Religions of South Asia 16.1 (2022) 93–96
https://doi.org/10.1558/rosa.23308
ISSN (print) 1751-2689
ISSN (online) 1751-2697

Review

Botanical Ecstasies: Psychoactive Plant Formulas in India and Beyond, by Matthew Clark. London: Psychedelic Press, 2021. 69 pp. £9.99 (pb). ISBN 978191626711.

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Keywords: *soma/haoma*; entheogens; Vedic sacrifice; ayahuasca.

In this short volume, Clark succinctly presents some of the theses exposed in his previous work, *The Tawny One: Soma, Haoma and Ayahuasca* (2017). The core proposition is that the drink called *sóma-* in Vedic (Old Indo-Aryan) and *haoma-* in Avestan (Eastern Old Iranian) is to be considered not as the product of the pressing (of the stems) of a single plant but as a concoction obtained from a variable number of vegetable substances, some of which possess psychoactive properties in a variable percentage. To validate his thesis, Clark refers to a similar case widely documented in contemporary scientific literature: ayahuasca in South America.

Botanical Ecstasies adds little or nothing to *The Tawny One.* In fact, rather than a 'monograph' (pp. 1, 48), it can be considered a long article representing an abridged edition of Clark's 2017 research.

Given the vastness of the subject matter—research on *soma* started over two centuries ago—and the brevity of the work under review, it is unavoidable that some aspects are left out or discussed in a cursory fashion. It is unfortunate, however, that the organization of the book and the presentation of the arguments lack a clear historical perspective. For instance, Old Indo-Iranian sacrificial culture is not sufficiently treated, which makes it difficult to contextualize the debate on the origins of *soma/haoma*. Another pivotal issue is the migration of *ārya* clans from the Kubhā valley to the Pañjāb and finally to Kurukṣetra, with the consequent change of landscape and environment as well as major transformation in society, culture, science and economics. Such factors have contributed to continuous modifications of the recipe of *soma*-based drinks, even though the names of the ingredients have generally been retained. As Clark rightly notes, this is a major challenge whose ramifications extend to all classification systems in Sanskrit. Such a characteristic of Indian culture requires historical problematization, which is in fact wanting.

Further to that, it is not clear whether Clark's intended audience is one of scholars/researchers or a lay public with an interest in Indian religions and entheogens and/or psychoactive substances. In both cases, there are significant problems. A great deal of technical terminology, primarily in Sanskrit but also in Avestan, is dealt with unproblematically. For instance, what are the 'yogic practices' or 'austerities (*tapas*)' discussed in relation to *soma* (p. 7)? Certainly, the semantic connotation of Vedic *yóga-* and *tápas-* differs from that of the very same lexemes when used in the epics, Purāṇas, Tantras, or in Buddhist or Jaina sources. Even well-known techniques such as *prāṇāyāma* vary according to context. The breath control of a *vrātya* in *Atharvaveda* 15 or related Vedic sources (Brāhmaṇas and Śrautasūtras) is different from that mentioned in Patañjali's *Yogasūtrabhāṣya* which, in turn, proves different in aims and scope from that practised in Tantric schools. The mythological background of *soma* would also require a more careful investigation. The *samudramanthana* or *kṣīrābdhimanthana* myth, which appears in several Purāṇas and—contrary to what Clark states (p. 9)—is present in a succinct form in both *Rāmāyāṇa* (1.44.18ab) and *Mahābhārata* (1.16.37), is a non-Vedic narrative but the relation between the cup-bearer Dhanvantari and the Vedic solar god Viṣṇu is worth further investigation, especially in relation to *amṛta/soma.* Similar problems with the category 'myth' appear in the medical(ized) use of *soma*. Clarks calls 'unbelievable' (p. 32) Suśruta's statement about *soma*-treatment as a way to extend human life up to 10,000 years. One should know only too well that Āyurvedic compendia, especially early ones such as Caraka, Suśruta, Bhela and Kāśyapa, recur very often to mythology and make abundant use of jargon that is heavily dependent on the symbols of hieratic texts: 10,000 years is certainly not an actual reckoning of human life expectancy.

The book can be grossly divided into three core subjects: (i) the entheogenic power of *soma/haoma*; (ii) their likely formulae; and (iii) *soma/haoma* in practice past and present (Vedic sacrifice, yoga, Tantric *sādhanā*).

Clark provides an overview of some of the most influential studies on *soma* and its use to achieve altered states of consciousness. Some of the effects are drawn directly from Vedic and Avestan sources: *soma/haoma* has a purgative effect; is bitter; has a reddish colour; should be drunk during complex ritual sessions every three hours, in some cases for several days; and is often mentioned in the plural (i.e. 'many' *soma/haoma*s, coming from the valleys, mountains, hills, rivers, etc.). Based on these data, previous research pointed at three likely candidates: (1) various plants of the genus Ephedra; (2) *Peganum harmala* L.: Syrian/mountain rue; (3) *Amanita muscaria* (L.) Lam.: fly agaric. According to Clark, none of these botanical species is acceptable as *soma/haoma*. The drink is thus discussed as a mixture of different and variable ingredients, like ayahuasca. Though I am in no position to evaluate the effects of the above-mentioned substances, there are some methodological details which need reconsideration. For instance, the fly agaric is discarded

for a variety of reasons. Amongst these, Clark notes that Dharmaśāstra texts prohibit mushrooms. The reference is primarily to *Manusmṛti*, though centuries before that the Dharmasūtras of Āpastamba (1.17.28), Gautama (17.32) and Vasiṣṭha (14.33) make it abundantly clear that brahmins should not eat mushrooms. This line of reasoning is fallacious for at least two reasons. First, early normative literature can be dated to the period from the fourth century BCE to the first century CE—that is, about a millennium after the early Ṛgvedic hymns. As mentioned above, historicizing textual sources is not an exercise to be discarded: ritual practices and rules are known to be subject to change. Further to that, it may well be, as in the case of other substances (e.g. meat), that the ordinary consumption of mushrooms was disapproved of whereas their use in a sacrificial, esoteric context was indeed permitted. Second, constructing part of the argument on the entheogenic properties of the fly agaric based on the occasional psychedelic journeys of authors like Wasson or anthropological reports on 'shamanistic rites' from Siberia, Canada and the USA (pp. 13–14) seems unconvincing.

The section on South Asian plants with psychoactive properties is quite interesting (pp. 33–35). Clark examines recent studies on the Bower, or Yaśomitra, manuscript, a text which is not from Kashmir (p. 33) but from Kuqa (Kucā), Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China. Here too a more detailed discussion could have been useful on the methods used to identify plants and to examine their 'potency' (to retain Āyurvedic jargon). This, however, is not found here. In fact, Clark often invites readers to consult *The Tawny One*. I take the opportunity to remind readers of this journal how, very often, a univocal identification system according to which the Sanskrit name of a plant corresponds to a Linnaean one is to be discouraged. First and foremost, plants are subject to mutations. A plant recorded in the nineteenth or early twentieth century following the rules of Western botany might be different from the 'same' one recorded in second-millennium-BCE Indo-Iranian sources. Second, if Linnaean taxonomy is to be used, one should always recur to the whole scientific name of a plant, which includes the identifier of the botanist (or botanists) who discovered or classified it. For instance, the *Desmodium gangeticum* mentioned on p. 33 means nothing without its (supposed) Sanskrit equivalent(s) and its accepted scientific name, which is this case it should be: *Pleurolobus gangeticus* (L.) J.St.-Hil. ex H.Ohashi & K.Ohashi. Regrettably, this practice is never followed.

To conclude, the way in which the history of *soma*/*haoma* is reconstructed here leaves me puzzled. This includes the very short chapters on *soma* in the Tantras (pp. 43–44) and *soma* use in Bengal (pp. 45–47). Here too there is no substantiated argument, and most considerations reveal an uncritical reference to an insider's perspective, as proved by statements such as 'typical *kuṇḍalinī* effects occur' (p. 46).

Clark's research on *soma* is indeed of interest, whether or not one concurs with his conclusions. However, *Botanical Ecstasies* is probably not what I would recommend to appreciate the depth of his knowledge.

REFERENCE

Clark, Matthew. 2017. *The Tawny One: Soma, Haoma and Ayahuasca*. London: Muswell Hill Press.