

Shamans, Religion, Soma and the R̥gveda

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1. Writer G. Hancock follows R. G. Wasson's researches into the use of a hallucinogenic or, as the newer term is, entheogenic drug from the mushroom *amanita muscaria* (= fly agaric) and indologists S. Kamrisch and W. Doniger O' Flaherty (1986): they all think that this mushroom was the soma potion, so amply celebrated in the *RV* (=R̥gveda). He then concludes that "an ancient hallucinogenic cult exploiting the well-know[n] shamanic virtues of the fly agaric mushroom provided the visionary spark out of which the Vedas first emerged fully formed in remote prehistory" (Hancock 2005: 529). This view about the origin of the Vedas cannot be ruled out altogether, but no indologist who has even an elementary knowledge of the *RV* would entertain it. For there is another aspect to the "visionary spark" of the *RV* which all these writers ignore rather flagrantly.

Hancock's statement about the origin of the Vedas is expressed in the much wider context of the origin of religion. In his book *Supernatural: Meetings with the Ancient Teachers of Mankind*, having himself experimented with psychotropic substances, he examines at length the experiences of shamans who by ingesting various similar substances (or by means of rhythmic dancing) produce in themselves altered states of consciousness or trances and thereby have the power to see in distant places and periods, to cause rain, to heal and the like. These shamans who still exist in South America and many other parts of the world, are the "ancient teachers of mankind". They are termed "ancient" because Hancock, following D. Lewis-Williams' neuropsychological theory regarding prehistoric Rock and Cave Art as expressed in numerous publications (1988, 1989, 1998, 2002 etc) does not doubt that this palaeolithic Art was produced by shamans. Hancock disagrees with Lewis-Williams because the latter "professes that the spirit worlds and beings encountered while hallucinating are not in any sense real" (Hancock 2005: 564; see also p 284-5). He thinks that this "spirit world" is very real. Nonetheless, he accepts that, as Lewis-Williams and Dowson first indicated (1988: 203-204), there are three stages or levels of mental images in this kind of hallucinating experience: stage one consists of entoptic phenomena (=geometric patterns like dots, parallel lines, zig-zag or wavy meanders, grids and the like); in stage two, these are turned into iconic forms (e.g. a zig-zag or wavy lines elaborated into snakes) and as this stage further develops, there appears an experience of a surrounding "vortex" or "rotating tunnel"; stage three has iconic shapes, often animal, therianthropic (=half-man half-beast) and other monstrous images; (Hancock 2005: 198-207; also a simple presentation in Lewis-Williams 2001: 338). The monstrous images are not only therianthropes (pp 69-93) and unnatural animals with two heads or elongated bodies (126-129) but also, drawn now out of recent material, fairies and dwarfs (364-410) and extra-terrestrials with their therianthropic forms (57, 261, 323 etc). However, Hancock agrees with Lewis-Williams' understated but far reaching theme that "mankind's first representations of supernatural beings, *and with them our earliest religious ideas*, were derived from hallucinatory experiences" (2005: 209, italics added). It does not occur to them that humans may have began their existence on earth with natural, inborn religious ideas and conditions, that did not require any hallucinatory experiences including taking external substances.



2. Neither Hancock nor Lewis-Williams were the first to ascribe the origin of religion to such non-ordinary drug-induced experiences. As mentioned earlier, Wasson *et al* had ascribed the origins of religion to the experiences arising from entheogenic drugs prepared from mushrooms like the fly agaric or from ergot of rye (1986: 24, 27, 41 etc). In that volume Wasson, Kramrisch and O'Flaherty dealt mainly, but not exclusively, with Soma and the Vedic culture, J. Ott with the Mesoamerican culture (Mexico) and C. Ruck with Greece and mainly Euripides' *Bacchae* as describing the introduction of the New Dionysiac religion. Even earlier, W. Le Barre had written "shamanism or direct contact with the supernatural in these states [altered states of consciousness] is the *de facto* source of all revelation, and

ultimately of all religions" (1980: 83). However, Wasson traces the mushroom *amanita muscaria* to many other cultures – the Mayans, Siberians, Maoris, Tibetans, Madagascans etc. In an earlier publication with Ruck and Hoffman (1978), they argued that the Eleusinian Mysteries, held a little west of Athens, included the ingestion of an entheogen (ergot) and that Demeter's journey to the underworld to claim back her daughter Persephone was a shamanic trip that celebrates the forces of life and regeneration.

I shall not deal with all these cultures and their use of entheogenic substances beyond saying that I find such practices very probable, even though the evidence is not in every case adequate. Nor will I examine Lewis-Williams' claim that the Rock and Cave Art of Europe (c 33000 BP), Africa (c 25000 BP) etc is the work of shamans or the expression of their visions in trances and that in those long-ago experiences are found the seeds of religion. For here we must take into account two related aspects. The first is easy and concerns the very nature of religion: what do we mean by religion and by religious experience? Obviously different people mean different things and the matter requires detailed discussion. The second aspect concerns the neurological change and the increased intelligence that is supposed to have occurred in *homo sapiens* c40000 BP which manifested in changes in human behaviour, in the production of art itself, in forms of burial and in various social phenomena. It is true that graves were discovered with skeletons wearing ornaments, caves with painted ceilings and walls and many portable pieces of art in stone and bone. But does this necessarily indicate a neurological change and increased intelligence? Perhaps yes, perhaps no. This aspect also requires detailed discussion.

In this paper I examine only Vedic religion and Soma.

3. That the Soma drink of the *RV* was extracted from the *amanita muscaria* or fly agaric, as the mushroom is called, seems to me fairly certain. Nowhere is *soma* said to have roots, leaves or fruit of any kind. Nor is it found in remote high places. In *RV* 8.91, going down to a stream for water, the girl Apālā finds *soma* by the way (*srut-*, or on the bank), takes it home and extracts the juice pressing the plant with her teeth (*jāmbha-suta*) – no ritual act here. Wasson argues this identification so very convincingly (1971), that one cannot entertain the notion of ephedrine being *soma* or that the plant was fetched from mountains in Iran. Although an earlier publication of his with this very information had been dismissed by J. Brough in 1971 (see Wasson 1986:27), no less a sanskritist than D. Ingalls of Harvard accepted the identification without any hesitation in a paper of that very year (1971). Ingalls' paper contains 'Remarks on Mr. Wasson's Soma' and is printed next to Wasson's 'The Soma of the Rig Veda: What was it?', both in the *Journal of The American Oriental Society*, vol 91 (2).

This brings me to good honest scholarship. Neither Wasson nor Hancock refer to Ingall's article. Wasson writes at length about Prof. Brough's objections (1986:27) but does not mention Ingalls' article and his agreement. Hancock, again, mentions Wasson's article in *JAOS* (2005: 527, 691, notes 110-112, 118-121) but not Ingalls' which comes immediately after. What is so important about Ingalls' article? Well, apart from accepting Wasson's identification 'soma-mushroom', Ingalls points out that, in the *RV*, there are "two sorts of religious expression and religious feeling, one ... calm, reflective, almost rational; the other built about the Soma experience ... exciting, immediate, transcending the logic of space and time" (1971:191). Any student of the *RV* would recognize immediately the two religious aspects – and, if acquainted with Greek literature, would associate them with the Apollonian and Dionysiac strands in the Greek culture – at least as one well known view

puts it. Ingalls admits that he is not a specialist in the *RV*; if he were, he would have known further that both aspects derive from a third one, about which we shall speak later. Obviously, both Wasson and Hancock are convinced that the origins of religion are to be found in Shamanic trances and revelations, they wish to promote this notion further, as do so many other writers (e.g. Winkelman 1992; McClenon 1997; etc) and so do not mention an article that would provoke serious doubts about this thesis.

Ingalls touches on two other points in Wasson's theory of Soma (1968, 1971). In his 1968 publication, the mycologist writes that rigvedic priests take on the role of Indra and Vāyu and drink Soma (p.25,30); also, that the priests urinate and others drink the urine which in this specific case contains Soma even more purified, having been filtered through the human organism and therefore more heightened and exhilarating. Ingalls rightly points out that nowhere in the *RV* is ever the suggestion that priests assume the role of gods, admits that in two or three hymns (2.34.13; 8.40.10; 9.74.4) there is urination in connection with Soma, then says that in the 10000 verses of the *RV* only once are priests said to piss Soma (9.74.4) and analyses the relevant stanzas to show that the verb *mihanti* "they urinate" is here used metaphorically (pp 189-190). And I think Ingalls' analysis is quite correct; for we shouldn't take a line or passage out of context, interpret it in a particular way then use our interpretation as evidence to prove a theory which, in fact, generated the interpretation in the first place. This circuitous and highly dubious process is unfortunately met very frequently in all kinds of writings.

Are we then to dismiss Wasson's view? Not at all.

4. Wasson refers to 9.74.4 which reads : _

ātmanvān nābho duhyate ghṛtām páyaḥ
 ṛtāsya nābhir amṛtaṃ ví jayate;
 samīcīnāḥ sudānavaḥ prīṇanti tām
 náro hitām áva mehanti péravaḥ

'[As] a living cloud (or, sky possessing life) it [= pot with Soma] gives forth butter and milk (i.e. highly nutritious substances); the navel of Truth immortal (or, "ambrosia" *amṛta*) is about to become manifest. Altogether, the generous ones (*sudānavaḥ* usually 'gods Maruts' here probably 'priests') make it well-disposed; the delivering|fructifying|swollen (? *péravaḥ*) men (or, Maruts) urinate it (= Soma) down as it is sent.' (The Maruts' urination is rain).

Even if it is the one and only incident in the *RV* where gods/men urinate, even if it is wholly metaphorical, we cannot ignore altogether the evidence which Wasson arrays in such detail from so many different cultures and particularly from Siberia. "He who drinks the juice of the hallucinogenic mushroom saves his urine, and others drink this urine with the identical inebriating effect, perhaps heightened, for there is reason to think that certain nauseating ingredients in the original mushroom are filtered out in passing through the human organism. This use of the urine can be repeated over and over again, it is said, until it has passed through five human bodies" (Wasson 1971:178). Wasson presents evidence from other cultures too and, in addition, cites several examples of urine-drinking from post-rigvedic and even modern times. Thus, in the *Aśvamedha* Book of the epic *Mahābhārata* (14.54.12-35), Lord Kṛṣṇa in the guise of an untouchable *mātaṅga* invites the holy man Uttanka to drink his urine but the latter refuses and so loses the opportunity to join the immortals. Even today some devotees show a willingness to drink their guru's

urine (Wasson 1971:179).

Undoubtedly it is unhealthy to drink urine. But when the urine is in fact a purified potion that brings an elevated state of consciousness without any inebriation and hangover and addiction, then one's caution or repugnance must be due to deeprooted (Western) conditioning and prejudice.

Personally, I find nothing unacceptable in all this. At the risk of upsetting many Indian friends (and Western sensibilities), I do accept Wasson's contention that the rigvedic priests drank Soma which was a distillation from fly-agaric and, even, its (more pungent) liquid form in urine.

Apart from the hymn cited above (9.74.4), 2.34.13 also speaks of urination as the Rudras in the form of horses emit *soma*. Then, 8.4.10 ascribes the same action to Indra: 'Come here to drink as a thirsty stag: drink as much soma as you wish. Urinating it out day by day, O generous One *maghavan*, you have assumed your mightiest aspect!'. So we don't have an isolated instance.

However, the important point for this essay is that there was in the *RV* another aspect of religion that did not entail the drinking of Soma. Ingalls referred to this as the worship of Firegod Agni "built about the hearth fire with a daily ritual – calm, reflective, almost rational"; this, too, was a channel of communication "between the human and the divine" (1971:191). But in fact there is much more to it than Ingalls writes.

5. In the *RV* we can detect a process which I call "divinization" and which is, really, the same as the upanishadic or yogic "Self-Realization", as is commonly termed in our times (Kazanas 2005, 2007). Most scholars, like Ingalls, somehow miss or disregard this aspect but some few have noted it and commented on it extensively (Shri Aurobindo 1956, Coomaraswami 1942, Jeanine Miller 1974, 1985, Werner 1989).

Repeatedly in the *RV* one god or another is said to reside within man. For instance, Agni, which is also the ordinary fire but is said to encompass all gods (5.3.1, 5.13.6), is the light and source of all inspiration *krātu*, is swiftest mental energy and is placed in man's heart *hṛdaya āhita*- (6.9.4-6): it is perceived there through mind *mānasā nicāy*- (1.67.2-3; 3.26.1; 4.2.11, etc.). The Holy Power *brāhman* is also within man or as the innermost armour (*brāhma vārma mamāntaram*, 6.75.19). A very clear statement reveals that 'the mighty and wise guardian of the entire world has entered me [= the poet] a simpleton' – *inó víśvasya bhúvanasya gopāh sá mā dhīrah pákam átrā viveśa*, 1.164.21. Some prudent visionaries seek and manage to realize these powers within themselves and chiefly the *acittam brāhma* 'the Holy Power that is beyond conception' (1.152.5). Many descriptions are given in the hymns. I quote one from one of the older hymns: 'they found the spacious/infinite light even as they were reflecting' – *urú/jyótir vividur dídhyanāh*, 7.90.4. Another statement comes from a later hymn when the seer Kaṇva declares how he was born even like the Sungod *Sūrya* after he had received essential knowledge (*medhā*) about the Cosmic Order (*ṛta*) from his father.

In these (and other) cases like 3.31.9, 5.81.1, etc., Soma is not involved in the least. The higher state of consciousness or self-realization comes through contemplation, meditation, reflection and, of course, the subjugation of mind and its thoughts (4.12.4, 5.81.1, 7.13.3, etc.). In other words, it comes not through some entheogen or other artificial, external aid but through mental action and other purely psychological processes accompanied by serious ethical practices, as is suggested in many hymns (1.125.5, 3.19.25-6, 4.5.5, etc., etc.).

In fact, to be fair to the *RV*, I must mention the fact that even the Soma ritual with the pressing, filtering and final drinking, has often an inner, psychological quality as if it is a process within man. The three filters, which Wasson (rightly) sees externally in the reality of the material distillation of the potion, are said to be within the heart *hr̥dy-antar* (9.23.8). Then, 10.85.4 gives this cryptic statement: 'As you stand listening to the singers, O Soma, no earthly person tastes of you'. It may be that *soma* is not being drunk literally or it may be that it is a supra-normal power within man which cannot be felt or realised unless man refines his being and rises above his earthly common existence. But this symbolism for an inner process I shall not press too far now. We must also accept the simple reality that brahmin-priests imbibed the entheogen and had visions and experiences out of the ordinary.

However, since, as we just saw, the higher states of consciousness and experiences achieved through Soma-drinking could be and were being attained by natural processes without the introduction of entheogens, it does not seem probable that the Vedic religion, even as Wasson, Lewis-Williams and Hancock conceived it, began with some revelries. And this thought can be extended to cover the origins of religion in much earlier cultures in prehistoric, palaeolithic times. Since the people of the *RV* had means other than inebriating elixirs to attain higher levels of consciousness and unite even briefly if not permanently with "divine" forces, there is every reason to suppose that normal humans (i.e. anatomically modern humans, *homo sapiens sapiens*) could and did achieve similar states in earlier periods without the use of drugs. It is like sleeping – to use an analogy. People who sleep naturally, going into deep sleep and getting rest and energy-replenishment, do not need and would not take sleeping pills. Only when this natural ability is lost or impaired, say in pathological conditions, would people resort to the artificial means of sleep-inducing substances. Similarly, one could argue people turned to entheogens after they lost the capacity to rise naturally to higher levels of being and consciousness.

Let us explore this further.

6. Lewis-Williams stresses the fact that Shamans obtain "extra-human" powers frequently through an ordeal and an encounter with death (2002: 274): here he follows M. Eliade (1972: 43ff) who examines Siberians shamanic practices, Katz (1982) who describes the shamans in African tribes and Joan Halifax (1982) who writes about the suffering of shamans worldwide. Such experiences belong to the realm of "somatic hallucination", he writes (Lewis-Williams 2002: 271): here *somatic* means 'bodily' and has nothing to do with the potion Soma! "Somatic hallucinations", he continues "may be induced by ingestion of psychotropic drugs, sensory deprivation and other extraneous factors [like the extended rhythmic dancing of tribes in South Africa or India], or by pathological conditions such as temporal lobe epilepsy and schizophrenia". In subsequent pages he presents various images of wounded people both from African Rock Art and from Upper Palaeolithic cave-art (pp 276, 278). Hancock examines many other sources and devotes many more pages to this theme giving many more representations of similar nature (2005: 262-275). He also emphasizes the incidence of therianthrope images or the different stages of transformation from man to beast as found in Upper Palaeolithic art (72-93; also 124-9; 175-180) and of abstract patterns like grids, zig-zag lines, honeycomb repetitions etc (197-207).

In their altered states of consciousness or trance journeys, the shamans have their somatic hallucinations or visions in that they enter "the world of spirits" as it is said. Their world has three tiers: there is the ordinary daily life we all experience, then the spirit world

above and also the spirit realm below (Lewis-Williams 2002: 145ff). In the world above, they experience lightness and dissociation and look down on their surroundings as they rise to the sky flying through the air, meet various "spirits" of people and animals (even while themselves are often transformed into animals) and receive information from them. Or they sink to the realm below going through the ground or water, rushing through a tunnel or swirling in a vortex, where they again meet spirits and their own "animal helpers".

In these states they mostly experience much pain, like being pierced by arrows, or being severely stung or bitten, or having their flesh torn off their bones or entrails pulled out and so on (Hancock 2005: 268-275).

There have been many studies on the various aspects of shamanism (Boas 1888, Bourke 1892, Mikhailowiski 1894 etc) since the end of the 19th century and many more in the 20th (Dixon 1908, Shirokogoroff 1926, 1935, Elkin 1930, Harper 1957, Eliade 1972, Kalweit 1988, Ripinski-Naxon 1993 etc). From these and more recent studies (Francfort *et al* 2001, Narby and Huxley 2001, Keeney 2003 etc) we see that the shaman comes out of his trance state with new powers which he normally places at the service of his community. It is recorded that he has the ability to see into the future or distant regions, to cure the sick, to control the weather and animals, to levitate, to cause telekinesis and practise telepathy, to transport souls back and forth from the netherworld, to enter and possess another's body, and to initiate new shamans. Such powers obviously give him great importance in the community.

7. As was said shamans enter these states and obtain their visions or "somatic hallucinations" by special rituals involving ingestion of a psychotropic substance (like fly-agaric or some other psilocibyn-containing mushroom etc) or extended dance leading to trance, or else through dreams and even by viewing this parietal art once it was painted on rocks or cave-walls and ceilings (Lewis-Williams 2002:157-8). Their hallucinations were often seen to emerge from within the walls or ceilings in the caves or the rock-surfaces in the open, often crowding one on top of the other and/or floating here and there with no exact scale or positioning of figures (Hancock 2005: 243). When the trance ended they would reproduce (or they might describe to others to do so) the important elements of their visions in painted images on the places they had seen them thus establishing "portals to the spirit world" (ibid). What were the highlights of such hallucination?

Hancock sums up eight categories appearing in this art (2005:240).

- a) Abstract geometrical patterns (zig-zags, grids etc) often in combination with fully iconic figures.
- b) Hybrid animals blending characteristics from two or more different species (snake-reedbeak, antelope-feline etc).
- c) Monsters like a lion with two heads and other bizarre creatures.
- d) The therianthrope – part man part animal.
- e) The figure of "wounded man" pierced by spear(s) or arrow(s).
- f) The rock face is often used to the best advantage by exploiting its mounds and hollows to give the impression of a screen out of which emerge the figures.
- g) Many superimpositions of images upon earlier images.
- h) Disregard of scale and absence of ground and horizon lines as though the images are floating.

A ninth feature in these images could be added to the list: men, therianthropes and animals often seem to bleed at the nose.

The RV tells quite a different tale.

8. In the *RV* we find no mention whatever of anybody being in pain or suffering in any way as a result of having drunk Soma or having been in deep reflexion. For instance, one of many descriptions in Eliade reads as follows: One novice was initiated by his shaman ancestors while he was ill: "they pierced him with arrows until he lost consciousness ... they cut off his flesh, tore out his bones ..." (1972:43). Another neophyte has his navel pierced by a lance and an arrow, then is killed and afterwards resurrected by an older shaman (1972:55). Eliade has about 30 pages of such descriptions of dismemberment, death and resurrection – all experienced in "somatic hallucinations". In the *RV* hymns there is nothing even remotely resembling such experiences. Drinking soma is always a joyous, exhilarating, most satisfying experience.

Commenting on "shamanism" in ancient India Eliade finds that hymn 10.136, usually titled *Keśin* 'long/loose-haired', belongs to the category of the shamanic flight to the sky and acquisition of godly powers (407-8). Yes, perhaps so. But other seers also ascend to heaven (like Vasiṣṭha in Varuṇa's boat: 7.88) while the Ṛbhus are actually raised to godhood. However, Eliade does admit that these practices and beliefs – even in post-rigvedic times – "are not necessarily 'shamanic'". He examines briefly *tapas* which he thinks is primarily "excess of heat ... obtained by meditating close to fire ... or by holding the breath" but does not consider at all the soma-drinking practice – except for the briefest mention (413). But he does note that sutra 4.1 in Patañjali's *Yogasūtra* refers to medicinal plants *auśadhi* – having the power to give – *like samādhi* – miraculous powers. Finally, he finds shamanic elements in some *RV* hymns, like 10.57 and 58 and *AV* hymns 8.1.3 and 8.2.3 where the soul is called back (414-5). But, of course, such hymns may well refer to reincarnation or to the acquisition of a form in higher realms and have nothing to do with shamanistic practices. He notes also "shamanic motifs that still survive in figures as complex as Varuṇa, Yama and Nirṛti" who are "binding gods" with a net or noose (*pāśa*). Here again, a seasoned vedicist knows that neither Varuṇa nor Yama are "binding gods" only: they are also liberators releasing from the bonds of sin, disease and suffering. As for Nirṛti – it is the state of absolute void wherein all forms are dissolved and all energy is absorbed.

There is serious difficulty in such approaches as Eliade's. First, this scholar mingles texts of different later periods (*sūtras*, *upanīśads*, *brāhmaṇas* and *AV*) with the *RV* which belongs to a very much earlier period. Later texts, even the *AV*, show important changes. There is devolution (or degeneration) as words acquire new meaning(s) while practices become grosser and show significant alterations (e.g. fixed altars with bricks in the *Brāhmaṇas*). Second, there is an unwavering assumption that shamanic practices (or animistic religions) as found in Siberia, among the Eskimos and other hunter-gatherer communities are older than those found in the *RV* because these communities are more "primitive". This is largely based on the wretched Aryan Invasion Theory which has the Indoaryans enter into Saptasindhu c 1700-1500 BCE, conquer the natives, (Dravidians, Mundas and whatever) or drive them East and South and gradually impose their own culture but at the same time absorb elements from the native one. Comparisons with such "primitive" folk and with post-rigvedic texts are not useful because the *RV* is much earlier than these. Intent as Eliade is on shamanism, Altaic, Siberian and the like, as being more ancient and archetypal, he finds in the Vedic tradition (and in Buddhism) influences from

the native “substratum” and even from Babylonia (406). It does not occur to him that the influence could be in the other direction; nor that monotheism, henotheism and polytheism exist simultaneously in the *RV* and most probably monotheism is in fact older; nor that both the drinking of Soma and the reflective practices in the *RV* do not aim at shamanic states but at full divinization (or Self-realization) as I indicated earlier in §3,5; nor that polytheism, animism and the like are, in fact, devolutions (or degenerations) from an earlier and truly primitive form of monotheism or monism.

9. Hancock and Wasson, in contrast to Eliade, show clearly that the Soma ingestion in rigvedic India, is the true shamanic practice (which is in harmony with Lewis-Williams’ theory of neurological change c 40000 ago and of the inspiration for the Cave Art in Europe and the Rock Art in South Africa and other regions).

Nonetheless, we find no descriptions in the *RV* corresponding to those that modern shamans from various parts of the world have given to researchers since mid-nineteenth century. There are no unions with or possessions by peculiar demons or goblins which result in higher states of being and knowledge (as with shamans: Eliade 1972 chs 2-4; Hancock 2005: 338-344), or with animal spirits that are or become the aspirant’s helper and source of power (Lewis-Williams 2002: 167, 253 etc). Supernatural beings like demons, imps, goblins, fairies, water nymphs etc, are mentioned in the *RV*, but in the rare case where there is union (as with King Pururavas and nymph Urvaśī, *RV* 10) there is no shamanic experience and new knowledge. Above all, we don’t find descriptions of therianthrope transformations and of infliction of pain with arrows, spears and the like. I repeat, there are no such descriptions at all in the *RV*.

But it is not only the hymns of the *RV* that are free of these extreme shamanic experiences. There is also the Indian Rock Art. Representation art in portable pieces goes back to c 40000 BP. Engravings or paintings on surfaces in rock-shelters go back to 25000 for certain, possibly before (Lorbhanchet 1992). Here also, from the earliest palaeolithic Rock Art down to chalcolithic and even the early historic period, we find no therianthrope transformations nor the Upper Palaeolithic “wounded” figures (pierced by spears) which “may represent a form of shamanistic suffering, death and initiation that was closely associated with somatic hallucinations” (Lewis-Williams 2002: 262). I should add that the *RV* has no mention whatever of any kind of iconic representation in painting, sculpture or relief.

Clearly then, Lewis-Williams and those who follow him and even go beyond his conviction that the shamanistic experiences are sheer hallucinations without substance beyond the imagination, like Hancock (2005: 284-5; 564), are wrong in thinking that the three stages of shamanistic hallucinations outlined above in §1 is universal. “We believe that ‘shamanism’ usefully points to a human *universal* – the need to make sense of shifting consciousness – and the way this is accomplished” writes Lewis-Williams (2002:132, emphasis added). Elsewhere he writes also “Joan Halifax summed up the suffering of shamans on behalf of their communities *worldwide*” (p 226, emphasis added). The *RV* and Indian Rock Art clearly show that no kind of therianthrope transformation, of meeting and uniting with animal-spirit and of suffering need be involved in reaching higher states of consciousness.

10. Other scholars have on different grounds found fault with Lewis-Williams’ general theory – some with no apparent good reason taking a very narrow view of the notations of the word ‘shaman’, arguing that such a figure did not exist in South Africa and claiming that he selected carefully his evidence (Bahn 1997: 182-3), or that he misrepresented some

of his sources (Hromnick 1991: 100). Hancock tackles very ably these criticisms (2005: Appendix One).

On the other hand, R. White, another expert on pre-historic Art, does present neutrally Lewis-Williams' shamanistic Trance Theory but he points out that all the material from prehistoric paintings and engravings used in support of the theory constitute less than 10% of the total of such art (2003: 122). Indeed, the magnificent images of bisons, bulls, horses, stags etc painted in Altamira, Lascaux etc in various styles, but almost always most vividly and realistically, and many animal and human figures in S. Africa, have little to do with the material used to uphold the shaman's trance hallucinations. The absence of such material (except some honeycomb patterns and two or three therianthrope figures) in the Indian Rock Art raises another formidable question.

However, I don't find it out of the ordinary that shamans (in the wider sense of the term) did have their trance experiences in caves or rock shelters and then had them recorded on the rock faces and even the ceiling of the caves. I simply object to the sweeping statements that shamanic trance experiences, as described by the writers mentioned so far, are a universal or all-human process wired into our neurological system, and that religion started with such experiences and especially with the suffering or wounded shaman. And I object because the Indic material, textual and iconographic, does not bear them out.

Another serious objection concerns the incompleteness of this theory. Yes, let us accept that the initiates feel excitation after the entheogen or the dance or whatever other aid; they feel tingling, pricking, burning and other tactile sensations and these are translated into images of spirits attacking with arrows and lances (Lewis-Williams 2002: 271-7). Let us accept that all such experiences are somatic hallucination. But, then, when the initiate returns from his trance(s) to our normality and is now a shaman with supra-human powers, how did he obtain these powers? Neither Lewis-Williams nor Hancock offer any explanation for this.

11. Hancock's *Supernatural* has as subtitle 'Meetings with the ancient teachers of mankind'. This is a very alluring subtitle. But when one has finished the book one wonders what it is that these shamans have taught mankind. The shamanic initiation stories and other adventures that one reads in Eliade (1972), Luna (1986), Kalweit (1988), Halifax (1991) and so on, are all modern, not earlier than the mid-nineteenth century; nor are they illuminating in any significant way. Kalweit reports that a Mexican shaman was in his pre-shaman period struck by lightning but survived, though he would lose consciousness regularly for six months. Then, after such an episode his spirit was abducted by *enanitos* 'dwarf-sized supernatural beings' who intended to turn him into a shaman. At first he refused but after the *enanitos* beat him severely and threatened to kill him he acquiesced, received a staff and three stones as aids to healing and was married to an *enanito* wife. He then returned to his ordinary life as a shaman but was not allowed to have sex with his ordinary human wife but only with his *enanita* in a trance! When he tried to have sex with his human wife, he swooned and his spirit was forcibly taken to a cave and received a thorough beating. Since then he has sex only with his *enanita* wife and has engendered several children who live with their mother in a cave in the *enanito* world (1998: 141-2).

It is very probable that this shaman did much good to his small village. But what does this tale teach us? Nothing at all. Hundreds of such tales are reported from many regions by many investigators. One may or may not believe everything. But the fact remains that they teach us nothing. They don't even produce the emotional uplift that a good short story or a good poem does. (For similar or corresponding stories of witches and "healers" and their

“familiar” in medieval Europe see Purkiss 2000 *passim*, esp 152-3).

What do the prehistoric paintings teach us? An artist might learn something and people might admire the finest specimens but the rest is of no interest to anybody except archaeologists, anthropologists and various historians.

Hancock would have us believe that Christ himself was a shaman, “so obviously and so profoundly” since he was half-human half-godly, had healing gifts and went through the ordeal of crucifixion to die and be resurrected (2005: 499). Except, of course, that half-human and half-godly is not parallel to half-man half-beast and his ordeal came at the end of his life and not like a shaman at an initiatory ritual. (Here again we find defective scholarship with misleading information.) Then Hancock tells us the early Christian Gnostics practised a mushroom cult but in a note it is clarified that these were the Manicheans (p500, n11 on p687) who were definitely not “primitive Christians”, as he calls them but of the 3rd century CE and had little to do with the early Gnostics and their belief that the true nature (or self) of man is the same as that of the Godhead. Here too we have wrong information and dubious scholarship.

M. Ripinsky-Noxon goes much further in finding therianthropic and shamanistic notions in early cultures. E.g. “ancient Greek religion had shamanistic beginnings” (1993:2); also in the Khmers of Cambodia (*ibid*, 22) etc. He also thinks that in ancient times in shamanistic practices “human victims were offered in sacrifice to propitiate [the] Master of Animals” (p 27). Unfortunately very little real evidence and documentation is provided for these claims.

Hancock refers extensively to the double helix of the DNA. Here he cites several writers but I stay with only two who have direct relevance to our discussion – Jeremy Narby and Francis Crick.

Narby puts forth the hypothesis that the DNA has ‘mind’ or intelligence and that the entheogen *ayahuasca* can open an inner door and establish a connection with that mind and its non-material reality (1995:92-103). What is more, he believes that this living-tissue technology was developed “elsewhere than on earth” (1995: 104). Crick, the Nobel winner who with J. Watson discovered the double helix structure, advances the similar theory that DNA is not of our earth but was developed by an extra-terrestrial civilisation and contains encoded messages (1982).

It is not impossible that the primary building blocks of living creatures did develop in some distant Galaxy and, endowed with intelligence, were sent, or came accidentally, to Earth some four billion years ago. But this consideration does not really explain the origin of ‘life’ on our planet; it merely pushes it further back and tacitly begs the question afresh: How did ‘life’ arise in that alleged alien civilisation? Neither the two writers nor Hancock raise the issue. Oddly enough it is raised by fiction writer Dean Koontz in one of his novels: if super-intelligent extra-terrestrials created our living world, then who created them? (2001: ch 72).

Another point needs to be made here. Some biologists have in recent years begun to question the primacy of the DNA ascribing equal if not more value to other parts of the cell, like proteins and the membrane (Lipton 2005; Baltimore 2001; et al). It is also thought that the DNA can be altered/modified by various factors (*Times on Line* 17th Sept 2008: M. Linklater).

12. Here follows a brief recapitulation and a different point of view.

The notion of writers like Wasson, Lewis-Williams, Hancock and others mentioned in previous pages that religion (which was not defined by them) started with shamanistic initiations, trance-states and extraordinary practices do not at all tally with the contemplative/meditative practices found in the *RV* and other early texts of the Vedic Tradition (like the Upanishads). While there is ample evidence that higher states of consciousness can be achieved through the absorption of entheogens or dancing and other shamanistic practices, there is also strong evidence that such states can be more properly attained through contemplation/meditation and a mode of living based on strict ethical observances. This latter course is the one found very clearly in the Vedic Tradition (§§3, 5, 8, 9).

As was said earlier (§5, end) if one can sleep well in the normal run of things, one does not resort to sleeping pills or other extraneous aids. Only when the natural capacity is lost or impaired would one turn to such aids. Similarly, so long as people were able to reach those higher states of divinization, as the *RV* amply demonstrates (§ 5), they would not need to resort to shamanistic practices; and, as was said, neither the ingestion of Soma nor any other spiritual practice in the *RV* entails shamanistic suffering like piercing with spear or arrow, being beaten or torn and so on. The rise into a higher state of consciousness is always a joyfull experience. In these circumstances, one would use extraneous aids either to speed up the natural process or to experiment and gain insights prior to the full experience (as the rigvedic priests did with Soma). Hymn 8.48.3 say unequivocally:

ápāma sómam-amṛtā abhūma áganma jyótir-ávidama deván;

kiṃ nūnám-asmān kṛṇavad-áratih kím-u dhūrtír, amṛta, mártiyasya.

‘We drank soma, we became immortal; we went to the light, we found the gods;

how could now affect us distress, O Immortal One, how man’s malevolence?’

Consequently, on the basis of the rigvedic evidence, shamanistic practices and experiences are in fact later developments. Furthermore, the widespread belief that at c40000 BP there was some kind of neurophysiological change towards greater intelligence in *homo sapiens* (§2, end) is by no means well-founded. Plato had argued that the invention of writing was accompanied (and perhaps was occasioned) by a fall in the power of memory. Similarly, one can argue that the new behavioural patterns of that period may indicate a fall in intelligence.

However, all these issues need further exploration.

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