Flesh of the Gods

THE RITUAL USE OF HALLUCINOGENS

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What Was the Soma of the Aryans?

At the end of the last century, cultivated circles in the West were excited by the discovery and translation of a body of antique verse composed in a language related to ours and dating from the second millennium B.C. This was a collection of 1028 hymns, the Rig-Veda, which had been preserved by word of mouth among the Brahmans in India for thirty centuries and more. There was an agreed text, but the Vedic language presented thorny problems. A cluster of scholars of the highest eminence worked hard to arrive at the meaning of those lyrics, and a number of renderings in European languages made their appearance in the 1880's and 1890's. The hymns were an expression of the religion of the people who called themselves Aryans and who had invaded the northwest of India about 1600 B.C.

One of the divinities in this religion was Soma—the only plant known to have been deified in the history of human cultures. One hundred and twenty of the hymns were devoted entirely to extolling this plant and its properties (including the inebriating juice), not to speak of frequent adoring references to it in the other hymns. The role of Soma in the Rig-Veda pervades the entire collection of hymns. As the late Louis Renou said, the whole of the Rig-Veda is present in a nutshell in the themes centered on Soma.

Now, the strange thing is that in 1900 no one knew, no one has known until now, what plant Soma was. In India its identity had been forgotten millennia before the arrival of Westerners. In the West, which was learning of Soma for the first time, there were many guesses, but none of them carried conviction. By this time the botanical survey of India was well advanced, and among Indologists and botanists in India there was much puzzlement about the mysterious Soma. Perhaps the
plant was extinct? Possibly it had never existed? But with the passage of time and no satisfying identification forthcoming, the enigma presented by Soma sank out of sight and nowadays has been almost forgotten except by Vedic scholars. Even they seem to be adjusting themselves to the absence of Soma, although this is a feat comparable to presenting the play of Hamlet with the Prince of Denmark absent. I now revive the question, proposing a botanical identification for Soma that is the subject of my recent book Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality. Soma, I suggest, was the mushroom known in the English-speaking world as the fly agaric, Amanita muscaria.

When I first approached the Rig-Veda in 1962 I was mystified not so much by the elusive Soma as by the inability of the learned fraternity to identify it. Given the free-wheeling nature of poets everywhere, always, who can suppose that scores of poets, for generations, probably centuries, composing their poems in different cultural centers, could devote themselves to extolling a plant and never use the descriptive terms that would make it identifiable for us? But let me remind you that we must read these hymns as poetry. Perhaps I was blessed by being unencumbered with problems of syntax, with ramifying questions of Indo-European philology, with the sweep of mythological concepts emanating from prehistoric times. However, I did possess some knowledge of the known plant hallucinogens of the world.

I will not tarry over the many suggestions that Soma was an alcoholic beverage, since they all do multiple violence to the text of the Rig-Veda and they merely reflect the obsession of the West with alcohol as the inebriant of this world. But I will point out that in the Rig-Veda there is no mention of the roots, the leaves, the blossoms, the seed, or the fruit of Soma. In fact, the Rig-Veda says* expressly that Soma was born without seed: the gods laid the Somic germ. The only plants that fill these requirements are mushrooms. The habitat of Soma is on the mountain heights. This means that the divine fungus grew in the Himalayas or the Hindu Kush or both, and not in the dry hot plains of the Indus valleys.

The fly agaric first appears as a fluffy ball the size of an egg wrapped in an envelope of white wool. As it grows and swells it bursts its woolly envelope, showing its dazzling red skin beneath. Fragments of the envelope remain on the cap, studding it with small white patches. In many, perhaps most, languages the "cap" of a mushroom is called the "head," and it is so called in Vedic, mūrddhān or ‘siras. The poets, with poetic license, also liken it to an "udder," udbhān, which is "milked" of its holy ambrosia, called pāvamāna. The full-grown fly agaric stands as

* IX, 85.5d.
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a column, and the poets hyperbolically refer to it repeatedly as the "mainstay of the sky," the "pillar of the world." The stem, or stipe, is called the am'si. In one place the poet actually says that Soma sloughs off its envelope, a figure of speech that a mycologist today might use in conversation. Its resplendent apparel is known as nirmi, the "vesture-of-grand-occasion." Vedic scholars, not aware that Soma was the stunning fly agaric, have always assumed that the nirmi was the milk with which the pāyamāna was mingled after being pressed out of the "udder," and they were certainly right, but this does not prevent the nirmi from being also the dress of the mushroom. The two figures of speech support and strengthen each other, permitting the poets to revel in word-play. It is a question which meaning was the original one. The poet speaks of the dazzling red skin of the fly agaric as the hide of a bull, the red beast that the Vedic priests exalted above all others in nature, and he describes Soma's "dress" as of sheep—the woolly fragments that remain when the envelope bursts. Could more suitable metaphors be found? (The reader must bear in mind that the ball of the mushroom is fiery red speckled with white.)

Scholars have been puzzled by the five verses in which Soma is called the "single eye," ekam dksi. This metaphor now becomes clear: in its natural habitat the adored plant at one stage in its life cycle looks like a single eye, contemplating the world, taking it all in. The juice of Soma is pounded out, filtered through a woolen cloth, and then mixed, with water, milk, honey, or barley water. But this filter, pavitra, is only one of three filters in the Rig-Veda. There is another transcendental filter of which the poets speak incessantly, the filter that permits the poet to say, "King, having the filter for chariot," and again, "With his 1000 knobs he conquers mighty renown." For the poet the divine juice comes down from heaven on the rays of the sun. Soma enters the plant while the rays remain caught on the skin. What a delicious figure of speech! What plant other than the fly agaric fits these poetic figures? Have not the Vedic poets exalted their adored Soma in terms that are unmistakable? The god is suitably enshrined in a plant radiantly beautiful, hāri, resplendent. The steeds of the Sun-God are hāri and so is Soma! By a miracle of nature the hallucinogen is clothed in vesture suitable to its high station.

Let me point out that these correspondences, shown strikingly in color photographs, recur without ceasing in the hymns; the poets play with them, ring all possible changes on them. I have yet to find a single verse in the Rig-Veda that is incompatible with my identification, and there are many verses whose figures of speech are in happy concordance with our regal plant. The poets repeatedly apply to Soma the word "navel," nābhi, and here we have analogies to this day in the fungal
vocabularies of the vernaculars spoken from France and Russia through Turkey to Cambodia and Korea. The poet speaks of Soma as “dazzling by day, by night silvery white.” Surely he is referring to the brilliant spectacle that the fly agaric presents in sunlight, and then to its aspect as the color fades out by night and only fragments of the silvery-white envelope remain visible in the light of the moon.

I now present converging evidence of startling character in support of my contention. I wish to emphasize that this evidence is not essential to my case, but, unless it is impugned, it alone is sufficient to prove that Soma was the fly agaric of Eurasian folklore and to suggest that the fly agaric may be the key to the religion prevailing throughout Eurasia in prehistoric times.

The fly agaric possesses a peculiar property, unique so far as we know in the whole plant world: it is an inebriant whose inebriating property passes quickly through to the urine. The tribesmen of the Chukotka and Kamchatka, in the far northeast of Siberia, used to drink the urine of those who had ingested the fly agaric, apparently by preference. I think because certain impurities are strained out as it passes through the human organism, the third of the Rig-Veda’s three filters. Georg Steller* tells us that the urine so used transmits its potency to the urine of the second drinker, and to the third and fourth or even fifth “generation” of drinkers, when finally its virtue peters out.† Not all tribes have recourse to this practice: we have no evidence that the U·i·Les who use the fly agaric in the valleys of the Ob and Yenisei do so. The sources are silent on this. The question may be asked how these northern tribesmen first discovered the potency residing in the urine of the fly agaric consumer. The answer may lie in the reindeer. The tribes live in intimacy with their great herds of reindeer, and these are addicted both to the fly agaric and to drinking urine, especially human urine. Fly-agaric inebriation is common among the animals, as every reindeer-handler knows.

When I read the Rig-Veda in translation I was naturally alert for evidences of urine drinking, and I think I have found them. The Rig-Veda is a collection of hymns written by poet-priests for priests to sing in the liturgy, and the priests were all, naturally, privy to the practices of their religion and to the singular attributes of Soma. We must expect

* See my *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality*, Exhibit 5, pp. 239-40.
† Wasson’s recent book *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality* (1968) includes a complete anthology of the travelers, anthropologists, and linguists who have left accounts of the Siberian practice, some of whom describe in some detail the practice of urine-drinking in mushroom rituals. See especially the accounts of Georg Heinrich von Langsdorff (pp. 246–51), J. Enderli (pp. 261–64), and Waldemar Jochelson (pp. 365–72). –Ed.
the allusions to be casual, incidental, not at all spelled out for us and
the other excluded profane to grasp. They are in fact revealed in
mythological contexts. In RV VIII 4.30 the poet addresses the god
Indra:

Like a stag, come here to drink!
Drink Soma, as much as you like.
Pissing it out day by day, O generous one,
you have assumed your most mighty force.

[Daniel H. H. Ingalls' rendering.]

When we drink tea or coffee or milk or beer, no one says that we
later urinate tea or coffee or milk or beer. But Indra pisses Soma, just
as the fly-agaric consumer in the Chukotka does. Whether the figure of
a drinking stag in the verse we have quoted alludes to the confirmed
addiction of deer to the fly agaric I hesitate to say. There is yet another
verse (RV II 54.19) where deities in the shape of horses, known as the
Rudras, seem to have pissed Soma. The tenor of these verses is clear:
only with Soma is there Soma-urine. How did the priests learn this
other than by drinking the Soma-impregnated beverage? In the Rig-
Veda we find a number of allusions to the passing of Soma through
the belly, the entrails, of Indra, some of these allusions expressing con-
siderable anxiety. I say that these become meaningful if we understand
that Soma is being passed through what the poets call the Third Filter,
the human organism, into the urine, and that this act is attended by
genuine dangers of misadventure. There is a verse, IX 74.4d, where the
priests “with full bladders piss Soma quick with movement.” Now this
is a translation of Renou and also in essence of Geldner, both of them
Vedic scholars of the highest eminence. They agree on the peculiar
meaning of this verse. I believe other scholars dispute such a reading,
but if Geldner and Renou are right, this verse alone is sufficient to
clinch my case.

Although there are only two or three direct references to Soma-urine
in the Rig-Veda, we find supporting evidence elsewhere, and this evi-
dence comes just where we should find it in the circumstances, given the
general acceptance in the priestly caste of all Soma's attributes and the
sacred nature of the Mystery. Let me emphasize again that we must
expect the references to occur casually, incidentally, like the accidental
disclosure in a conversation of a secret known to all. According to a
well-known Brāhmaṇa story, * Indra drinks so much Soma that the
sources say Indra exudes it from his ears as well as pissing it. In the

* Taittirīya Samhitā 2.3.25-8; Satapatha Brāhmaṇa 5.5.4.8-9 and in most detail
12.7.1.1-9.
Avesta, Yasna 48.10, Zarathustra angrily excoriates those who use urine in the sacrifice: “When wilt thou do away with the urine of drunkenness with which the priests evilly delude the people?” The Parsis, descendants of the Zoroastrians, to this day consume urine in their religious devotions, although only in symbolic amounts and only bull’s urine. The Manichaeans, whose religion was an outgrowth of Zoroastrianism, exercised considerable influence in China for some centuries; from a late date in Fukien Province, two reports survive by a high civil servant to his superiors criticizing the religious activities of these Manichaean sectarians. In their devotions, he said, they consume too many red mushrooms and, moreover, were making use of urine, apparently human urine. (Probably this civil servant had not himself attended the Manichaean rites and was reporting hearsay.) As a final citation, in the Mahabharata we find a quaint apologue, interpolated late into the text, telling how a mātanga (the lowest of the low) invited the holy man Uttanka to drink his urine to quench his (Uttanka’s) thirst and how Uttanka refused indignantly, only to learn later that the mātanga was Krishna in disguise, and that he had been offered—and had refused—Soma-urine! Uttanka thus lost forever the chance to join the immortals.†

If my interpretation of the Rig-Veda in this crucial respect meets with resistance in the West, it has proved acceptable, even illuminating, in India in some quarters. An English woman writes me that she was in a circle of Indian ladies and one of them, a ranee, was dwelling on the infatuation of her husband, the rajah, for a certain sadhu, or holy man. Why, he even wished to drink the sadhu’s urine, she said. The Indian ladies accepted this calmly, as though not surprised, and my correspondent therefore remained silent. Again, an Indian intellectual says that the present-day sadhu conveys his spiritual powers to his disciples in any one of four ways: (1) by a “laying on” of hands, precisely as in our church; (2) by having his disciples repeat incessantly for long periods a certain prayer or mantra; (3) by having him fix his gaze undeviatingly on the sadhu’s countenance for long periods; and, finally, (4) by giving his favored disciples the privilege of drinking his urine. Do not these instances of contemporary urine-drinking come down from the time when urine was still impregnated with the essence of Soma?

Some skeptics are doubtless asking how it comes about that the iden-

‡ Avvamedha Pravan, 14.54.12–55.
The Indo-Iranians coming down from the North exalted a plant in terms breath-taking for us. But for three millennia Soma, the exalted plant, has been absent. The Hindus strangely disclosed no curiosity about it; as for the West, our speculations in recent times have been only blind guesses, convincing no one, often not even those who pronounced them. Of late I find more and more scholars receptive to the possibility that the Soma of the poets was for them little more than a mythological concept—that is to say, a non-plant. Nature abhors a vacuum, and in the absence of the genuine plant, our scholars, devising a myth to fill the vacuum in their own knowledge, seem ready to weave for the poets a myth that the poets never knew.

The trouble, I think, is clear and simple. The Vedists have allowed themselves to be miscast. When you seek the identity of a plant you go to a botanist, not to a Vedist. But then, why have the botanists not discovered it? A little reflection will give the answer.

Cultivated circles in the West were first alerted to the existence of the Rig-Veda in the second half of the last century. The Rig-Veda could be read only by the Vedists, a generation of scholars of the highest eminence tilling a field remote from the main thoroughfares of Western studies. The botanists had no access to the hymns, but, what was far worse, they thought they had. A number of translations tumbled from the presses, and botanists working in the Indian field read them. But the translations of the period—by Wilson and Cowell, Griffith, Langlois—were not intended for scholars or scientists. They were an effort to convey to cultivated circles the treasure house of early religious poetry that had just been uncovered in India, composed in a language related to our Western languages. The translators were not in the forefront of Vedists. Their translations sound like what refined ladies enjoyed reading in the Victorian age. They were "poetical" in the vein of the Idylls of the King but without Tennyson's powers of versification. They were flowery, rotund, some might say flatulent, giving a pseudo-sense to all passages that puzzled Vedists and that the translators had to guess at, and, moreover, bowdlerizing the text to caress the prudish Victorian ear. Small wonder that George Watt, the foremost botanist of the British raj, who knew no Sanskrit, much less Vedic, is quoted as saying, "the vague and poetical descriptions given of the Soma make any scientific identification impossible."

And so the Vedists were left with the Soma problem. Unhappily they did not demur: they accepted the role of botanists, for which their

qualifications were not readily apparent. The world has ever since looked to them for an identification that they could not supply, could not be expected to supply. Speaking for the Vedists, Professor F. B. J. Kuiper of Leiden is a thousand times right in saying that "the complexities of the problem should not . . . be underestimated." He adds that the identification of Soma must take the seeker far beyond the confines of Indo-Iranian studies proper. This is where I have gone.

There was a further difficulty. British botanists in India performed a Herculean task in mapping the vegetation of that vast land in a long series of specialized monographs culminating in an admirable encyclopedic work, Dictionary of the Economic Plants of India, edited and partly written by George Watt. But they confined themselves to the phanerogams—the seed-bearing plants—and they neglected the fungal flora. No one suggested a mushroom for the role of Soma. This may seem strange, but the English people, mycophobes to the core, chose to ignore the fungal flora, the "toadstools," of India.

One more consideration: from a botanist's point of view the distinctive feature of Soma is that it belongs to the world that Louis Lewin, the pharmacologist, first called Phantastica more than forty years ago, that today is usually named the "plant hallucinogens," that the chemist and pharmacologist designate as the psychotropic or psychotimetic plants. This restricts the area of inquiry. Specialized study of the natural hallucinogens is only a few decades old: before then there were only the old travel books and the field notes of anthropologists, difficult to come by and to collate.

Many have observed that discoveries in the realms of geographical or intellectual exploration arrive in a measured sequence, when the days are fulfilled that they should be made, and that only in recent years have we been able to approach the Soma problem with a hope of finding the answer. The fortunate person who makes the discovery is an accident of history, arriving as he does at precisely the right moment and happily possessed of the needed information derived from diverse disciplines hitherto not associated together. I am certainly one of the first persons with any botanical background to study the recent scholarly translation of the Rig-Veda concentrating on the Soma question. My late wife and I had been concerned with ethnomycological problems for decades. On the strength of the folklore of Europe and the etymologies of the fungal words in the languages of Europe, in the 1940's we had advanced to each other the daring idea that a mushroom had once figured in the religious life of our own remote ancestors. When we learned of the role played by the fly agaric in the shamanic rites of Siberian tribesmen, down to recent times, we were overjoyed, thinking that the Siberian usage in part vindicated our hunch. Little did we
Imagine that we were on the road to a discovery of much larger scope.

In 1952 we were diverted to Mexico, where we later revealed to the world the part played by hallucinogenic mushrooms in the religious life of the Indians of southern Mexico. Thanks to the indispensable aid of Professor Roger Heim, then Director of the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, upwards of a dozen hallucinogenic species received scientific identification for the first time. We took advantage of our Mexican explorations to extend our acquaintance to the phanerogamic hallucinogens.

Certain English scholars have lately dwelt with dramatic effect on the divorce that has taken place in our generation between the scientific and humane aspects of our culture. But for ethnobotanists (including ethnomycologists) these two aspects are still joined. As scientists, they know plants; as students of human cultures, they study the role plants play in man's daily life and in his spiritual perceptions. When I read the Rig-Veda as poetry, it was evident that the poets were deifying, in
lyrical language of breath-taking poignancy, the hallucinogenic fly agaric of the Siberian taiga, *Amanita muscaria*, in prehistory the divine inebriant of all Eurasia.

What is this discovery that I think I have made? Have I done more than identify some plant or other that happened to be named in an ancient hymn? When the Vedic poet sang that most famous of all the verses of the Rig-Veda,

We have drunk the Soma, we are become Immortals.
We are arrived at the Light, we have found the Gods.
What now can hostility do to us, what the malice of mortal,
O Immortal Soma!

he was giving utterance to the epitome of the whole collection. What are we to make of it?

The poet throughout the ages has pursued a serious calling intimately associated with prophecy. In this verse we feel the potent afflatus of Soma, the ecstasy inspired by the divine hallucinogen. The poet is certainly not performing an arid exercise in versification and music about a plant that he has never seen. Nor are we discussing merely an "invigorating" inebriant comparable to alcohol. We are dealing with the "enthusiasm" of the poet, in the original and now obsolete sense of that word, divine possession, poetic frenzy, supernatural inspiration. The engine behind the myth and ritual of the Rig-Veda is this "enthusiasm."

If I am right, here is where we are arrived, this is the secret of our discovery. We have identified a plant understandably considered as miraculous by the people of long ago, and in so doing we have swung open the portals to ecstasy.

Daniel H. H. Ingalls, Wales Professor of Sanskrit at Harvard, has recently endorsed my identification of Soma,* and he added:

The greatness of a discovery is in the further discoveries that it may render possible. To my mind the identification of the Soma with a hallucinogenic mushroom is more than the solution of an ancient puzzle. I can imagine numerous roads of inquiry on which, with this new knowledge in hand, one may set out.

I will venture now on one such "road of inquiry."

The fly-agaric complex of Siberia is of absorbing interest from many points of view. That the use of Soma, the inebriating mushroom, has survived there until recently, even if in a degenerate state and restricted

to two shrinking areas, is a remarkable fact. In our own time the use of the fly agaric has been described in the Chukotka and also, far to the west, in the valleys of the Ob and the Yenisei. The words used for the fly agaric in the various tribes, the associated meanings of those words and their etymologies, the part played by reindeer in the urine-drinking of the natives, the personification of the fly agaric as little men, the petroglyphs dating from long ago—all these aspects of the fly agaric cult deserve attention. But I will pass over them to come to the point of my story.

Many students of the customs and folklore of the forest belt of Siberia have remarked on the reverence shown everywhere for the Siberian birch, a tree that is much taller and straighter than our birches. The birch is pre-eminently the tree of the shaman. He builds his tent around the bole of a birch, and in trance he climbs up the trunk to go on his travels to the land of departed spirits. The folklore of Siberia is saturated with the birch, even where the cult of the fly agaric has been given up. Why the birch? Every student of the Siberian forest peoples has asked this question, but no one seems to have found an answer.

For me the answer is clear. The birch is revered wherever it grows in Siberia because it is the preferred host to the fly agaric. This mushroom grows in mycorrhizal relationship with certain trees, and the tree that it prefers is the birch. It also grows at the foot of conifers, and I hold it to be no accident that the pine tree occupies a place second only to the birch as a cult focus for the forest tribesmen of Siberia. The relationship between birch and fly agaric has been known to mycologists only since 1885, but the natives of the Siberian forests have sensed it from time immemorial. If investigators have not discovered why the birch is a cult object, I think this is because they have not asked the right questions. The natives of the Chukotka and of the valleys of the Ob and Yenisei have not volunteered information that they regard as self-evident; in their world, any cretin would know why the birch is venerated. As for the mycologists, who certainly now know the birch-fly agaric relationship, they talk only to one another and never to anthropologists.

Uno Holmberg, in the Mythology of all Races, has summarized for us the folk beliefs that surround the birch. The spirit of the birch is a middle-aged woman who sometimes appears from the roots or trunk of the tree in response to the prayer of her devotee. She emerges to the waist, eyes grave, locks flowing, bosom bare, breasts swelling. She offers milk to the suppliant. He drinks, and his strength forthwith grows a hundredfold. The tale, repeated in myriad variations, clearly refers to the fly agaric, but none of Holmberg's sources has called this to his attention. What is the breast but the udder, ādhar, of the Rig-Veda,
the swelling cap or pileus of the full-blown fly agaric? In another version
the tree yields "heavenly yellow liquor." What is this but the "tawny
yellow pāramāna" of the Rig-Veda? Repeatedly we hear of the Food
of Life, the Water of Life, the Lake of Milk that lies hidden, ready to
be tapped, near the roots of the Tree of Life. There where the Tree
grows is the Navel of the Earth, the Axis Mundi, the Cosmic Tree, the
Pillar of the World. What is this but the Mainstay-of-the-Sky that we
find in the Rig-Veda? The imagery is rich in synonyms and doublets.
The Pool of "heavenly yellow liquor" is often guarded by the chthonic
spirit, a Serpent, and surmounting the tree we hear of a spectacular
bird, capable of soaring to the heights, where the gods meet in con-
clave.

In brief, I submit that the legends of the Tree of Life and of the
Marvelous Herb had their genesis in the Forest Belt of Eurasia, the
tree being the towering Siberian birch, and the herb being the fly
agaric, Soma, the pongo of the Ugrian tribesmen. True, we are familiar
with this legend from the cuneiform inscriptions of Sumeria and the
countries lying to the west thereof. There the birch had become only a
memory, and it is an unanswerable question how much even their most
learned priests knew of the marvelous herb. But the legends were
powerful, speaking for the power of the original Soma, and they survive
in paintings, sculpture, and writings on clay. We must not forget that
the Sumerians, the shadowy Subarians, the Hittites, the Mitannians, and
yet others, known to us and unknown, had all hailed from the north,
and in their original homelands they or their neighbors knew the
marvelous herb by personal experience. They brought down with them
in their baggage all the tales about the herb and proceeded to write
them out in clay as soon as they had devised and mastered the art of
writing. It is a mistake to attribute the genesis of these ancient tales to
Mesopotamia and the Near East merely because these lands furnished
the clay on which they were first inscribed. Gilgamesh, our earliest epic
hero, dates from a recension written in the third millennium in Sumeria,
but he was already a legendary hero by that time. He went out to seek
the marvelous herb and found it in a watery place, only to have it
filched from him, as he slept, by the Serpent, its chthonic guardian,
more subtle than any beast of the field. The Semites at Mari and else-
where lived in intimacy with the Sumerians and borrowed their stories,
as is well known, sometimes giving the stories a new twist. In Genesis,
is not the Serpent the self-same chthonic spirit that we know from
Siberia? The Tree of Life, is it not the legendary Birch Tree, and the
Forbidden Fruit of the Tree of Life, what else is it but the Soma, the
fly agaric, the pongo of the Ugrian tribesmen? The Indo-Iranians were
late-comers on the stage of history, but they brought down with them
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the miraculous herb itself, and they bequeathed to us the strange, the breath-taking poems known as the Rig-Veda.

Hitherto the Soma-Haoma of the Indo-Iranians has been regarded as without parents or siblings. If my reconstruction of the legends holds good, the Soma of the Rig-Veda becomes incorporated into the religious history and prehistory of Eurasia, its parentage well established, its siblings numerous. Its role in human culture may go back far, to the time when our ancestors first lived with the birch and fly agaric, back perhaps through the Mesolithic and into the Paleolithic. We have here a web of interrelated beliefs that give to us a united field in a major area of primitive Eurasian religion.*

* And perhaps Amerindian religion as well. Much the same association of world (or shamanic) tree as symbolic axis mundi, with the pool of the water of life at its base, is found in the Americas, as is the chthonic guardian, the chimereal serpent. The prehistoric shaman's ascent of the sacred tree (and its functional counterpart in the great prehispanic religions, the ascent of the priest up the steep pyramidal stairway to the house of the god at the summit) still survives in some indigenous cultures of the New World. When applied to aboriginal beliefs and rituals in North and South America, Wason's exploration into the origins and symbolic meanings of the tree of life support La Barre's recognition of powerful vestiges of the religions of Paleolithic and Mesolithic Asia in the religions of the American Indian. (See La Barre, below.)—Eb.
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