The stool of a toad).

Recently, the Colombian Academy believed that *Amanita muscaria* (Fig. 4) was introduced to Colombia and has established mycorrhizal relations with endemic Colombian oaks.

A fertility cult symbolized by a frog goddess in which entheogens like coca leaves and mushrooms were used ceremonially could had been put to the practice by the Quimbayas. The use of toads and frogs that exudate DMT containing toxins must not be discarded also.

In the Quimbaya section in the Museo del Oro (museum of gold) there are lots of pieces that deserve the attention of this case because they represent frogs. Frogs are associated with water and fertility. Lagoons, rivers, and lakes are places where they can be found. They salute the sun every morning (Fig. 6).



Fig 4. *Amanita muscaria*.



Fig 5. Rainforest frog.



Fig 6. Golden frog in Quimbaya section in the Museo del Oro.

In ancient Egyptian mythology one of the thousands goddess is the frog and named Heqet (Fig. 7). She was associated with fertility and waters. Sometimes she was portrayed as a frog or as woman with the head of a frog. This mysterious Egyptian deity was in charge of infusing the breath of life to the newly born Egyptian babies. Pregnant woman worshipped her and deliveries were in her domain also.

The Egyptian goddess Heqet could be the origin of the Greek goddess Hecate consecrated to magic, witchcraft, the moon, among other feminine mysteries that include the knowledge of power plants and neurotropic fungi for the preparation of magic potions, love philtres, and abortifacients that could also include frogs and toads as ingredients for recipes.

The Greeks related their goddess Aphrodite with the frogs that represented harmony and fertility. This was also believed by the Romans.

The appearance of frogs and toads in European fairy tales, and myths and legends of prehispanic America, must be taken into account, as the reminiscence of a bygone and forgotten era, where entheogens and shamanism were an integral and vital part of the culture exercised by the ancient civilizations ruled by goddesses and priestesshood.

There is a widespread belief that frogs and toads were part of the ingredients used by witches in their potions. Mushrooms are also included in this list but archaeological evidence has not been sufficient to verify this neither in Europe or in America.

The indigenous Colombian tribe of the Muisca also have the frog as an important figure in their mythology and cosmography and a goddess named Huitaca. Huitaca was the goddess of the moon and witchcraft among them. The owl was related to her. In a similar way in the Greek Mythology the owl was related to Athena.

The Quimbaya pieces that the reader can see up next are very curious. When you turn golden frogs upside down they look like mushrooms and moons. Also, they resemble the *Amanita muscaria* mushroom and the Fleur-de-lis. (Fig. 8 a,b). It's a beautiful relation between the Moon and mushrooms that deserves consideration in the theme that is being studied in the present paper; all connected with a fertility frog goddess.

I believe the Quimbayas used mushrooms of the *Psilocybe* type but this is not the final conclusion as *Gymnopilus* and *Panaeolus* could be included in this list. The use of mushrooms belonging to the genus *Amanita* endemic of Prehispanic Colombia should not be disregarded. All this regarding a mushroom complex and cultural fungal knowledge could have involved medical, and nutritional uses among the Quimbayas including lichens.

It's a possibility to consider that ancient cultures have achieved knowledge analogous to ours regarding fungi. Could they have been aware of the importance of the mycelium? Can mycelia belonging to different fungal genera communicate with each other through signals, electrical impulses, and biochemical products generated by the same mycelia?

Could it be a biological worldwide network of vital importance for earth ecology connecting the whole planet by mycelia? The ancient white goddesses of worldwide mythology? Why not?

In recent research it has been acknowledged that electric activity influences fungal dynamics. It's a common belief among many people around the world that an *Amanita muscaria* grows up where lightning strikes.



Fig 7. Egyptian goddess Heqet.



Fig 8. Quimbaya golden frog pieces A- Upper view, B- upside down view.

More research must be done

A cult of a frog goddess, involving mushrooms and other kinds of entheogens, seems to have been practiced by the ancient Quimbayas. It is presumed that the first goldsmith tradition of prehispanic Colombia could be the Quimbayoid and this could have expanded and influenced the goldsmith art created later in other indigenous cultures of the time.

The cultural exchange of the Quimbayas and their contributions to other societies may not have been only around goldsmithing. Even cultural contributions from other cultures could have permeated the Quimbaya culture itself. Knowledge of mushrooms cannot be ruled out. This is reflected in the gold pectorals analyzed by Schultes and Bright in their article, which were found in various places, demonstrating a style of goldsmith piece that extended throughout much of prehispanic America, influenced locally in each part where it was present.

3. A Sacramental mushroom vessel

In the Quimbaya section on the Museo del Oro, there is a

piece that deserves all the attention of the case. It's a ceramic work exposed to the museum visitors that when you watch it with delight it can give us more clues around a mushroom cult practiced by the Quimbayas (Figs. 9-11).



Fig 9. The vessel under investigation in zoom out view.



Fig 10. Top view of the vessel under investigation (zoom in).



Fig 11. Very close up of the vessel under investigation.

The ornaments of the piece suggest stylized mushrooms. I suspect this vessel was used in one of the religious ceremonies practiced by the Quimbayas. Probably the neurotropic mushrooms were served in this receptacle before their consumption by the initiates in a ceremony accompanied by songs where some of the pieces of the Quimbaya goldsmith were exposed.

4. A mysterious poporo and the Quimbaya treasure in Spain

I really don't know in which museum or private collection this piece is protected. I think it belongs to the Early Period of the Quimbayas (year?). The image is so obvious it does not need explanation. A shaman holding a mushroom in each one of his hands in a complete entheogenic trance is what is represented on this *poporo*. The piece is Quimbaya. (Fig.12). Some had suggested a musical instrument is portrayed in this goldsmithing piece but I think they resemble mushrooms. It's a possibility they mixed the use of entheogenic mushrooms with coca leaves in the fertility rites they performed. The great ethnomycologist Carl de Borhegyi has suggested before that this piece represents a shaman holding mushrooms. I agree with Borhegyi. I only differ from him in that the mushrooms that the shaman is holding belong to the *Psilocybe* genus and is not *Amanita muscaria*. It could be *Psilocybe caerulea* or *P. zapotecorum*, or another endemic psilocybin producing mushroom present in Colombian territories.



Fig 12. A poporo from the Quimbaya culture of Columbia.

It's important to note before finishing this paper that in the Museo de América (Museum of America) in Madrid

there is located the Quimbaya Treasure; a magnificent collection that was given from the Colombian government to the Spanish crown because of a conflict of borders with Venezuela in which the Spanish intervention was definitive to put an end to the struggle. That happened a long time ago in 1892. Until the present date of this publication, Spain has not yet returned the pieces to Colombia.

In this collection there are pieces that can give as new insights around the case that is being studied in the present paper. (Fig. 13)



Fig 13. Golden statues from the Quimbaya culture of Columbia

The piece in the middle is reminiscent of the poporo already described on the beginning of the present chapter. The difference is in the representation of the mushrooms. On the first piece the mushrooms are evident. In the second piece the mushrooms are stylized and abstracted following R. Gordon Wasson ideas.

Conclusions

It can be concluded that, after a thorough examination of goldsmithing and other expressions of Quimbaya art, that the Quimbayas knew the secrets regarding sacred mushrooms. They used them in a fertility cult involving a goddess represented in the form of a frog who kept the mysteries of the sacred mushrooms and plants for spiritual purposes in ritual ceremonies performed by the tribe. Included in this list of entheogens are hallucinogenic secretions from the skin of frogs.

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