

Sociocultural and Ethnomycological Uses of Mushrooms Among the Esan People of Nigeria

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Esan is one of the major tribes in Edo State, but it is a minority among the approximately 250 tribes that exists in Nigeria. Different villages and towns of this tribe trace their histories to many other big tribes across the country. However, similar farming practices, eating habits, social norms, and cultural practices, in addition to a common language (Esan) with highly variable dialects within the tribe, are the common factors that make this tribe different from its neighbouring tribes of Ika, Owan, Etsako, and Bini. The use of mushrooms in food, traditional medicine, and other sociocultural practices is reported here.

The Esan word for mushroom is *utun*. Divination is very prevalent among the Esan people, who depend upon it for solving mysteries. People afflicted with diseases and misfortunes that are usually affiliated to punishments from the gods and ancestors go to seek divinations from priests, in order to know what sacrifices will appease the gods. What we found is that many of the diviners use mushrooms to wash and clean their faces so that they can see the future or the cause of their problems. The sclerotium *Pleurotus tuberregium* is the fungus used for this purpose.

In the cultural dance practiced by the Ogwa people, dancers are known to jump to high and dangerous positions and fall to the ground without signs of injuries. This is usually when they are in a trance. A mushroom yet to be identified is a critical ingredient in the preparation they eat before the

dancing begins. It is clear now that this mushroom has hallucinogenic properties.

Termites are a major problem among the local people in the rural areas because their wooden homes are usually infested and eaten up by termites. Sclerotium of *P. tuberregium* is used in addition to other herbs to prepare a powdered substance that is spread or sprinkled around the houses during the raining season in order to ward off the termites.

Many mushrooms are used as food by the Esan people. Such mushrooms are usually collected in the wild during the early periods of the rainy season. It is a practice mainly engaged in by women and children. Such mushrooms are used as meat substitute, sold fresh in local markets, or dried for use during the dry seasons when meat becomes very scarce. The elderly women lead the younger women and children in such collections (forays), identifying the edible mushrooms from poisonous ones, from those that are suitable for fresh sales or drying for preservation purposes. Collections of such mushrooms have been made, and so far the following species followed by their local names have been identified: *Pleurotus tuberregium*, *Lentinus squarrosulus* (Asikhia), *Volvariella* sp. (Ameinmen), *Agaricus* sp. (Ojutun), *Auricularia* sp. (Ehor-ofen), *Termitomyces* sp. (Utun-okhan), *Schizophyllum commune* (Ikpekpelu), and *Coprinus* sp. (Utun-uzo). Studies to identify about 13 other mushrooms used for food are in progress.

Sclerotia of *P. tuberregium* are the most widely used for medicinal purposes. The local people usually com-

bine sclerotium with different herbs to treat whooping cough, dysentery, malaria fever, and energy-providing patties for pregnant women and babies suffering from malnutrition. An extract from the combination of sclerotia and the plant *Ocimum gratissimum* L. (a plant in the tea family locally called Alhanmhonkhor) is used to treat ear infection in children.

Ongoing studies on formulations and administration of mushrooms based on traditional medicines and comparison of usage with the practices of others tried in the West African region will be presented.

Many mushrooms known today to have medicinal benefits, which arose from observations of their uses in China and Japan, are objects of scientific studies that continue to determine the active components in such mushrooms. Whereas the documentation of this knowledge is important for the understanding of the sociocultural practices of the Esan people, it is equally good for science, because detailed scientific studies of mushroom uses and practices of the Esan people can lead to the discovery of new drugs and nutraceuticals.