

of the *Varāhapurāṇa* according to the edition of the Caukhambā Amarabharatī Prakāśan (1982), a glossary (not exhaustive) of the infernal bestiary in the Purāṇas (but this reviewer regrets the absence of a general index of Sanskrit words), the transliterated Sanskrit text of *Mahāmṛtyuñjayastotra*, as well as the reproduction of a page of a *Rāmāyaṇa* in Persian illustrating the fight between Yama and Rāvaṇa accompanied by the text in its original script and transliteration. The book also includes 19 illustrations. It is preceded by a detailed summary in English (pp. xxi–xxxv) that does not do justice to its richness.

In the course of this survey of 3,000 years, the author traces the mutations in the literary history of the character of Yama from the period of the Indo-Iranian tradition of Yama as a descendant of Vivasvat; he points to the persistence of the eerie figure of the dog, and the recurrence of the essential catabase of Naciketas, the cursed child. As is inherent to this kind of long-term study, some topics are discussed too superficially. Food rhetoric, for example, deserves a book to itself. In addition, there is a gap in methodology in dealing with hells in only their narrative expression. The doctrinal implications are undervalued, for example when evoking the notion of experience (*bhoga*), and there is a lack of a more systematic integration of the hells in the philosophical systems that the stories exemplify, as well as of a finer analysis of the discourse on their proselitic nature. The author is not to blame for this, especially since he brings together here for the first time data on the hells, an excellent starting point for more detailed studies.

However, at the narrative level where he is situated, a wider “ideological” contextualization would have allowed the author to grasp hell with a more dynamic vision, which would include, as well as the infernal condition, the embryonic condition, childhood, adulthood, old age and illness (for example, in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* the description of the embryo/foetus condition displays many similarities with the infernal condition, as is the case, too, in ancient Buddhism).

The fact remains that this is an original and innovative work on Indian hells, which traces the history of the development of the figure of Yama and the conception of hell as a locus.

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MATTHEW CLARK:

*The Tawny One: Soma, Haoma, and Ayahuasca.*

x, 285 pp. London and New York: Muswell Hill Press, 2017. ISBN 978 1 90899 522 3.

doi:10.1017/S0041977X19000934

What is “soma”? In *The Tawny One: Soma, Haoma and Ayahuasca*, Matthew Clark aims to shed new light on the plant called *soma* in Sanskrit and *haoma* in Avestan, whose juice was consumed as a sacrament in Vedic and Zoroastrian ritual. His thesis is bold and refreshing. Soma/haoma, he argues, was not a single plant, but many plants blended as a concoction, with ingredients varying over time and space. Arguing that viable plants for this purpose possessed chemical constituents with psychoactive effects, Clark compares soma/haoma to *ayahuasca*, a brew of multiple plants used to engender psychedelic experiences throughout the Amazonian region. To be clear, Clark does not claim that soma/haoma *was* ayahuasca, or even made from the same plant species;

instead, he calls it an “ayahuasca analogue”. In this way, he aims to reorient the scholarly debate – which for centuries has sought out a single plant – towards an assessment of a wide array of plants in Central and South Asia, along with the possible effects – physiological, cognitive, and spiritual – that ingesting such substances could produce.

Ever since it attracted the attention of nineteenth-century Orientalists, soma/haoma’s botanical identity has remained one of the great unsolved mysteries in the study of religion. Given the sparseness of the archaeological record, our primary sources are linguistic and literary. Derived from an Indo-Iranian verb root, *soma* and *haoma* mean “that which is pressed” – the terms literally refer to the process of extracting juice or sap from a plant for ritual use. Yet in Vedic and Avestan texts the words denote not only the juice, but also a drink made from the juice, the plant itself, and the plant-deity Soma/Haoma. Complicating the issue is the fact that our texts lack unambiguous descriptions of the plant’s botanical features, method of preparation, and effects; and refer to different kinds of soma/haoma along with numerous substitutes. Based on the evidence at hand, it seems that soma/haoma was a plant with stems, ranging in colour from tawny brown to golden. Practitioners would soak it in water until it swelled, beat it to extract the juice, strain the impurities, and add milk to cut the bitter taste. After imbibing the mixture, they would feel wakeful, inspired, and intoxicated; in Vedic texts, *soma* is called *amṛta* (“the immortal”) – drinking it confers immortality.

Scholars have proposed many different plants as the original soma/haoma, including cannabis, ephedra, fly-agaric mushroom, and Syrian rue. Each of these is psychoactive in its own way, with effects varying according to dose and circumstances. This is the intractable challenge of the soma/haoma debate: while identification hinges on the plant’s effects on people, these effects remain murky, subjective, and contested. Since R. Gordon Wasson’s influential *Soma: Divine Mushroom of Immortality* (New York, 1968), which made the case for the fly-agaric based on reports of Siberian shamanism, scholarship on soma/haoma has been divided into two camps: those who think the substance had psychedelic effects (“entheogenic” being the current term of art); and those who deny this. In making the case for an ayahuasca analogue, Clark allies himself with the entheogenists.

Although a slim volume, *The Tawny One* is densely annotated. After introducing the soma/haoma problem and giving a synopsis of his thesis, Clark provides a comprehensive and up-to-date survey of primary sources and previous scholarship (chapters 2–5). Next, a series of chapters (6–12) evaluates arguments on the botanical identification of soma/haoma, taking each of the major plant-candidates in turn. “Altered states of consciousness and demarcation criteria” (chapter 9), which treats mysticism, phenomenology, and cognitive approaches to religious experience, is a welcome interlude, shifting the focus from plants to people.

Clark’s main contribution arrives with “Many plants are *soma/haoma*” (chapter 13), which argues that no single plant is the original soma/haoma; rather, *soma* and *haoma* designate a concoction of multiple plants with psychedelic effects. Although at times this would seem to suggest, bewilderingly, that every plant *might* have been soma/haoma, the “many plants” thesis is an ingenious way to explain the disparate evidence at hand. Clark’s obsessive sifting of clues also reminds us how much remains to be discovered about botanical knowledge in the ancient world. In “A renewed case for a psychedelic: ayahuasca” (chapter 14), Clark explains how ayahuasca is prepared from the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine, which contains monoamine-oxidase (MAO) inhibitors, and the leaves of the *Psychotria viridis*, which contains the alkaloid *N-N* dimethyl-tryptamine (DMT). Consumed together, these constituents engender visions, ecstasy, and a sense of rejuvenation. He contends that a chemical reaction with identical effects could have been achieved using any number of plants in premodern Central and South Asia. One of the best-known MAO inhibitors is Syrian rue (*peganum harmala*;

pictured on the book's cover), while the possible plant-sources of DMT continue to expand as ethnobotanists make new discoveries (including perhaps *kuśa/darbha* grass, used throughout Vedic ritual). "Vedic and ayahuasca rituals" (chapter 15) compares textual accounts of soma rites with ethnographic accounts of rituals in the Brazilian Santo Daime church, where ayahuasca is the main sacrament; in Clark's estimation, psychedelic experiences constitute the church's *raison d'être*. Along these lines, he invites us to consider "a different way of looking at ancient Vedic and Zoroastrian ritual", namely, as religious institutions that "developed *primarily* as vehicles for an entheogenic trip" (p. 170).

Several chapters on Greek mystery rites (which he suggests may also have utilized an ayahuasca analogue) and "The Bronze Age origins of entheogenic cults" (chapters 16–18), though interesting as a comparative excursus, undermine the integrity of the argument and would have been better relegated to an appendix. The book finishes with potential rejoinders to the ayahuasca proposition and thoughtful concluding remarks (chapters 19–20).

*The Tawny One* is an interdisciplinary work of comparison, with all the promise and peril this entails: with its wide scope and heavy reliance on scholarship from diverse fields, the book risks rankling many and satisfying few. Indologists may object that Clark does not offer substantially new readings of Sanskrit materials, while South Asianists may deem his foray into ayahuasca irrelevant. But such critiques would miss the intellectual value of Clark's contribution. In much the same way that Wasson productively injected ethnobotany into an ossified philological debate, Clark fruitfully engages perspectives that previous scholarship has discounted: self-experimentation, ritual studies, history of consciousness, and comparative religion. While it may not solve the mystery once and for all, *The Tawny One* reframes the soma/haoma problem in ways that will greatly benefit future research.

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MASATO KOBAYASHI and BABLU TIRKEY:

*The Kurux Language: Grammar, Text and Lexicon.*

(Brill's Studies in South and Southwest Asian Languages.) xvii, 791 pp.

Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017. \$203. ISBN 978 90 04 34765 6.

doi:10.1017/S0041977X19000946

Dravidian is the sixth largest language family in the world and second in South Asia. The Kurux language, known as Oraon, belongs to the North Dravidian sub-branch. It is spoken in the Indian states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Odissa. Unlike other South Dravidian non-literary languages, Kurux is in extensive contact with Indo-Aryan languages. However, Kurux has received less attention from either descriptive or comparative linguists than its sister languages. Consequently, the unique mixture of archaic Dravidian features and contact-induced innovation in Kurux is not represented in comparative studies of Dravidian languages. And contact-induced changes in Kurux have not received much attention in the literature on contact and convergence studies in the Indian linguistics area. Masato Kobayashi and Bablu Trikey's *The Kurux Language: Grammar, Text, and Lexicon* is a comprehensive grammar of Kurux which fills the gap and sets a standard model for the description of Dravidian languages. The introductory part gives a brief typological