

Haoma

The Original and The Substitute

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Identity

Haoma/soma, as an instant intoxicating and hallucinogenic plant, has made many think of various plants, from the mushroom to the ephedra plant, called *hom* or *hûm* by Zoroastrians in India and Iran. The Rig-Veda shows it to be a drink that prompted gods, particularly Indra, to go on a warpath, and it is said that it was obtained from far northern mountains. It is said to be highly stimulating.

The mushroom seems to be farfetched. In contrast, ephedra grows all over eastern Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistani Baluchistan and is used by both Iranian Zoroastrian and Parsi priests in their haoma ritual. Ephedra, void of all the qualities described in the Avesta and the Vedas, is definitely a late substitute. This author, a teetotaler, has drunk large glassfuls of *hûm* juice in Yazd without feeling any side effects. It was after attending the Haoma ceremony at the Atash Bahram, performed by a Parsi and an Iranian priest, and was provided by a student of my Gatha classes in Tehran, who is now an active, ordained priest. Ephedra supplies *ephedrine*, a medicine used to treat low blood pressure. Ephedrine is a decongestant. It does not push a person “high”, but it does make one feel “hyper”! Recent research on ephedrine, published in US medical magazines, has shown that excessive use can cause high blood pressure and heart attacks.

The ancient descriptions of the plant are that it was greenish in color (*zairi/hari*), grew on mountains well north of the Indus Valley, was traded by outsiders, required a special ritual to prepare, and was an instant intoxicant prepared from pounding and extracting its juice. Also, the Saka tribes of eastern Central Asia were called *haumavarka* (‘haoma-gatherers’) by the Achaemenians; all these point, in my opinion, to what is now known as Indian hemp (*cannabis sativa*). Originally native to Central Asia, it has now spread all over Asia and here in the Americas. The drug obtained from it has proven quite devastating. Carbon 14 test on the archeological finds in Central Asian temple ruins has confirmed that the juice residue in jars contains *cannabis sativa*.

Whatever the true identity of original haoma/soma, the ceremony highly resembles the present practice of solemnly pounding *bhang* (Indian hemp, hashish, marijuana), extracting and straining its juice, and mixing it with water, milk, poppy seeds, and almonds by *sufis*, *faqirs*, *pirs*, *sadhus*, and other Muslim and Hindu mystics of certain orders and circles in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, particularly those connected with shrines and holy places. It still has a halo around it!

The drink, an instant psychoactive mixture, is greenish in color. It is called *dûgh-e vahdat* (‘unity milk’) by Iranian mystics and *thâdal* (‘cooling, refreshing’) by Sindhi sufis. One description says its addicts kabhi na marsi “never die” a far echo of *dûraosha* for haoma. The ceremony is similar, and the identity is quite attractive but not absolutely convincing. We may

never know for sure the true identity of the original haoma. The original haoma/soma could be considered lost to both wings of the Indo-Iranians priesthood.

Haoma in the Later Avesta

Whether it was hemp, some other intoxicant, or a mixture of more than multiple intoxicants, we see a story in the Haoma Yasht (Yasna 9-11) where one day, during the morning-prayer time, when Zarathushtra was tending the fire and chanting the Gathas, Haoma appeared to him in the form of a handsome youth. Zarathushtra asked Haoma to who he was, and Haoma replied, “I am Haoma, the righteous, the Dûraosha, O Spitama! Beseech me and squeeze me into drink. Praise me the way future Saoshyants would do as well.” Then he relates to Zarathushtra how four fathers in the past had pressed the haoma juice and were rewarded with worthy sons. Pourushaspa was the fourth of them, and to him was Zarathushtra was born.

This story clearly shows that the well-advanced Zarathushtra, the Mânthran of the Gathas, did not recite any “Yasna Liturgy” to as to perform the haoma ceremony. He only sang his Gathas, THE only liturgy, before a fire altar. He did not know what “haoma” was! How strange it is for a person said to be the “Foremost *Âthravan*”, did not know Haoma and did not perform the Haoma ceremony, a ceremony which is so closely connected with the Indo-Iranian *Âthravan*/*Atharvan*, professional priests. Instead, he only tended the Fire and chanted his Gathas!

This passage also reveals three things: (1) Zarathushtra was not a priest. (2) His parents never told him of the marvels of Haoma. (3) He did not perform the Haoma ceremony. (4) We are given the story by a third person, obviously well after him in the Later Avestan dialect, and not as a firsthand command by Ahura Mazda at the very beginning of his mission.

It also shows the way the traditional priests brought in their age-old haoma cult into the Good Religion. This time it was not “*bhang*” or another strong intoxicant but a very mild substitute, ephedra. The yasht mentions this mildness: “Indeed all other intoxicants (*maidhyâongho*) are accompanied by wrath of the bloody standard but the intoxicant (*madho*) of Haoma has the right calm following it. Its intoxication gives lightness.” It is acknowledged as an intoxicating drink and is compared with other intoxicants. The substitute “ephedra” was soothing, indeed. Haoma was re-introduced to continue to be “central to the [expanded] Yasna liturgy”! The priests were interested in preserving their rewarding ceremonies and not the original drink.

Haoma in the Gathas

The word “Haoma” is not mentioned in the Gathas. Nothing surprising! Zarathushtra has, in his Sublime Songs of 241 stanzas, today a pocketbook of less than 40 pages, enough space to mention *Mazdâ Ahura* 283 times, *Asha* 162 times, *Vohu Manah* 125 time, *Khshathra* 64 times, *Âramaiti* 40 times, *Daênâ* 25 times, *Khratu* (intellect) 19 times, *Ameretât* 14 times, *Haurvatât* 11 times, and *Seraosha* 8 times. Yet, he has no place for any of the pre-Zarathushtrian deities—from the “a” of *Apam Napât* (water-born [lightening?] deity) and *Aredvi Sûrâ Anâhitâ* (river deity) through *Drvâspâ* (cattle deity), *Mithra* (pasture covenant deity), *Parendî* (riches deity), and *Tishtrya* (rain deity) to the “v” of *Vanant* (star deity), *Vayu* (wind deity), and *Verethraghna*

(victory deity). He even does not mention the Indo-Iranian Âthravan, the Fire-Priest, so closely connected with the elaborated Haoma ritual.

Zarathushtra has own way to do it. He does it collectively. He has enough words to condemn the only priests he knew, the Karapans; censure the ruling princes, the Kavis; renounce all the gods and goddesses, the Daevas, reprimand their followers, and denounce superficial rituals.

Two stanza of the Gathas point to the Haoma ritual:

Song 5.14 (Yasna 32.14)

*ahyâ gerêhmô â-hôithôi
nî kâvayascî xratûsh nî dadat
varecâ hîcâ fraidivâ
hyat vîsêntâ dregvañtem
avô hyatcâ gâush jaidyâi mraoî
yé **dûraoshem** saocayat avô.*

Seizing such spoils,
even the sagacious princes
have long been devoting their minds and efforts.
They have, thus, resorted to help the wrongful.
Fired by the wisdom-wasting drink,
they have declared that the world must be destroyed.

Song 13.10 (Yasna 48.10):

*kadâ mazdâ mânarôish narô vîsêntê
kadâ ajên **mûthrem** ahyâ **madahyâ**
yâ añgrayâ karapanô urûpayeiñtî
yâcâ xratû dushe-xshathrâ daxyunãm*

When shall, Wise One, humanity settle down in dwellings?
When shall they throw out the filthy intoxicant?
It is through it that the priests
and the wicked rulers of the lands form their evil intellects.

The two stanzas show Zarathushtra's stance on the most important Indo-Iranian ritual of "Haoma/Soma". In one, the exclusive epithet of Haoma *Duraosha* is mentioned and in the other, it is called *mûthrem mada*, lit. 'urine-intoxicant'. However, to fully understand the subject, one should read both Songs 5 and 13 (Yasna 32 and 48). I give below the gist of the two Songs:

Song 5 - Aberration

This song is, in fact, an exposure of the fraud and aberration practiced by the priests and princes of the old cult. The daevas, false gods, and their worship were the creation of evil mentality and deceit. It is superstitions that deviate a man from thinking right. However, they become a good source of income for the cunning, who continue to hoard what they can extract

from the simple people. These cunning persons are the ritualistic priests, called *karapan* by Asho Zarathushtra. The word actually means ‘arrangers of rituals’, but it also can mean “chatterers” and “mumblers” which they were indeed. They were not alone. There were the rulers, turned into luxury lovers through the spoils they had accumulated. The two, having a common vested interest of exploiting the people, had joined hands. They kept the people in darkness and ignorance. Their increasing lust for wealth had turned them into tyrants, an action that earned them people’s hatred. However, they forgot that God was watching them and that a day would dawn when a thought-provoking genius would rise and lead the people out of their clutches.

It may be noted that this is the only song in which Asho Zarathushtra mentions a legendary person—Yima (Jamshed/Jamshid)—about whom it was said that he fell because of his arrogance and false pride. He, however, leaves the judgment to God. He also alludes to the Haoma ritual of an instant intoxicating drink performed by the Karapans and the Kavis.

Song 13 - Victory over Wrong

Wrong results in wrong ways and good produces yet more goodness. Wrong must be conquered. This is achieved by means of righteousness, good mind, and profound wisdom, a wisdom that promotes one to be Godlike. Fury and violence, practiced by fanatic religious leaders and wicked rulers who indulge in intoxicating rituals, must be abandoned. Spreading health and happiness is a foremost principle of life. Government must be run only by the good, wise and righteous rulers. Life on the earth must be led in peace, prosperity, and progress. It is only then that true reward of good life is obtained. It is only then that the divine dominion is established. It is only then that the mission of Zarathushtra is fulfilled.

However, since there are some scholars who either say that the Gathas are not clear on the condemnation of Haoma, or that Zarathushtra wanted some reform in the ceremony, let us see what the outstanding translators say about the two above-quoted stanzas:

Taraporewala has shown that, in regard to Song 13:10 (Yasna 48:10), Mills, Batholomae, Kanga, have preferred reading *madahyâ*, ‘intoxicant’, over a solitary instance of *magahyâ*, ‘greatness’. I would add Insler, Anklesaria, Robert S.P. Beekes (A Grammar of the Gatha-Avestan), and Humbach who stuck to his rendering of “urine” in *The Gathas of Zarathushtra* (1990) and again in his co-authored translation of *The Heritage of Zarathushtra* (1994). Insler’s rendering in his *The Gathas of Zarathustra* (Liege, 1975) reads: “When shall they fear the folly of that intoxicating drink ...?” The foot note says: “The Haoma, cf. Y[asna] 32.fn 19.” Of the Iranian translators, Mobed Firuz Azargoshasb reads *madahyâ* and renders it as “lie and greed.”¹ Prof. Jalil Doostkhah writes: “When shall the filth of this intoxicant (Persian *mei*) will be thrown away” and adds in his footnote: “It means the haoma drink. Cf Yasna 32.14.” (Avesta, the Oldest Iranian Compositions, in Persian, two volumes, Tehran, 1991).²

¹ Gathas, Holy Songs of Zarathushtra, Council of Iranian Mobeds of North America, San Diego, 1988, page 63.

² See Gathic †*maṇarōiš*: A Hapax Expatiated Compositionally by Martin Schwartz for a modern, in-depth scholarly treatment. – CG

Mûthrem ahyâ madahyâ (the “urine” of this intoxication) is not the only allusion to Haoma. We have another, a stronger one. It is *Dûraoshem*, a well-known exclusive epithet of Haoma, in Song 5.14 (Yasna 32.14).

My translation reads: “Fired by the wisdom-wasting drink, they have declared that the world must be destroyed.” And my Summary Substance adds: “The Kavi princes, although men of knowledge, were cooperating with the practicing priests in exploiting people. The two had a common interest—exploitation. Thus the rulers were helping the wrongful. Addicted to ‘haoma,’ the instant intoxicating drink prepared ceremoniously was to give ‘pep’ to their aggressive mood for destroying the world.”³

While Taraporewala gives a long note showing that the Avestan *dûraosha* and Vedic *durosh* are related to the haoma/soma cult, he concludes that “... I am not quite inclined to accept the view that there is a special reference to the Haoma-cult here.” Kanga simply says “ay fakrâno tarjomo hûñ kar shakto nathi, taythi muki didho chay. Mills tathâ Darmesteternâ tarjomâ manay khâtri lagtâ nathi—I cannot translate this stanza. Therefore I have left it out. I do not find the renderings by Mills and Darmesteteter as satisfactory.” Insler is quite specific. He writes: “... who has been kindling Haoma” and adds in his foot note “The intoxicating drink which formed the sacrament in the worship of the traditional gods.” (page 49). Humbach has “fire-proof intoxicant” in his book and again “fire-resisting (Haoma Dûraosha)” in his co-authorship with Ichaporria. The footnotes add: “The pun ‘the one who inflames the fire-resisting (Haoma)’ denotes a deceitful priest who performs a certain Haoma rite considered unlawful by Zarathushtra” and “The etymological meaning of Dûraosha ... which in the Younger Avesta is an epithet of the Haoma, the intoxicant ritual drink of the Iranians, is ‘fire-resisting, resisting annihilation’. In the Younger Avesta it is understood as ‘preventing death, providing immortality’. Zarathushtra polemizes against the use of Haoma or, at least, against its misuse (cf. 48.10.)” Azargoshab translates: “They wish death and destruction for the world of creation in the hope that the invincible shall help them.” The footnote specifies: “It refers to Haoma, which is described with the epithet of invincible. This Yazata has been honored by the followers of untruth” (page 24). Doostkhah renders: “... the Repeller of Death be motivated to (their) help.” The footnote says that this word is the epithet of haoma (page 26), and the Glossary elaborates that while haoma drink is “forcefully condemned” in the Gathas, it is highly praised in the Younger Avesta (page 1086).

It may be noted that *Duraosha* stands exclusively in the Later Avesta for Haoma and no other entity. Also, the word *mada-* ‘intoxicant’ used in the Gathas (48:10), occurs as Young Avestan *madha-* nine times in the Later Avesta, seven referring to Haoma and two to other intoxicants in relation with Haoma. (Yasna 10:8 – 3 times; 10:19 – 3 times; 11:10 – 1 time and with *Duraosha*; and 17:5 – 2 times)

Conclusion

Haoma/Soma in the pre-Gathic period was an instant intoxicant drink. Condemned by Zarathushtra, the plant was substituted by the post-Gathic priests, who continued with their age-old ceremony. It was, most probably, ephedra, a much milder drink. It continues to be used in the

³ The Gathas, Our Guide, Cypress, 1989 and Stot Yasna, the Gathic Part of the Avesta, in Persian, Tehran, 1981

ceremony performed by the Parsi priests in India. To the best of my information, Iranian Zoroastrian priests have given it up. The Gathas have no place for it.
