

Soma of the Rigveda - The Divine Light

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Throughout this essay I explore the mystery of Soma and its identity within the Rigveda, arguing in favor of the psychedelic *Amanita Muscaria*, a common fly-agaric mushroom of Eurasia. I will be quoting the Rigveda directly to help illustrate key descriptions of India's poetic insights, drawing parallels between their ancient texts, doctrines, gods, and practices to the fly-agaric mushrooms. Moreover, I will explain why Soma's identity has remained a mystery for so long, as well as how its symbolism and usage have changed over the years. Lastly, I will explore the usage of *Amanita Muscaria* within shamanic traditions of ancient and present-day Siberia, as well as the linguistic roots of Soma to strengthen my claims of its identity.

Poetics of the Rigveda

While exploring the Rigveda and its descriptions of Soma it seems strange that this mystery "plant" has never been expressed in terms of its roots, leaves, branches, blossoms, or even seeds (Wasson, 1971). This alone should serve as a powerful guide in the search for Soma. It is unlikely that the saturated and carefully crafted poetry of the Rigveda would fail to include any of those botanical descriptions listed if they were a part of Soma. The lack of these features, as well as the emphasis on other features, such as a head, stalk, and milky sap, should appear as obvious descriptions that Soma is a mushroom and not a plant.

The fly agaric spawns from the mycelium body living underground as a magnificent white, fluffy ball. As it grows, its white envelope gets stretched by the red (sometimes yellow or orange) skin plating the mushroom cap. In its maturity, the mushroom appears as seen in much of Eastern and Western symbolism, the mushroom with a red cap and white flakes [Image 1].

Soma is persistently compared with the sun and with fire. This holds great significance within Hinduism because the sun and fire are honored as symbols of purity, illumination, and

divine energy. The Hymns which I quote directly from the Rigveda (Next page) seamlessly articulate the radiant qualities of Soma, with the red (yellow/orange) cap embodying the sun and its white patches resembling the sun's rays.

Properties of Psychedelics

Here we should reflect on the psychedelic properties of this mushroom and draw analogies to its illuminating nature. Psychedelics are a subcategory of hallucinogens. They are psychoactive substances classified in terms of their ability to invoke altered states of consciousness characterized mainly by alterations in thought processes, mood, perception, and sense of self, as well as other changes (Franz, 2001).

There have been many attempts to define phenomenological structures (i.e. patterns of experience) of psychedelics, but there is only one well-accepted taxonomy of them because of how variable many of their effects can be. This quintessential quality which I am referring to has been addressed by the philosopher and ethnobotanist Terence McKenna, who has expressed that the effect that all psychedelics share is their quality of dissolving boundaries (McKenna, 2014). This quality of boundary dissolution (unity and oneness) is a central theme of the Vedic texts.

The psychedelic dissolution of boundaries manifests itself in many ways. This could be the boundary between the *Atman* (self) and *Brahman* (the external world), the separation of the individual and collective consciousness, and even the boundaries of time and space. All of these boundaries arise from the inherent human tendency to categorize, which has shown to be both a gift and a curse in many ways. Because there are no real boundaries to [a psychedelic] reality, all such distinctions are merely an organism's attempt to decipher a relative reality to maintain homeostasis.

Why is the dissolution of boundaries important to keep in mind as we explore the Vedic texts? As we can see in the following passages, there is a very profound sense of unity, oneness, and non-duality when describing Soma in relation to the Sun. All of these are effects of psychedelics, which hint at the very nature of Soma as a boundary-dissolving substance.

IX 2: [Soma] shines together with the sun...

IX 28: [Soma] has made the sun to shine...

IX 76: He who has been cleansed by the sun's ray.

IX 111: [once] born, thou [Soma] dost fill the sun with rays.

Atman, Brahman, and The Dissolution of Separation

The concepts of *Atman* and *Brahman* are central understandings of Hinduism. *Brahman* is understood as the eternal, ungraspable, invisible, and imperishable source of all (Bresnan, 2022). *Atman*, on the other hand, is considered the innermost essence of an individual. It refers to the purest self which transcends the mind and the physical body.

What Hinduism seeks to achieve within culture is to allow individuals to understand the true relationship between the *Brahman* and *Atman* through self-realization. It offers a garden of practices including meditation, self-discipline, and devotion of all kinds, through which individuals can cultivate self-realization or enlightenment, also known as *Moksha* (Bresnan, 2022).

The true nature of the *Atman* is that it is *Brahman*, according to the schools of thought branching from Advaita Vedanta. Here there is no separation between the highest, truest, and purest self with that of the eternal, infinite, and ultimate nature of reality. Gnosis of this truth is referred to as *Moksha* and is the highest level of realization that an individual can have, a state in which there is an ultimate union with the divine.

A philosophy of unity, non-duality, and interconnectedness is a philosophy of the psychedelic experience. The parallels between the state of *Moksha* and psychedelic experiences are undeniable. Firstly, the very act of consuming Soma was a devoting act, one which was highly ritualized and respected as we can see through its descriptions throughout the Rigveda. More so, the mere act of consuming a product of nature, especially in such a ritualized context, is ultimately a mediation on *Samsara*, the cyclical nature of reality.

“In rituals, the most ordinary of actions and gestures become transformed into symbolic expressions, their meaning reinforced each time they are performed.” (Hobson, 2018). In this case, there is Soma, which is created, grown (naturally), and digested/decomposed, which sages and practitioners contributed to. As evidenced by the Rigveda, the ritualized manner of consuming Soma reinforced the meaning behind what they were doing, which entails being a part of *Samsara*.

As we attempt to envision the birth of Hindu philosophy and what factors contributed to why it developed into what it is, the psychedelic qualities of Soma illuminate many previously challenging questions. We can easily imagine that the transcendental state that Soma helped people reach is a crucial element of why the Hindus understood no separation between the self and the all. After all, the state of being that Soma offered had to include not only an explanation of it to their understanding of reality but a genuine integration of it, which Soma itself was able to account for.

To summarize, the experience of boundary dissolution provided by Soma not only gave direct insight to those who got to experience it, but it also had to be accounted for within their paradigm of reality. To reach *Moksha* is to see beyond the illusion of separation between the *Atman* and *Brahman*, an experience manifest through the consumption of Soma.

Parallels in Hindu Gods

There are a few Hindu deities that embody many aspects of Soma, ranging from its transcendental properties to its physical characteristics. The most notable associations are with; *Indra*, the king of all gods and the embodiment of the sky, lightning, and rain, along with more. *Agni*, the god of the sun and fire is conceptualized on three levels, on Earth as fire, in the atmosphere as lightning, and in the sky as the sun (Lochtefeld, 1970). *Chandra*, also known by the name of *Soma*, is the goddess of the moon, associated with plants and vegetation. And lastly, *Shiva*, the supreme lord who creates, protects, and transforms the universe (Sharma, 2000). *Shiva* is also regarded as the creative energy and power within the Shakta tradition.

As we can see, all of these deities contain at least one or more relations to psychedelic properties. The sky resembles openness, the sun represents enlightenment, the fire illumination, the rain as Soma's liquid nature, the lightning for brilliance, the creative power with boundary dissolution, and vegetation with the very origin of the psychedelic compounds. While all of these natural forces that are embodied within the gods show powerful correspondences, their physical characteristics further strengthen the identity of Soma.

Firstly, there is an exceptionally high level of deities illustrated within Hindu art to have more than two arms, more than two legs, and more than one face, along with the common zoomorphism. One prominent feature of psychedelics is their quality of proliferating objects within the receptive field, including effects such as seeing multiple limbs as they move through space. While this may not be intentional, given that the more explicit meaning behind this is to express the multitude of powers the deities possess (Stutley, 2019), it is nevertheless a very psychedelic imagery and potentially profoundly related.

Moreover, one of *Shiva*'s avatars, specifically one closely related to Soma, is known as *Aja Ekapada*. The name roughly translates to “One footed unborn one” which some scholars have interpreted to resemble the seemingly miraculous birth of *Amanita Muscaria*, given that it is “unborn” from any seed and always grows with “one foot” or a single stalk (Macdonell, 1974).

The Cow and The Filter

There is a deep reverence for the cow in Hinduism. While there has been speculation of why the cow plays such an integral role in Hindu ethics beyond the obvious reasons of their values in providing milk and manure (for fertilizer), there is no conclusive evidence upon which those claims can comfortably rest (Jha, 1970). Rather than speculating upon the true origin of this value, let us keep in mind the deep veneration of the cow as we continue to explore the Rigveda. Here are a few examples from the Rigveda that express a reverence for the cow:

VIII 9: The swollen stalks were milked like cows with [full] udders.

IX 107: Milking the dear sweetness from the divine udder...

As shown in [Image 2] we can see swollen stalks, which could be milked of their liquid like a “divine udder.” What’s more is that some of the Vedic Hymns express a urination of Soma, which is a vital clue to uncovering Soma’s identity. The reason this detail of urinating Soma is so important is that the psychoactive molecule within *Amanita Muscaria* is still active after it has been passed through the body and expelled through urination (Winkelman, 2022). This chemical is called Muscimol.

IX 74: Purified Soma, when you are diluted with the water your juice passes through the woolen fleece; cleansed by the sages, O exhilarating purified [Soma], be sweet-flavored for Indra to drink.

The passing of Muscimol through the body is seamlessly described as “diluted with water” which passes through the warm “woolen fleece” of our organs and bladder. The “cleansing by the sages” is another vital poetic description, since not only do the nauseating toxins from the mushroom get filtered through the sage's liver, but the ibotenic acid within *Amanita* is converted into even more Muscimol (Winkelman, 2022). As a gentle and warm prayer, the hymn asks the now-purified Soma to be sweet-flavored, since as we can imagine the urine drunk was generally not a pleasant-tasting experience.

What's more is that *Indra*, the god of the sky, urinates Soma daily, as expressed throughout Hymn 74. Is it possible that the poets were merely painting us a metaphor or is this a direct expression of Soma's purification through the filter of the body? After all, the sages would urinate Soma because their “swollen” bladders, like that of the cow, were full.

Shamanic Traditions of Siberia

“He who drinks the juice of the hallucinogenic mushroom (*Amanita*) saves his urine, and others drink his urine with the identical inebriating effect.” (Wasson, 1971). This is a passage from Wasson's ethnomycological exploration of Siberia, where he documented shamanic traditions that drink the urine of those who have consumed *Amanita*. This process is effective when drinking reindeer urine as well, and is said to be active until it has passed through five bodies.

It has been further noted that Shamans in Siberia are known to drink the urine of reindeer since they are the animal most associated with this mushroom. The reindeer act as a filter, their livers cleansing many of the toxins while still expelling a potent blend of psychoactive muscimol throughout their urine. It should come as no surprise that these traditions have existed beyond

what history can accurately account for and that similar usage of this abundant mushroom would be true for other parts of Eurasia as well.

The Fall of Soma

Soma's mysterious identity is a reflection of a lost practice, one that has been extinct for longer than humanity can properly account for. What is it that led to the decline of the use of such a profound and enlightening substance, and why has it evolved beyond what scholars can easily analyze?

To begin, we must acknowledge the recency of such an endeavor. It wasn't until 1850 that the first English translation of the Rigveda was published, and to make matters worse, the initial translations were far from what the Rigveda even meant to express (Wasson, 1971). On top of this, the scientific study of psychedelic compounds didn't begin until the 1930s, which left a whole field of possibility unaccounted for. Yet inevitably, scientists of all sorts attempted to uncover what Soma was before there was even a reasonable playing field of information to work from, which has unfortunately birthed biases towards botanical identities.

Like all organic elements of the natural world, the geological and temporal cycles of the Earth play a critical role in facilitating the survival of certain species. *Amanita Muscaria*, like other fungi, is not available in infinite quantities. It is relatively fragile in terms of when its fruiting bodies emerge, and that in combination with over-harvesting likely led to the decline of Soma's availability, which inevitably caused a decline in its usage.

While *Amanita* is still considered a common fungus of Eurasia, it is dependent upon gentle and steady rain, as well as warmth and sunlight to fruit (Wasson, 1971). This would mean that in times of drought, challenging weather, and dangerous storms, the mushroom was harvested in minimal quantities at best. The weather not only contributed to the lack of

abundance but also became a barrier to gatherers who would otherwise be seeking the mushrooms in remote locations.

It is plausible that the scarcity of *Amanita* resulted in a higher emphasis on other ways of attaining the effects that the mushroom produced. This manifests in many ways, including alternative plant mixtures intended to produce altered states, and a greater importance placed on practices such as yoga and meditation, which were non-invasive ways of achieving enlightened states of being.

The decline of *Amanita*'s presence likely occurred slowly, dissipating from common practice over generations, until eventually most priests never even got exposed to the traditional use of *Amanita* being understood as Soma. As further evidence, the later written extensions to the Rigveda mark a shift in the poetic tonality and express a potential turning point in their relationship to botanical and mycological relationships (Wasson, 1971).

One last thing to keep in mind is that the scarcity of *Amanita* likely led to it being reserved exclusively for the highest class, at which point it would have become essential to keep Soma's identity a secret. As we see in passage X 85, the mysterious essence of Soma is said to be understood only by a select few, the Brahmins, who are the only ones that truly comprehend its nature. The secrecy of Soma's identity possibly became essential to maintaining its presence for the Brahmin, since centuries later we can see that this was a substance not common nor imbibed by everyone.

X 85: One thinks one drinks Soma because a plant is crushed. The Soma that the
 Brahmins know, that no one drinks.

This passage strongly implies that there was a widespread practice involving a *plant substitute* for Soma, as understood by the general public. This is a critical detail in tracing the

evolutionary trajectory of Soma to its root identity since it indicates a common misunderstanding. While the passage doesn't provide us with information on what Soma truly is, it does provide us with clarity on the common misunderstanding of Soma being cultivated through the crushing of a plant. Therefore, this passage explicitly states that Soma is not a plant, because the crushing of any plant is not what the Brahmin drink.

Linguistic Roots

Finally, philological analysis of etymology can help guide us in understanding the uncertainty of Soma's identity. Let us begin with Sanskrit, where the word *Amrita* is often referring to a nectar of immortality. To break it down into its components, "A" is negative, as in "not", and "Mrita" expresses death. Therefore, Amrita means "Not dead", which can be poetically stretched to mean "That which prevents death".

In Greek Etymology they have the word *Ambrosia*, referring to a food/drink of the gods, which similarly manifests immortality. While the linguistic breakdown of this word is not something we can definitely establish, it is thought that the "A" here is also negative, and that "Broto" expresses mortality. Collectively manifesting the idea of a substance that negates mortality.

To tie this resemblance, I rely on the work of Sir William Jones, a philologist and scholar of ancient India. He suggested that Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, and others all share a common linguistic root (Kaula, 2003). If this is true, the development of *Amrita* and *Ambrosia* is likely not accidental and provides an even earlier root for when the use of the fly agaric began.

Food of The Gods

While this exploration of Soma's identity scratches at the surface of many important correspondences, it is far from encapsulating the dynamic nature of such a mystery. There are

other theories of Soma's identity, and the strongest theory remains the one that can account for the highest quantity of unanswered questions. As proposed, *Amanita Muscaria* can account for the fungal descriptions of the Rigveda and supports the lack of botanical expressions of Soma. *Amanita* is also able to explain depictions of Gods that are directly related to Soma with parallels that are easy to visualize. It can explain the prevalence of Soma's relationship to urine, which is a practice still alive in Siberia today. We are also provided with a plausible explanation for the decline of Soma's usage, and can even envision the roots of the language used to conceive of the immortal essence this fungus provides.

In conclusion, the boundary-dissolving essence of psychedelics accounts for the sense of oneness and unity which is a key theme of Hinduism. The altered sense of self that these substances offer grounds our understanding with the idea of oneness, which perfectly accounts for the concept of immortality that follows it. Could anything other than a natural, abundant, and powerful psychedelic account for the holistic understanding of reality that the Rigveda promises?

VIII 48: We have drunk the Soma, we are become Immortals,
 We are arrived at the Light, we have found the Gods.



[Image 1] - By Onderwijsgek at nl.wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0 nl.



[Image 2] - By Chelton Photography

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