

PARALLELISM BETWEEN INDO-IRANIAN "SOMA HAOMA" RITUALS & THE "CHI-DYO" RITUALS OF THE LEPCHAS OF SIKKIM

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Alcoholic drinks play a very important role in all sacrificial ceremonies and rituals observed by the Lepchas (Rongkup) of Sikkim. One such drink is the "Chi" which is millet beer and another alcoholic sacrificial drink is "Dyo" made from medicinal herbs, roots or other fermentable plants. According to ancient tradition of the Lepchas, "Chi" is of divine origin. Legend has it that the ferment used in the preparation of "Chi" was brought to mankind from the nether world in a cunning manner by a cockroach named "Tagder Palyong". The Lepchas of Sikkim link up immortality with this drink. It is believed that the quail (Lepcha name - Kohom fo) is one of the two birds which fetched this drink of immortality from heaven. Then again, the "Chi" sacrifice is closely linked with the bull and performed on the head of the animal. The "Chi" sacrifice is intimately bound up with the life and rituals of the Lepchas and an integral part of the cultural heritage of their ancestors.

We find striking parallelism between the Indo-Iranian "Soma-Haoma" sacrifices and the "Chi" sacrifice of the Lepchas of

Sikkim. According to Indo-European beliefs, the drink which manifests secret, ecstatic and exciting power to men is an essence of the gods, and a special possession of theirs. The dwelling place of this drink "Soma" rasa of the gods is heaven and from its heavenly storage, the bird eagle of the king of the Aryan god Indra (the nectar carrying eagle of Zeus, Greek god King of Olympus) or the god himself disguised as a bird, fetched or stole it from the jealously watching demons. It is accepted by most experts that at the time of the Indo-Europeans, the concept of god-like immortality was already connected with the drink of the gods (Indo-European words-Amrita and Ambrosia). As human life is preserved by taking meat and drink and specially death is warded off for a time, at least, by medicine, so the godly existence must also depend on the partaking of a sacrificial drink whose essence is immortality. "Soma-Haoma" was this drink of immortality.

Similar sacrifice as the nourishment of the gods is performed by the Lepcha folk too. "Tak-bo-thing", the wonder power god of the Lepchas made his first sacrifice of many fruits and fish to "It-bo-Rum", the supreme god of Rong folk or the Lepchas. Thus according to H.Oldenberg, the stimulating drink possessed with demonic strength, like the sacrificial fire of the Indo-Iranians becomes a mighty god among the Lepchas as among the Indo-Iranians. Besides this, there is a close parallelism between the intimate linkage of the Indo-Iranian "Soma-Haoma" sacrifices with the cattle and the Lepchas cult of the stimulating drink "Chi" linked with the bull.

To quote Oldenberg, "Soma is dressed in the cow robe-the admixture of milk in it". Likewise, the lepchas decorate the bowl of "Chi" with three little pats of butter called "San-dyo" and place the "Chi" offering on the forehead of the bull. This is very significant.

The blessed killing of the "Haoma bull" among the ancient Iranians and the most Solemn "Soma" sacrifice of the ancient Indians on the one hand and the cult of the intoxicating drink "Chi" connected with the bull cult of the Lepchas are strikingly parallel. Another

striking point of similarity between the two rituals is that just as the Iranian Gatha - religion is Dionysiac and it indulges in the "Haoma" delirium with ecstasies and trances, so during a sacrificial ceremony of the Lepchas, the Rong highpriests and highpriestesses (Bongthing and Mun) partake of "Chi", rouse themselves into frenzy and finally begin their ecstatic dances and soul-wanderings. Then again, the preparation of the other Lepcha alcoholic drink "Dyo" and that of the "Soma-Haoma" drinks of the Indo-Iranians are similar but the secret of the latter's extraction has been lost. The herbs and "Soma-Haoma" were also medicinal plants.

The Lepcha "Dyo" is prepared from some medicinal herbs mentioned in the Rikveda as "Medicine for the sick" which even brought about immortality. According to Oldenberg, "Soma rasa" (Iranian Haoma) was not a popular drink since it was made from a rare plant. The common alcoholic drink of the ancient Aryans was "Sura" which too was a sacrificial drink besides the "Soma" sacrifice. Here too we find a remarkable parallel to the Lepcha common brew "Chi" (although it is of divine origin) easily made from millet and "Dyo", infrequently made from some rare herbs and not commonly used in sacrificial rituals. Thus the Lepcha drink "Dyo" is the counterpart of Aryan "Soma rasa" while "Chi" holds the status of the Aryan "Sura".

Strangely enough, Aryan "Sura" in Vedic myth, is the goddess of wine just as Lepcha millet brew "Chi" is regarded as a female. According to the eminent German anthropologist and ethnologist, Mattlias Hermanns, the Lepcha "Chi" sacrifice closely linked up with the bull cult, has an entirely original and individual character. It belongs to their ancestral heritage and was not borrowed from the ancient Aryans nor from other peoples outside Sikkim.

The writer of the article during his strenuous trek to Zongu, Lepcha settlement in North Sikkim, gleaned information from the elderly Lepcha people that the "Chi" sacrifice custom was handed down to them from generation to generation. It is, therefore, of indigenous origin and not influenced by sacrificial rituals. The Lepcha

"Chi-Dyo" sacrificial rituals developed independently of the ancient Indo-Iranians "Soma-Haoma" sacrificial ceremonies.

Footnotes. The cult of the killings of the Soma in the form of little plant shoots in the vedic sacrifice and the myth of the slaughter of the Haoma bull in the mythology of Mithra have a wide ethnological connection and happened to be the Aryan shaping of and ancient prehistorical mythology and cult. If Zoroaster, the founder of the Zoroastrian religion disclaims with passion and holy anger against the killing of bulls, it is not for agricultural and utilitarian reasons, but because this ritual formed the constituent part of the old religion. Now the Soma sacrifice, the highest and the most Solemn sacrifice of the ancient Aryans, was not essentially offering of a gift to the gods but the renewal of the original sacrifice of the gods. As the gods in heaven create the Soma rain for the good of the World, so does man on earth in the holy ceremony prepares the drink of immortality which stands for rain as the fountain head of life in order to share in the blessing of the gods like the original sacrifice. The killing of cattle again and again condemned by Zoroaster, was the imitation and repetition of the indeed cruel but blessed killing of the original bull. And in very close relation with this, Zoroaster condemned in the same place the Haoma sacrifice although he did not mention the name Haoma but used instead, and old unmistakable title of the Haoma.

The sacrifice of the bull in the Mithra cult and its cosmic meaning is believed by H. Lommel to be identical with the Iranian Haoma sacrifice. But the beliefs of the Rong people (Lepcha tribe) and their rituals and rites prove beyond any shadow of doubt that the intoxicating drink and the cult of the bull are not identical but are two altogether independent cults. Moreover, they are not the imitation of the original offering of the deity itself. This mystification is not found among the most ancient ethnological tribes but found among those tribes professing a peculiar mystery-religion. Other experts believe that the intoxicating Haoma has been supplanted by the milk-Haoma which links up with an ancient milk-mystery.

The Indo-Iranians would perform the Soma-Haoma sacrifice in spring time for all the gods. As the stimulating Soma-Haoma drinks taken by the Indo-Iranians would give them demonic strength and fill them with almost boundless exhilaration, so the Rong people by partaking of the millet brew "Chi", would drive themselves into a state of ecstasy. A brief description of the process of preparation of this alcoholic drink would not be out of place here. Well-ripened small millet grains are dried in the Sun for three days and then cooked in an earthenware pot covered with a bamboo mat. A larger barrel is inverted over it. After the cooking, the ferment is added to the boiled millet for fermentation to occur. The fermented liquor is then left in the Sun for several days in order to make the alcoholic content stronger. Finally the grains are squeezed out and the chi-brew is thus made. The fermenting grains are then put into a bamboo cylinder and warm water is poured into it. This water becomes alcoholic and is sucked in intermittently through a bamboo reed in order to avoid the impure sediment.

The other type alcoholic drink, Dyo, is made from medicinal roots, herbs or other fermentable plants. The preparation depends on the material used in each case. The roots are soaked in warm water, the fermenting material is added and the whole connection allowed to ferment. After a few days the extract is squeezed out.

The home of the Soma plant is supposed to be high rocky mountains. In the Rik veda, there are references to "Soma on the rocks", the eagle robs Soma from the rocks", it is a dweller of the mountain world". In one place in the Rik veda, the name of such a mountain is said to be Mujevat. According to the Mahabharata (XIV), this is a mountain in the rear of the Himalaya. The plant being a medicinal herb, was called "Medicine for the Sick". The medicinal efficacy was so potent that it was even known as "Medicine of Immortality".

In those bygone days blurred by the mist of time, no Indo-Aryans lived in this mountain world. It is therefore very probable that from very early time they obtained medicinal herbs and

roots from the mountain dwellers. In the Atharva Veda it is said, "The young maid of the Kirata race digs the drug root with shovels wrought of gold on the high ridges of the hills".. The expression "Kirata-tikta occurs in Sanskrit and means a very bitter medicinal plant. This name is distorted in Prakrit as "Cilaa-itta". In olden days in Bengal it is known as Cirayita and today it is known as Cirata. According to Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, it means "Medicine of the Kirata".

The some plant's juice was equally bitter. It is said that the Kirata provided the Aryans with soma plants. If the plant grew in the high Himalaya, then the Aryans would not have been able to obtain it except through the Kirata and other Himalayan tribes having a knowledge of the medicinal herbs.

The some plants were ground according to primitive methods by the Aryans by means of grinding stones and later on crushed in a stone mortar. thereafter, the juice was squeezed out. This soma juice was reddish brown or greenish-yellow in colour. It was strained through a sheep wool strainer for purification. Likewise, the Iranians purified the Haoma juice by means of a stainer made of hair from the body of the holy white bull. During the process three priests would chant a hymn in monotone. The juice was frequently mixed with water, milk or sour milk and then poured back and forth into different barrels to cause fermentation to prepare an alcoholic drink. This process, according to Matthias Hermanns, shows that soma juice was a rare intoxicating drink. The ordinary alcoholic drink of the ancient Aryans, he opines, was "Sura" which too was used for the purpose of ritual sacrifice. According to Hermanns the Himalayan tribes gave "Soma" to the Aryans and disclosed to them the recipe for making it.

This does not prove beyond doubt that the sacrifice of the alcoholic drink was introduced by the Aryans.

The ides of the alcoholic drink of the gods appears, according to Oldenberg, to exist during the time of the Indo-Europeans.

To them it was the old honey mead. Instead of mead used by the Aryans earlier, they began using soma when they migrated to India and came to know of its use from the Himalayan tribal people.

the customs and rituals of the Lepchas of Sikkim run parallel to the ancient Indo-Iranian customs. Among the southern Himalayan tribe, the Lepchas, according to M. Hermanns, are the only tribe having knowledge of plants and the art of preparing intoxicating drinks from them. the Tibetans call the Drink of Immortality "Dud-rtzi". It is nectar or ambrosia although literally it means the devil's drink. They use the word "Homa" to mean butter-burnt offering. "Ho-ma-byed-pa" usually means to offer. The Tibetan word "Homa" is related to the Iranian word "Haoma" and not to the Sanskrit word "Soma". Then again, the expression "devil's drink" is a derogatory appellation. Zoroaster too expressed the same derogatory feeling regarding the Haoma drinking bout. these two facts, Hermanns opines, appear to indicate that the Tibetans imbibed the Iranian heritage.

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SOME NOTES ON "SOMA", "HAOMA", "AMRITA", "SURA", ETC.

SOMA : In Hindu mythology soma is an alcoholic liquor consumed by the vedic priests in order to induce a state of ecstasy. Agni, the divine fire was the spirit of Soma and the effect of pouring libations on the altar fires was to enable the gods to combat the forces of darkness and to maintain the order of light. It is believed to have been prepared by fermentation of wild species of Himalayan rhubarb. Eventually Soma became identified with the elixir of life supposed, when drunk, to prolong life.

HAOMA : Soma was worshipped in Zoroastrian mythology by the name Haoma. It was regarded as the purifier of the place of the Sacred fire and as the destroyer of demons and tyrants.

AMRITA : In vedic myth, it is the ambrosia of the gods. This elixir or drink of immortality referred to in the mythological "Churning of the Ocean" is probably another version of Soma. As a result of the "Churning of the Ocean" performed by the gods (Devas) and demons (Asuras) with the help of Vasuki, ruler of the clan of serpent-worshippers, coiled round the Mandar mountain, a pitcher containing Amrita rose up from the Ocean bed and from the hands of the Asuras, it was cleverly snatched away by the Devas (the gods) who drank the Amrita and became immortal. Amrita is identified with Sudha.

SURA : It is the goddess of wine according to the vedic mythology. It was produced owing to the Churning of the Ocean during the Kurma Avatar aeon. The accepted sense of the word is alcoholic drink prepared by fermenting fruit juice or some herbal juice rich in carbohydrates. The fermented liquor is then distilled to get alcoholic beverage.

KURMA AVATAR : In Vedic myth, Kurma Avatar is the second or tortoise incarnation of Lord Vishnu. This forms the second episode of the Deluge legend which began during Vishnus Matsya Avatar period. Here the god incarnate descended to the bottom of the Ocean to recover the treasures of the Vedic tribes lost during the Deluge. As

a tortoise he stationed himself at the sea bottom and on his back was placed the Mandar mountain round which was coiled Vasuki. The gods at the tail end and the demons (Aruras) at the mouth of the serpent king churned up the ocean with tremendous force when the following precious objects came up :- Airavata, Indra's elephant, Amrita; the ambrosia of the gods; Dhanus, the bow of victory; Kaustabha, the jewel of Vishnu; Lakshmi (or sri), Vishnu's wife; Parijata, the tree of knowledge; Rambha, the first of the celestial nymphs (Apsaras); Sankha, the conch of victory; Sura, the goddess of wine; Surabhi; the cow of plenty; Uccaihsrava, the first horse; Visha or Halahal, the deadly poison.

KVASIR : It will be relevant here to touch upon the Nordic myth according to which Kvasir was the wisest of men who was killed by the dwarfs, Tjalar and Galar in Spartheim.

After his death his blood mixed with the honey mead was fermented in Odherir, the magic cauldron to produce an intoxicating liquor which gave wisdom, the knowledge of runes and charms and the gift of poetry. The soma of the ancient Aryans and the Haoma of the Iranians were believed to possess similar power.

ZARATHUSTRA : By about 600 B.C., the Zoroastrian religion reached its nadir, and but for the work of Zarathustra who recognized it, it would doubtless have vanished. His writings are recorded in the Zend-Avesta, the Bible of the Zoroastrian religion which laid down a standard text for the tales forming the basis of the doctrine. He appears to have been a religious leader like Moses, bringing the people back to their faith.

In 520 B.C., the Persian king Darius had substitute the new monotheism of Zarathustra for the then existing polytheism. According to Egerton Sykes, whether Zoroaster is another version of Zarathustra or whether he was the real founder of the religion is not clear but it is, however, reasonably certain that the religion doctrine of Zoroaster was definitely existent for a long period prior to 600 B.C., when Zarathustra is believed to have put the Zend-Avesta into writing

later-day Zoroastrianism carried to extreme limits, the worship of the sacred fire brought by the Indo-Germans from their northern habitat. The modern parsees of Maharashtra profess Zoroastrianism.

MITHRA : Mithra or Mitra, first appears as a god in the Vedic Hymns where he is mentioned about one hundred and seventy times. He would appear to have been a human being who was elevated to the divine rank after his death which had taken place before the Aryans reached India. In the Rik-Veda he is regarded as one of the twelve Adityas (Aditya is a personification of the generative powers of nature). As the Hindu religion gave rise to Brahmanism, the cult of Mithra gradually vanished.

The Iranians, however, made him of the Ameshas (the six immortal Holy ones) as the genius of heavenly light. He was the chief of a heavenly host of Ahura (Benign powers according to Zoroastrian religion) whom he led against the evil forces of the Devas (Benign forces according to the Aryan faith). In the reform of the Mazdean religion done by Zoroaster, Mithra was reduced in status from the rank of Amesha of that of Yazata (celestial being in charge of a heavenly task) where he stood between the opposing forces of good and evil, always helping in the saving of souls. The worship of Mithra is always associated with the killing of bulls and was introduced into the Roman world from Cappadocia. By the time of the Persian king Xerxes I, it had spread into Greece. Mithraism was an aesthetic religion of truth, purity and right for men only and women worshipped Cybele but the dominant feature of the religion was dualism with good and evil equally balanced.

But for the spread of Christianity, Mithraism would now have been the religion of Europe. The Mithra religion, unlike the Dionysiac Zoroastrianism, was sober, formalistic and Apollonic.

N.B These notes are based on the finding of the eminent : British mythographer Egerton Sykes who compiled them in the form of a book titled "Everyman's Dictionary of Non-classical Mythology".

A Special Note on "Chi" (1) This is protected by a deity named "Don-dyo-chi-log" who is accorded the same homage as the supreme god of the Lepcha tribe named "It-bo-rum". The Lepcha people offer the chi brew to their deities in a wooden vessel together with rice and flesh of little birds on a banana leaf-plate. "Chi" has to be prepared by a young virgin and the sacrifice is called "Rum-fat" or "Lyang-rum-fat" and performed once a year in honour of It-bo-rum sometimes in December or January. Generally the head of a family who is also the family priest, performs the "Chi" sacrificial ceremony.

Strangely enough, the Lepcha alcoholic liquor "Chi" is regarded as a female just as "Sura" in Vedic myth is the goddess of wine.

(2) The Lepcha people call themselves "Mutan-chi-Rongkup" meaning "Dear children of Mother Nature".