**MISCELLANEOUS COMMUNICATIONS**

**SOMA: COMMENTS INSPIRED BY PROFESSOR KUIPER’S REVIEW**

When I brought out my book on Soma I knew it would not be readily accepted in all Vedic circles. I am glad to see the concession (and it is substantial) that my friend Professor Kuiper has made to my argument. I am fairly confident that when the shock of my ideas wears off — when the Vedists have lived with them for a while — they will meet with wide approval. Professor Kuiper’s polite reservations about my main thesis prompt me to accept the gracious hospitality of your columns to discuss certain questions that I hope will interest Indo-Iranian scholars.

1 Let me recapitulate Professor Kuiper’s version of the use of inebriants and inebriant surrogates by the Indo-Iranians and their ancestors.

(a) In Prehistory, according to Professor Kuiper, the ancestors of the Indo-Iranians were drinking mead, the “older” drink. “*Sauma has taken the place which the *Médhu ‘mead’ had in the older religion.” Professor Kuiper finds support for this hypothesis in a mythical parallel in the *Snorra Edda*, to which Adalbert Kuhn called attention almost a century ago, and also in the use of *mádhu* as a metaphor for Soma in the *RgVeda*.

(b) “It would seem a reasonable conjecture that at some moment in their common prehistory the Indians and the Iranians, having become acquainted with the practice of crushing a certain plant and drinking its juice, substituted the *Sauma for the older mádhu.*” Here Professor Kuiper goes on to say that the “invigorating effect of the Soma, of which the RigVedic poets tell us, may ultimately be based upon real experience and is, indeed, strongly reminiscent of the effects of eating the fly-agaric. ... Wasson may be perfectly right in assuming that the original Soma plant was *Amanita muscaria.*”

Bees and honey are ubiquitous throughout the areas under discussion and Professor Kuiper in developing his “reasonable conjecture” supplies no motive for the replacing of mead by *Saum, nor does he give a reason why mead was possibly not being drunk in Vedic times, nor why memories of mead’s inebriating effects, as he thinks, still evoked reverence. One does not normally remember with reverence one’s bouts of alcoholic drunkenness of years gone by, much less the drunken bouts of one’s progenitors of past ages.
(c) At some point *Sauma was abandoned. Professor Kuiper tells us neither why, nor when, nor where. He does say that when the RgVeda was composed and assembled *Sauma was “primarily sacred tradition”; he doubts whether the priests had “much factual knowledge about the original hallucinogen”. As he reminds us, Hillebrandt entertained the possibility that the plant had been replaced in the Vedic age. He also considers that the post-Vedic acceptance of “many substituters” lends some measure of support to his view that in the Vedic period the botanical identity of the plant was of minor importance. Again he does not say why. Let us suppose, contrary to Professor Kuiper’s assumption, that the identity of the plant had been of supreme importance, then when once it had to be abandoned for good, there might be widespread indifference about the surrogates.

Professor Kuiper thinks that a surrogate was already being used in the ritual when the hymns were being composed. This I will call Surrogate One. It was called Soma in honour of the lost but not forgotten *Sauma. It was sometimes called mēdhu in honour of the still more ancient *Mēdhu.

(d) In post-Vedic times “many substitutes” were used. These are what I will call the Litter of Surrogates.

If I have correctly stated Professor Kuiper’s case, the Vedic hymnologists probably composed their hymns without having had the experience of drinking *Sauma and probably without being familiar with the sacred plant itself. Only long after *Sauma had been given up, perhaps many generations later, did the priest poets compose and assemble the remarkable hymns known to the modern world as the RgVeda. Whilst they praised Soma with eloquence that moves us strangely even today, “their main concern [was] the reiteration of the sacred act itself”, in short the ritual. The abandonment of *Sauma apparently caused no trauma in the spiritual life of the Indo-Iranians. It was of “minor importance”, he says, both for them and for him.

The canon of the RgVeda having been settled, the priests ceased their hymn-making activities, this change coinciding grosso modo with the proliferation both of Surrogates and of the commentaries known as the Brāhmaṇas and *Srauta-sūtras. The Age of Exegesis had begun.

2 I am pleased that Professor Kuiper thinks *Sauma may have been the fly-agaric. But his history of inebriants and of their Surrogates among the Indo-Aryans poses problems.

(a) Professor Kuiper is certainly mistaken about the relative age of mead and the fly-agaric. Many think of fermented drinks as having always existed in human societies, but this is wrong. It is a habit of technologically sophisticated peoples to minimize technological advances made long ago, advances that we take for granted. (For its bearing on this question, let me remind the reader that when the Leahy brothers in 1933 penetrated for the first time into the Wahgi Valley, below Mount Hagen in New Guinea, they found an intelligent, sedentary people who cultivated the soil and bred pigs, but who knew no fermented drinks. Theirs was a moist, warm climate abounding in fruits.) I cannot say when mead first assumed importance in northern Eurasia, whether it was in B.C. 3000 or 4000 or 5000. But there was a definite terminus a quo. Furthermore, an acquaintance with fermented drinks is not the same as the significant