

Soma in Indian Religion

Etheogens as Religious Sacrament

By

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The use of sacramental substances in ritual or religious observances is a practice that is abundantly attested in the shamanic world as well as among some Indian religions such as the Avesta and the Vedas.

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Introduction

In Indian mythology the Sanskrit word 'mela' means a 'festival' and 'Kumbh' means a 'pot'; a Kumbha-mela or 'open air spiritual fair'. According to the Vedic literature, at the beginning of time, the Gods got together and churned the ocean to extract a substance which would confer immortality. The Gods agreed to share this mighty elixir, but one of them apparently absconded with the whole pot of Holy Ambrosia. Fleeing with the 'Nectar of the Gods', over the course of twelve days, the decoction Amrita was spilt onto four auspicious places, namely, Prayag, Hardwar, Ujjain, and Nasik.¹

The most popular version of the Indian myth 'Churning the milk Ocean' is found in the Eighth Canto of the Bhagavata Purana.² In Buddhist mythology, Amrita³ is the drink of the gods, which grants them immortality. The Rig-Veda is

¹ A Kumbh Mela is a mass Hindu pilgrimage which occurs four times every twelve years and rotates among four locations: Allahabad (Prayag) at the confluence of Ganga and Yamuna and mythical Saraswati river, Hardwar along Ganga river, Ujjain along the Kshipra river and Nashik along the Godavari river, so a Kumbh Mela is practically held every three years across the four locations. TIME, Feb 08, 1960.

² The Bhagavata Purana is also known as the S'ri-mad Bha-gavatam, or as the Bha-gavatam, one of the Puranic texts of Hindu literature. Bhagwatam is Sanskrit for "The Book of God". Srimad Bhagavatam Canto 8, Bhaktivedanta VedaBase Network.

³ Amrita or Amrit is a Sanskrit word often referred to in Vedic texts as "nectar" corresponding to ambrosia. It has different significances in different Indian religions. See the Dictionary of Hindu Lore and Legend, compiled by A. Dallapiccola.

known as the Soma Mandala.⁴ According to Terrence McKenna in his book The Food of Gods, the psilocybin-containing *Stropharia cubensis* mushroom is a likely Soma candidate. Psilocybin⁵, the active psychoactive component in *Stropharia Cubensis* has a strong hallucinogenic nature. Soma (Sanskrit), or Haoma (Avestan)⁶ was a ritual drink of importance among the early Indo-Iranians, and the later Vedic and Iranian cultures. It is frequently mentioned in the Rig-Veda, which contains many hymns praising its energizing or intoxicating qualities.

According to Lewis M. Hopfe and Mark R. Woodward:

"Another liquid apparently used as a libation was the juice of the sacred soma plant. The exact identification of the soma plant is lost to the modern world. The ancient texts describe it as sacred plant sent to earth by the god Indra. Its juice was described as delicious and invigorating to the worshiper who drank it and shared with the gods..." (75).

McKenna describes *Amanita* as an alkaloid, of the mushroom species. Its common name is "fly agaric" and it has been described as "Pileus Size: (5) 7 - 25 (40) cm broad; Shape: convex, becoming plane to slightly wavy or depressed in

⁴ The identity of the original plant is disputed. Some candidates have been, a decoction made from cannabis, or ephedra or even honey. Gordon Wasson believed that soma was composed of the mushroom *Amanita muscaria*.

⁵ Psilocybin is an entheogen used in various practices for transcendence, such as meditation, and psychedelic psychotherapy. Psilocybin is a psychedelic indole of the tryptamine family, found in psilocybin mushrooms. See Wikipedia, *Psilocybin*.

⁶ Haoma is the Avestan language name of a plant and its divinity, both of which play a role in Zoroastrian doctrine and in later Persian culture and mythology. See Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices.

age; Color: blood-red, or various shades of bright, scarlet, or orange-red; becoming lighter toward margin; Surface: smooth, covered with white warts or small patches (remains of the universal veil); sometimes washing off in age; tacky, sticky or viscid when moist; Margin: striate; at first appendiculate; Flesh: firm when young and becoming soft in age, white (yellowish beneath cuticle); thick; Odor: faint; Taste: pleasant” (179)

Alkaloids and Patanjali Yoga

The use of substances in ritual or religious observances is a practice that is abundantly attested in the shamanic world as well as among some yogins, and among the rishis in the Vedas. We know that Patanjali,⁷ himself puts simples (ausadhi), together with Samadhi, among the means of obtaining the siddhis.⁸

Mircea Eliade⁹ states in his classic book Yoga: Immortality or Freedom:

"In the sphere of shamanism, strictly speaking, "...intoxication by drugs (hemp, mushrooms, tobacco, etc.) seems not to have formed part of the original practice. For, on the one hand, shamanic myths and folklore record a decadence among the shamans of the present day, who have become unable to obtain ecstasy in the fashion of the "great shamans of long ago"; on the

⁷ Patañjali is the compiler of the Yoga Sutras, an important collection of aphorisms on Yoga practice. See Wikipedia.

⁸ Siddhi is a Sanskrit word that literally means "perfection", "accomplishment", "attainment", or "success". See Wikipedia, *Siddhi*.

⁹ Mircea Eliade was a famous Romanian historian of religion, a fiction writer, a philosopher, and professor at the University of Chicago. Eliade is the author of Shamanism and A History of Religious Ideas, The Sacred and The Profane, etc.

other, it has been observed that where shamanism is in decomposition and the trance is simulated, there is also overindulgence in intoxicants and drugs" (338).

Eliade wrote that only the rudiments of classic Yoga are to be found in the Vedas, and while Shamanism¹⁰ and other techniques of ecstasy are documented among other Indo-European people, Yoga¹¹ is to be found only in India and in cultures influenced by Indian spirituality (102). Eliade notes that "Possession" by spirits, although documented in a great many shamanisms, does not seem to have been a primary and essential element. Rather, it suggests a phenomenon of degeneration; for the supreme goal of the shaman is to abandon his body and rise to heaven or descend into hell, not to let himself be "possessed" by his assisting spirits, by demons or the souls of the dead; the shaman's ideal is to master these spirits, not to let himself be "occupied" by them" (320).

Patanjali has this to say about ecstatic simples in Yoga Sutra IV, 1:

"Psychic and spiritual powers (siddhi) may be inborn, or they may be gained by the use of simples, or by mantra, or by striving, or by Meditation¹²".

¹⁰ Shamanism is a broad range of traditional beliefs and practices concerned with communication with the spirit world. Shamans can fly up to the nether world and communicate with the spirits.

¹¹ The term Yoga refers to traditional physical and mental disciplines originating in India and is associated with meditative practices in both Buddhism and Hinduism. See Wikipedia, *Shamanism*.

¹² Meditation means "to think things over", a mental discipline by which one attempts to go beyond or transcend the discursive and reflexive, thinking mind into a deeper state of relaxation or total awareness. Meditation often involves turning attention to a single point of reference

"Simples" mean ecstasy-inducing herbs, from which the elixir of longevity was extracted. In any cases, "simples" produce ecstasy and not the yogic Samadhi¹³. Eliade believes that these "mystical means" properly belong to the phenomenology of ecstasy and they were only reluctantly admitted into the sphere of classic Yoga. According to Eliade:

"Yet the fact that Patanjali himself refers to the magico-ecstatic virtues of simples is both significant and pregnant with consequences; it proves the pressure exercised by the ecstasies, their will to substitute their methods for the disciplines of classic Yoga" (Eliade 338-339).

The Aryan Ur-religion

In the Rig Veda, the sacramental basis of the Vedic religion was the preparation and consumption of a decoction obtained by mixing the juice of the various plants with other ingredients, one of which may have been hemp, or a beverage prepared by extracting the juice from the Amanita Muscaria fungus. This "ur-religion" does not begin with the composition of the Vedas, when the Aryans arrived in India, but much further back in time, in the late Ice Age in Siberia.¹⁴ During this cold age, when people had to live most of the time deep

such as a "mantra" or image. See Williams, See [TM Study Cambridge Handbook of Consciousness](http://www.rwilliams.us/archives/Meditation.pdf) (8.587KB download). <http://www.rwilliams.us/archives/Meditation.pdf>

¹³ Samadhi is a Hindu and Buddhist technical term that usually denotes higher levels of concentrated meditation or a meditation that is transcendental. See Wikipedia.

¹⁴ Subhash Kak is notable for publications from an India-centric "Indigenous Aryans" ideology as well as a paper that theorizes a Siberian origin for the soma plant. See David Frawley, [Gods, Kings, and Sages](#)

inside caves or other dwellings, an inward direction was given to their spiritual endeavors.

With the aid of certain magical herbs and plants, man may have first invented religion. When the Aryans came down from Siberia they brought with them their ur-religion and an urgaritic language which became the Vedic and Persian religious expression and later the Indo-European language¹⁵, which includes Sanskrit and Persian, and the dialects of Greek, Finnish, German, Hindi, and Urdu.¹⁶

Nectar of the Gods

The Aryans,¹⁷ a word which originally meant 'noble tiller of the earth', i.e. an agriculturist, 'digging stick in hand', came from Siberia, not by invasion, and not in 1500 BCE, but by a process of diffusion, as described by the famous archaeologist Colin Renfrew,¹⁸ around 7000 BCE. The first Aryans settled in what is called the Saraswati Valley. However, there is evidence that successive waves of Aryan immigrants came to India in later years perhaps up to as recently as 1500 BCE.

The evidence for this is centered on three main hypotheses:

¹⁵ The Indo-European languages are a family of several hundred related languages and dialects, including most major languages of Europe, the Iranian plateau, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent.

¹⁶ Professor R. L. Brougham, Ph.D., estimates that fifty-percent of the world's languages may have originated with the Indo-Europeans. Personal communication.

¹⁷ Calvert Watkins in the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, says that the word "Aryan", is a loanword. The term Aryan describes the peoples who inhabited parts of what are now Iran, Afghanistan, and India.

¹⁸ Colin Renfrew is an English archaeologist, noted for his work on the prehistory of languages. See Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins.

1. There is a direct affinity between Sanskrit¹⁹ and Latin. The Aryan speakers who composed the Vedas were akin to the same Aryan speakers who moved to what is now Iran, the latter having composed the Avesta, both of which scriptures center on the cult of the magical substance, Soma. According to Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty²⁰, a Rig Vedic scholar, "the soma sacrifice was the focal point of the Vedic religion" (95-147).

2. The cult of the "magic mushroom" has been traced by mycologists to Siberia. This has been cited by not only Wasson but also other eminent botanists such as S. Hajicek-Dobberstein, the author of the book Soma Siddhas and Alchemical Enlightenment: Psychedelic Mushrooms in Buddhist Tradition, published in the Journal of Ethno pharmacology. The substance may have been the Amanita Muscaria²¹ which is alluded to in the Rig-Veda, and has its origin in the northern area around Finland and Siberia, where the fungus still grows and can be seen each year.

3. There is no evidence that the Amanita Muscaria, that is, the Vedic Soma, grows in the Himalayas or in the desert which comprised the Land of the

¹⁹ Sanskrit is a member of the Indo-Iranian sub-family of the Indo-European family of languages. Its closest ancient relatives are the Iranian languages Old Persian and Avestan, the Baltic languages and with Greek and Latin.

²⁰ See Wasson, Soma: The Divine Mushroom of Immortality Wendy Doniger is an American scholar of the history of religions. Much of her work has focused on translating, interpreting and comparing narratives and myths of Hinduism. Doniger is the Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor of the History of Religions in the Divinity School, the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, at the University of Chicago.

²¹ Amanita muscaria, commonly known as the "fly agaric" is a psychoactive fungus, one of genus Amanita. The fungus is native throughout the temperate and boreal regions of the Northern Hemisphere. Apparently the Amanita muscaria has been introduced to many countries in the Southern Hemisphere.

Five Rivers, that is, Arya Bharata²². Therefore, the Amanita may have been imported into the Middle East and South Asia by immigrant agriculturalists.

Based on these considerations, it is clear that the Aryans came from outside India; brought with them a language very similar to Sanskrit; a people who had an intimate knowledge of the 'fly agaric'²³ which grows in Siberia, but does not grow in India; and composed the Vedas while under the influence of a psychedelic substance. This seems to have occurred after they arrived in modern Pakistan, after parting company with their Persian cousins, who stayed in Iran.²⁴

From these people we got our language which spread over the Middle East, India, and Europe. And, from these people we got the Vedic Religion, a religion which centered on the soma cult.

As further evidence, note that the Tibetan word for cannabis is 'So.Ma.Ra.Dza', that is, soma-rajā, "king of soma", and 'bDud.rTsi", which in Tibetan means "drink juice" as translated from the Sanskrit and taken to Tibet by two of the so-called Eighty-four Mahasiddhas²⁵ of Vajrayana Buddhism in the tenth century of our era. The mysterious substance referred to in Buddhist

²² India and Bharat are equally official short names for the Republic of India.

²³ English mycologist John Ramsbottom reported that "fly agaric" or Amanita muscaria was used for getting rid of bugs in England and Sweden.

²⁴ The word 'Aryan' is an adaptation of the Latin Arianus, which refers to Iran. The term 'Aryan' has long been in English language use. The Aryans and the Iranians are speakers of the Indo-European languages.

²⁵ The Mahasiddhas are acknowledged as the founders of many Indian and Buddhist traditions and lineages. See [Essential Tibetan Buddhism](#) by Robert Thurman, Je Tsong Khapa Professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Studies at Columbia University.

texts, variously described as 'Amrita' may be a similar decoction containing a similar alkaloid as contained in the soma fungus.

Soma in Vedic Ritual

Apparently, the proper performance of sacrificial ritual was of the utmost importance in the Vedic Aryan religion.²⁶ By means of the sacrifice it was believed that certain individuals could win the favor of the gods. Even before the Aryans entered India, the sacrifice had become a complex and elaborate affair. The sacrifice involved the slaughter of dozens and sometimes hundreds of animals - cattle, sheep, goats, and horses - as priests uttered the sacred formulae and the mysterious chants of the Vedic hymns.

According to historians, J. Bently and H. Ziegler, Vedic worshippers partook of Soma, a sort of elixir of the gods, a hallucinogenic decoction that produced "a divine sense of power and inspiration" (103). The hymns are recorded in the Rig Veda, wherein is described the sacred event as the gods themselves joined the participants and partook in the ritual eating and drinking.²⁷ By pleasing the gods with sacrifice, song, drink and food the Vedic Aryans hoped to gain the support of nature, (and much military success), large families, long life and abundant herds of cattle. These sacrifices required the

²⁶ In the Vedas, Soma is portrayed as a "deva", the plant and the god being one and the same. Soma is described as a preparation decocted by extracting juice from the stalks of a certain plants. The drink seems to be common to both the Vedic and Zoroastrian tradition.

²⁷ See Mushrooms and Mankind: The Impact of Mushrooms on Human Consciousness and Religion by James Arthur.

constant attention of a special class of priests who were required to perform no less than five rituals per day for the average common household.

According to Gordon Wasson²⁸, "There is little doubt that the substance called Soma in the Rig Veda has been identified as the fungus *Amanita Muscaria*." The idea that Soma was an "entheogen"²⁹, specifically the red capped *Amanita Muscaria* mushroom, as described in Mandala IX and X of Rig Veda,³⁰ was first presented by the ethno-mycologist Wasson. The *Amanita* grows in a close relationship with a number of different trees, specifically the pines, firs, and above all, the birches, from which the mushroom must feed. An example of the readings from the Ninth Mandala of Rig Veda:

"Flow Soma, in a most sweet and exhilarating stream, effused for Indra to drink. The all-beholding destroyer of rakshasas³¹ has stepped upon his gold-smitten birthplace, united with the wooden cask. Be the lavish giver of wealth, most bounteous, the destroyer of enemies; bestow on us the riches of the affluent. Come with food to the sacrifice of the mighty gods, and bring us strength and sustenance. To thee we come, O dropping (Soma); for thee only is

²⁸ Robert was an author and amateur researcher who, in the course of independent research made contributions to the field of ethnobotany, botany and anthropology.

²⁹ Entheogen is a word that means to "create god within" from en- "in, within," theo "god, divine" and gen "creates or generates". An entheogen is a psychoactive substance used in a religious or shamanic practice.

³⁰ The Vedas are organized in 10 books, known as "Mandalas", of varying age and length.

³¹ A rakshasa in Hindu mythology is a demon or unrighteous spirit in Hindu and Buddhist mythology. In the Ramayana rakshasas are a populous race of supernatural humanoids who tend toward evil, in particular, the demon Ravna, the king of Lanka.

this our worship day by day, our prayers are to thee, none other”
(Radhakrishnan 295).

Conclusion

Terrance McKenna³², thinks that the Soma decoction was in fact, a combination of water, cannabis indica, and the psilocybin mushroom. McKenna bases this theory on the fact that the Amanita is widely known to be a poisonous fungus which does not grow in South Asia and that further, Amanita has not been demonstrated to produce a psychedelic experience.³³ Timothy Leary³⁴ and Richard Alpert ran the Harvard Psilocybin Project, carrying out a number of experiments concerning the use of psilocybin in the treatment of personality disorders and other uses in psychological counseling.³⁵ Psilocybin is a known hallucinogenic substance which produces the same effects as described in the Vedas.

In the Plant Medicine Sutra³⁶, the Bodhisattva³⁷ said: "Thus have I heard. That night the bodhisattva awoke and found herself surrounded by vines,

³² Terence McKenna was a writer, philosopher, and ethno-botanist, noted for his knowledge of the use of psychedelic, plant-based entheogens, and subjects ranging from shamanism, to the theoretical origins of human consciousness.

³³ The genus Amanita contains many types of edible mushrooms, but most mycologists generally discourage amateur mushroom hunters from selecting these for human consumption. In contrast, the the Psilocybin fungus has been used in Mexico and North America by the native inhabitants for religious purposes. See Wikipedia, *Native American Church*.

³⁴ Timothy Leary was an American writer, psychologist, futurist, and advocate of psychedelic drug research. Leary is most famous as a proponent of the therapeutic and spiritual benefits of LSD.

³⁵ Albert Hofmann discovered and experimented with LSD, was the first to recognize the importance and chemical structure of the pure compounds psilocybin.

³⁶ See Zig Zag Zen. Buddhism and Psychedelics, Stephen Batchelor, editor.

branches, flowers, roots, sap, essence of the plant world, and the wildness of nature, all supplicating her for a teaching that would illumine their minds."³⁸

The sacramental basis of the Vedic Religion³⁹ was the preparation and consumption of a decoction obtained by mixing the juices of various psychoactive ingredients, one of which may have been Cannabis Indica, a species of weed, or a beverage prepared by extracting the juice from the Amanita Muscaria, a magic fungus, or from Psilocybin, which together produced the substance "Soma" mentioned on numerous occasions in South Asian⁴⁰ sacred scripture. Below are some of the many Rig Vedic citations cited by Wasson from the Rig Veda:

Mandala IV: 1-19; 3-9; 18-13; 32-1; 26-6; 57-7;

Mandala X: 43-4; 45-9; 51-4-7; 85-2.

³⁷ The term Bodhisattva was used by the Buddha in the Pali Canon to refer to himself both in his previous lives and as a young man in his current life, prior to his enlightenment.

³⁸ The Plant Medicine Sutra. Posted by Ryan. Tribe. Accessed on April 2, 2009.

<http://tinyurl.com/d64b8n>

³⁹ The Vedic religion is also known as Vedism or Vedic Brahmanism or, in a context of Indian antiquity, simply Brahmanism. The religious practices centered on a clergy administering rites that often involved sacrifices performed by priests.

⁴⁰ South Asia, also known as Southern Asia, is the southern region of the Asian continent, which comprises the sub-Himalayan countries. See Wikipedia.

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