EPHEDRA AS SOMA MEANING HEMP FIBRES
WITH SOMA LATER MISIDENTIFIED AS THE HEMP PLANT ITSELF

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Ephedra sinica, the Chinese species, is an assembly of thin long yellow stalks. Due to its appearance it was finally named in Chinese after yellow hemp fibres as hao-ma, fire-yellow hemp (fibres). Soma being thus associated in name with hemp, it was believed to be the hemp plant itself. Moreover names of hemp were transferred to ephedra. Here there are three epochs. 1. Ephedra = hao-ma, fire-yellow hemp fibre. 2. Ephedra = ma-huang, ‘hemp-yellow’ and cannabis = huang-ma ‘yellow hemp’. 3. Hum = ephedra. Most names of hemp and of ephedra have been independently considered.

In Rgveda soma is primarily a plant. But its juice, being the more important, soma usually signifies its content and the drink. Then as actually known the plant, as container, would have priority over its content, the juice. This would be the reasoning according to common sense. But here comes the specialized reasoning of the philologist who assumes that the word soma is a Sanskrit word which then must have a Sanskrit root. He could not find this better than the root Su = to press. This delivered the word soma merely signifying what has been “pressed out”. Then it is neither the juice, nor the plant, but merely the procedure to which the plant was subjected that has given the name soma. Moreover the juice was named before the plant, the content before the container. Whatever may be the justification of such an etymology it is imperative to know who it was that named the plant and what led to its discovery. It must be pointed out that no one seems to have taken the word soma to that early stage when the plant came to be used on account of which the plant and its juice became so popular that the plant was finally deified as God Soma in charge of all vegetation. People seem to have ignored the earliest use of soma and it is this feature that is being emphasized here.

However before proceeding further we may consider two criticisms already offered against the name soma. Bailey¹ clearly writes that “the plant has no reasonable name if it is traced to hau, press-out-juice that is the pressed out stuff or (actually to) the (mere) act of pressing juice.” Hau would be the root in Avesta where the word is hauma or haoma, corresponding to the Sanskrit root su and its derivative soma. Then if soma had been a Sanskrit word some allied form should have been found in some other Indo-Germanic language. But Keith² critically observed commenting that “Soma is derived from the root su, and means merely the pressed drink, and there is no parallel word in the other Indo-European languages.” Others must have also realized all this but the problem was to find the best root assignable to hauma or soma.
The solution lies in taking it to Chinese which then gives the meaningful name haoma in Avesta and Soma in Sanskrit. We start with a Chinese ascetic pressed to search food-stuffs from the resources of a forest. This emphasis on necessity leading to a discovery is no where hinted at in the present attempts to trace the etymology of the name soma. The hungry ascetic saw, on a hill, a bush loaded with conspicuous red berries. Finding them sweet and edible he had a hearty meal and as a result he further felt energized and happier. At times when there were no berries he tried to chew the thin stalks which characterized the plant and found that even these yielded a juice which was an energizer and euphoriant. The plant was ephedra and it became a regular drug with the ascetic. He then had to give it a name.

The Chinese species of ephedra has yellow stalks which are long and thin. Then both in shape and in colour it resembled the fibres of hemp. In Chinese hemp=ma, and fiery-yellow=ho. This was anciently pronounced hua, as given in Karlgren. Then the term hua-ma first designated ephedra in Chinese. It was named after hemp or cannabis fibre. At this time, or about 4000 B.C., the Aryans were hunters, using spear and bow. With such weapons hunting was very strenuous and they needed a drug to make them fatigue-proof. Thus there was a regular necessity which induced the Aryans to learn the use of ephedra and they took to it with a vengeance. They consumed it thrice a day. Being hunters they pounded the stalks or twigs between stones, added water and drank the juice thus obtained. The point to note is that the stalks of ephedra are thin and long as also yellow in colour. As such they resembled fibres of hemp. To the hunters, familiar with thin arrows, the stalks resembled arrows. RV. X. 89.5 speaks of soma as though "armed with arrows" and this feature is so characteristic that "all forest trees and all bushes (would) not deceive Indra with their (own) offered likeness", since none has arrow-like, thin and long stalks. Thus as verse IX. 50.1 informs each stalk would end in "Soma's thin arrow's sharpened point". The thousand thin fibre-like stalks with as many "sharpened points" would collectively resemble, as verse I. 32.12 speaks "a horse tail wast thou". This would be the general appearance of a plant collected from the field and seen at home. Now Hakim Mohammed Said has published a work on Chinese Medicine which now appears in its second edition. He quotes a Chinese source which mentions "Ephedra (as) a variety of shrubby Horse-tail" plant. Fortunately years ago Read had sent me a reprint of his article on Ancient Chinese Medicine. From this article I can offer fig. 1, which shows the "horse-tail" appearance of the plant. On the left in the figure there is the plant in fruit. The rest are whole plants. The white spots on the two central plants are "scab-leaves" coverings of the joints of stalks. Before we part we must remember that Rgveda, and a Chinese authority, each has compared ephedra, as plant, to "horse-tail", and independently, Read illustrates ephedra likewise. These three sources mutually confirm one another. The stalks of E. sinica are yellow and the name hua-ma likewise signifies fire-yellow hemp (fibres). Fortunately Prof. Farmsworth of Chicago has recently published in June 1983 an article with the Chinese ephedra, E. sinica, coloured yellow. It fully confirms how in Rgveda and in Avesta, the plant is praised as being golden-coloured. RV, 8.9,19 says "when yellow stalks give forth the juice".
History shows how ideas continue to persist some times in quite mutilated forms. B. L. Mukherjee⁷ has contributed an article where he finally states that "from what has been stated above we may now conclude that the weight of evidence is in favour of the identification of soma with cannabis (bhāṅg)." The one glaring fact against such a theory is that cannabis, as plant, has conspicuous large leaves while Rgveda speaks of soma as though it was an all-stalk plant, with no leaves to speak of RV. IX. 5.10 refers to soma as "Vanaspati, the ever-green, golden-hued, refulgent with thousand boughs." As vanaspati it is a medicinal plant, as ever-green it is perennial, which ephedra is, as golden-hued it is the yellow-stalked ephedra species of China, and with thousand boughs it is an assembly of stalks resembling a horse-tail. Here is a brief but a very characterising description of the Chinese ephedra plant. Ephedra, moreover, is a flower bearing plant and this fact can also be documented. Mills⁸ has translated from Avesla, Yasna
42.5 stating “We sacrifice to the haoma, "golden-flowered" growing on the heights." In as much as haoma=soma, the above statement refers to soma. That the plant was practically an assembly of long, thin stalks did strike Wasson who nevertheless imagines soma to be the mushroom, Amanita muscaria, which naturally has only one stalk per plant. He correctly observes that in Rigveda “the dominance of the word anśu-stalk, stem, calls for comment.” He has not correctly worded the problem. What calls for comment is not only stalks but the assembly of thousand boughs per plant. Abiding by what Rigveda actually states soma would be an assembly of "thousand boughs" and this would single out ephedra from most, if not all, of the plants the Aryan nomads actually came across. When Rigveda could speak of "thousand boughs" and Avesta of "yellow flowers" there could have also been some indication of leaves if soma did at all possess them. We can safely conclude that the name homa/soma signifies "fire-yellow hemp fibres", and as such the plant has been named after hemp or cannabis.

The mistake further created was to interpret homa as having been named after the hemp plant itself, instead of its fibre. This is the genesis of the erroneous interpretation leading B. L. Mukherjee to "identify soma with cannabis". G. Majumdar was Professor of Botany and had specialized in Vedic plants. He finally selected five plants one of which was to be soma. Strange enough he illustrates among them both ephedra, with leafless stalks, and cannabis, with conspicuous large leaves. That a botanist who was also familiar with Rigveda could not decide between ephedra and cannabis as to which is soma only shows undue respect to the former writer, Mukherjee. Majumdar for his part quotes RV. IX. 61.13. Griffith translates it thus "the Gods have come to Indu (Soma) well descended, beautified with milk, the active 'crusher of the foe". The Sanskrit word concerned is bhanga which means "crusher of foe", and not bhâng=cannabis. Here we have a mistake within a mistake. We may now consider how the two plants, cannabis and ephedra, have been designated and how the name of one has been transferred to the other, with soma identifying both ephedra and cannabis. Above all is the fact that centuries later, when ephedra was officially recognized as a medicinal plant, it nevertheless continued to be designated in terms of cannabis. If hemp=ma, then as yellow-hemp or ma-huang is ephedra really hemp (resembling) yellow (plant). Thus arose two names huang-ma for hemp and ma-huang for ephedra. They are mirror-images of each other which means next to being identical. Thus there is a regular continuation in associating by name cannabis with ephedra. It started with the name ho-ma or so-ma, yellow-hemp-fibres.

We have in the following list names of ephedra still current in the localities indicated. They are taken from an earlier publication.¹¹

1. Soma, in Kafiristan—Qazilbash¹²
2. Somani, in Kafiristan and Chitrak—Qazilbash¹³
3. Ma-Hu and Wa-ma
   (recalling ho-ma and ma-huang), in Hindukush Valley—Qazilbash¹²¹³
4. Hum and huma, in Herat, Afghanistan (recalling ho-ma)—Qazilbash¹³
5. Uma and Uman, in Baluchistan—Qazilbash
6. Hum in Afghanistan—Stein
7. Hum, humb and Nar-Omb in Baluchistan—Bailey
8. Om and Hom in Afghanistan—Bailey
9. Hum, huma and yah-ma in Harirud Valley, Afghanistan—Aitchinson quoted by Griffith
10. Hum, mentioned by Alberuni—Hakim Said

We may classify these names as allied in sound.

1. Soma, Somani
2. Ma-hu, inverse of ho-ma
3. Hum, human, humb, recalls homa
4. Om, Uma, Uman, is again homa, with the loss of initial, h.
5. Omanos. Cama gives as occurring in Greek the herb omoni, of which the singular is omanos. If we Hellenize the word uman as given in series 4 just above, uman = omanos. They all signify ephedra as the sacred plant homa.

We now come to the interesting fact that Suryakanta in his Vedic Dictionary gives uma = shana = hemp, while according to Qazilbash uma = ephedra. We can now construct three epochs with the following terms.

1. Hao-ma = hemp = ephedra
2. Huang-ma = hemp and ma-huang = ephedra
3. Uma = hemp = ephedra

Suryakanta, for almost every word, gives reference to some text which he however does not do so in the case of uma as ‘hemp’. Due to his sad demise I had to appeal to Prof. Dandekar of Poona as perhaps the best Vedic scholar we have today. On 12th Aug. 1983 he kindly supplied the following information: “The earliest occurrence of uma, in the sense of hemp, is to be found in Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa 6.6.1.24. The commentary explains the word umah occurring here as ‘Umah kṣauma-vastropādānabhutas tynaŭiḥ’saḥ’. Uma is a particular kind of grass which is used for the production of linen. This meaning suits the context very well. The word uma is attested in the same sense also in Panini’s Astādhyāyi 5.24”. We can now finally equate uma = cannabis = hemp = ephedra (this as given by Qazilbash). The Aryans finding hemp as a useful fibre coined a connotative name śana, signifying “brightness” as explained before. Thus most of the names of hemp and of ephedra have been discussed. Critically considered, we have two fibres, flax from the linseed plant and hemp from cannabis species. Apparently the Hindusthani word san, derived from the Sanskrit word śana, designates both hemp as also flax. As plant cannabis would be bhāṅg, while the flax yielding plant would be the linseed plant. We have now to explain the genesis of the name hemp.

In Danish hemp would be hanf. We have recognized the popular form of the word, hum, mentioned by Aitchinson, Stein and Bailey. As pronounced hun would give a nasal
sound. To make the terminal sound clearer either "f" or "p" can be added whence would arise the forms, humf or hump. Humf easily mutated into hanf as in Danish while hump into hemp as finally found in English. Then as the sense carrier hemp in English is finally traceable to hum.

REFERENCE

7Mukherjee, Braja Lal; (1921), The Soma Plant, J. R. As. Soc., p. 241.