

ORIGINAL
ARTICLE

A Historical Survey on “Haoma”
Plant in Ancient Iran and India

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Abstract

In the ancient world many scientific beliefs were rooted in religion and were shared among civilizations. One of the important commonality of two civilizations of Iran and India is the medical field, especially curative plants. “Hume” was one of these herbs which treated many diseases. This plant is called “Haoma” in “Avesta”, “Soma” in Sanskrit and “Hume” in Persian. It had remedial features and was believed by both civilizations to contain water of life and immortality. Iranians used it in their rites and ceremonies. “Haoma” or “Soma” was assigned a divine role and was worshiped as a god. The extract of “Haoma” granted supernatural power and was accepted as a God who was able to give strength and health.

Key words: Historical background, Hume, Soma, Medicinal plants, Iran, India.

Received: 15 Aug 2013; Accepted: 30 Sep 2013; Online published: 8 Nov 2013
Research on History of Medicine/ 2013 Nov; 2(4): 129-134.

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Introduction

The relation between the two civilizations of Iran and India dates back to antiquity. These two civilizations have similar roots in race, history, religion, and culture. Therefore, they have a close relationship, common interests and history and also a lot of scientific and cultural exchanges.

One of these important and productive common fields of these two civilizations is the medical sciences. This research historically investigates the remedial features of “Haoma” plant in Iran and “Soma” in India and their usage.

Usage and meaning of “Haoma” in Avesta and Sanskrit texts

This plant is called “Haoma” in Avesta, the earliest Aryans holy book after Veda. It includes holy texts of Zoroastrians, the Persians’ religion at least from Achaemenid era (500 BC) up to 637 AD when Islam was introduced to Iranian population.¹ Haoma was also called “Soma” in Sanskrit, the ancient Indian language that the book of Veda was written in. It has the same root with Avestan language.² In ancient Iran, a holy angel named, Izad Haoma (Haoma God) was the guardian of this plant. Based on the ancient stories, a physician, “Haoma” found this herb and it became important in ceremonies and rites.³

“Haoma”, known to have a divine role, was prayed by both civilizations.⁴ Haoma is god whom people drink holy liquor for him and ravish by its memory. There are “114” carols for Haoma’s worship in the 9th book of Rig-Veda, the oldest part of the book of Veda, and written when Iranians and Indians lived together in antiquity.⁵ They believed that drinking “Soma” helps them find the light of god. In Avesta, a carol named “Hom Yasht” was composed for worshipping Homa.⁶ In the 9th Mandalay of “Rig-Veda”, Carol no.33, Soma is mentioned: “the extract of Soma is a bright and fawn liquid which carry water of life”.

In Sanskrit culture, Soma means extract, ink, syrup, water of life, moon, moon’s god, and “Soma”. In ancient Iran, the root of this word came from “hav-/hu-” which means flail, press and extract. So, some words like “havn” or “Haw” have the same roots with “Haoma”. In Subcontinent of India Soma means “water of life”.⁷

Haoma in mythology and religious belief of ancient Iran and India

The extract of Haoma (after fermentation), called “Prahome”, was used in ritual sacrifice for the God. Priests believed that drinking “Haoma” can be a reason for accepting the sacrifice and Soma liquor is resuscitative like fire and blood.⁸ Haoma was entrusted with the preparation of the Magi in Persia.⁹ Magis were ancient Persian priests who had religious duties as well as providing medical services, astronomy and some other tasks.¹⁰ This liquid was used in religious ceremonies of Persians. Haoma and the benefits of selling it is described in the texts discovered at Persepolis.¹¹

Soma in India and Iran changed his position and it became a warrior who fights with God’s enemy. In fact, Soma was as the same as “Indra” and have same characters like “Indra”. Indra found “Soma” in Himalaya and gave it to the gods for protecting them from demons. When demons found out about the power of Haoma, They tried to steal it. So, Soma became more powerful than Indra, and Indra did not have any power without it. Therefore, Soma became the first and blessing god with treat-

1. Pirnia,1999: 224
2. Mashkoor, 1984: 7/69
3. Rezaei, 2003: 185.
4. Dadvar et al., 2007: 271.
5. Mashkoor, 1984: 58
6. Mehrin Shooshtari A,1973: 15.
7. Ostovari, 2013:18.
8. Eunes, 1995: 28.
9. Ravandi, 2004: 451.
10. Pirnia,1999: 67, 170.
11. Gryshmn,1996: 175.



ment power.¹²

In Hindu religion, Soma has another name, “Chandra”, which means moon and “Emryt” and a butter which is produced from a milk ocean. Soma became foods of gods, immortals, and many other creatures. Based on some narratives, in the first half of each month, 36300 gods eat Soma and become immortal.¹³

Haoma had a warrior’s character in which fight with demons. He sacrificed himself for men’s life. This god exists in a holy plant which naturally grows in Amanda Mountain. In Zoroaster mythology, this plant has an important position.¹⁴ Therefore, Soma gets a celestial identity by goddess character like: Charkhsht turning of Soma is symbol of sky, extract of Soma is symbol of rain and Soma as creator of god’s water. Yellow extract and Soma’s sound became thunder. This liquor shed to vat and fertilizes herds of cows. In another mythology, Soma as well as Indra was associated with fertility, pest and waves. He was god of water life and associated with moon.¹⁵ But after these periods, Haoma drinking was reduced. In mythology, adultery of Brahma with his daughter forbade Soma due to some of its effects. In mythology Brahma had cursed Soma.¹⁶

Another curse of Soma is Sakra who mixed his student ash with Soma and drank it. In fact, rejection of Soma was related to the rise of religious reformers like Buda and Zoroaster. According to our knowledge, both religions of Buda and Zoroaster opposed ruthless and bloody rites of Aryans. Zoroastrianism was set by strict and serious laws. In these religions bloody sacrifice became forbidden because animals which work for people and feed them should have been respected. Alcoholic liquor became forbidden as well.¹⁷ when Buda’s students asked him to explain the meaning of life, he noted 5 moral points of which the fourth one was avoid consumption of alcoholic liquor that vanish awareness.¹⁸ Finally, after these new rules, Soma became moon and maintained as a holy herb and plant of god. In other periods, the positions of Indra and Huma were changed and they became close friends of Ahura (God in Zoroastrianism). It seemed that people cannot reject these gods and their powers¹⁹ In old Avesta, after Gathas, the greatest part of Yasna is Homyasht which described the emersion of Haoma on Zoroaster. It shows that people return to some of their old religious beliefs after the prophet’s death. “In the time of Hom’s readiness, he immerse to Zoroaster and read Gathas, “who are you? Zoroaster asked him, the most beautiful man with immortality who I have ever seen, “I am holy Haoma, abductor of death, oh, Sepantaman, make me on your Charkhsht to drink me and praise me like future Soashyants” Holy Haoma answered Zoroaster, “praise on holy Haoma” Zoroaster answered.²⁰

Haoma as remedial herb and curative drug

It is believed that Haoma is the plant with scientific name of Ephedra vulgaris L. and can be mentioned as the first antidepressant agent in the history of medicine.²¹ In Arabic language, they call it “Hom-al-Majos” and use it for bladder stones and stomachache. They called it Hom-al Majos because Zoroastrians used it when in their prayers. Arabs called them as Majos. They believed it have amazing effects and benefits.^{22,23}

Aryans believed that Haoma is a holy plant with tasty extract and was useful in treatment of patients. They boil its extract to make it colorful. It has soft stem and white extract. The patients who used its extract, because

12. Eunes,1995: 29 .
13. Eunes,1995: 146.
14. Amuzgar,1998: 30.
15. Eunes,1995: 29.
16. Ostovari, 2013:19.
17. Gryshmn,1996: 180.
18. Durant, 2002: 496.
19. Rypka, 2003: 20.
20. Ibid: 23.
21. Zargaran et al, 2012: 225.
22. Dehkhoda, 1956: 14/20863.
23. Moeen, 1992: 4/5227.



of its ephedrine, felt happy and mirth. Based on Iranians and Indians points of view, drinking of Haoma gives men a new life. Nowadays, this plant is still used in Baluchistan, Afghanistan, and Kashmir.²⁴ This plant is used only by its extract and Zoroaster mentioned it as a yellow flower with creative features used as tea.²⁵

The extract of Haoma is called "Parahome" which makes men immortal; six men cooperated in making of Haoma extract: 1."Zout: who read Avesta, 2.Havanan who flail Haoma with mortar and pestle, 3. Atravachche who check fire, 4. Aberet who carry water, 5. Asnatar who purify Parahome, and the last one, Raetvichekara who mix milk with Parahome. All these men are holy and use a mask, "Penam", to protect Haoma from their earthy and infected breath. In 10th Yasna, paragraphs 6 and 7, haoma is mentioned:" Any extract of haoma can treat all patients and can destroy all infections. Each house which has Haoma is protected from sickness.²⁶

Also, in 9th Yasna, Paragraph 16 it is mentioned that: "bless on great "Homa" who create great, treat great, winner, yellow, soft, good for soul and body.²⁷ As we see, extract of Haoma was used as a treatment for patients and doctors carried tools for making Haoma. Maybe, this plant has alcoholic effect which makes patients closer to god.

In the next periods, they used white extract of Haoma. This mixture should be used in resurrection day to give new life to death men.²⁸ In first tree days of child's life, they gave extract of Haoma and stick spring oil to them.²⁹

Iranian phytologists mentioned this ancient plant in some historical texts like Tohfeh-al-Momeneen (written in 1105-1077AH by Hakim Momen): "Hom-al-Majos is a plant with one thin stem, Yellow flower like Jasmine and thin leaf. It is like Arghavaan (scientific names: *Cercis siliquastrum* L.). But some call it Cyclamen and some call it Maranyh. Also, Western herbalists and orientalist discussed about this plant. Dr. Achinson, a famous herbalist, calls it "Ephedra vulgaris L.". It has astringent taste and the same formula and features like C1.H13No.³⁰ Nowadays, Zoroastrians use Ephedra vulgaris L. as Haoma. There are different opinions about the implementation of this plant.

Haoma was grown in Hindukush Mountain in east of Alborz (based on 10th Yasna paragraph 11). Today, it grows in Afghanistan plateau, Tibet, Kashmir and Hindukush Mountains.³¹ In Sassanian era, especially in Khosrow 1 (King Anoshiravan) period (531-579AD), Borzuya (or Burzōē or Burzōy, Prozos in Latin), great physician of Sassanian dynasty, translated the Indian Panchatantra from Sanskrit into Pahlavi. He went to India to learn about curative herbs. International University of Jundishapur was in a great condition and exchanged medical information with India in that time.^{32,33} This religious herb has special place in ancient Art. It was used for cloth decoration. As we see, Haoma was decorated cloth besides image of Altar (Holy plant of Zoroaster).³⁴

Discussion

As it was mentioned, two civilizations of Iran and India have same medical background, besides cultural and social commonalities. Iranian have used many medical information from Indian culture. Two civilizations of Iran and India have a common medical background. One of the commonalities of these two is Haoma or Soma which was worshiped as holy,

24. Rezaei ,2003: 150.
25. Mousavi , 2004: 63.
26. Ostovari, 2013: 22.
27. Rezaei, 2003: 185-186.
28. Elgood,1978 : 34.
29. Christensen, 1990: 439.
30. Rezaei,2003: 187.
31. Shams Ardekani et al,2009: 7.
32. Safa, 1952: 25.
33. Sami,1964: 117.
34. Allemagne, 1957: 435.



curative and Powerful plant. People and physicians used its extracts for treatment. There are “114” carols for Haoma’s worshiping in 9th book of Rig-Veda. They believed that drinking “Soma” help them find the lightness of God. In Avesta, a carol named “Hom Yasht” was composed for worshiping Haoma. In Zoroaster sources and Rig-Veda Haoma was mentioned as a yellow flower with curative features.

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