

Wine in India and Other Substances

An Anthropology of ‘Entheogens’

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Abstract The history of studies on psychotropic and psychoactive substances in general and on hallucinogens concerning the religious experience and altered states of consciousness is undoubtedly wide and intriguing. Today, it clearly emerges that the scientific perspective has too often been shaped, or even spoiled, by socio-economic trends, political backgrounds, fashions and pop culture of the times. From Prohibition to the psychedelic revolution, reported academic positioning shifts dramatically regarding these substances, which eventually were defined as entheogens in the 1970’s. This contribution traces the history of these studies with a particular focus on South Asia, from the still largely unsolved mystery of Soma/Amṛta to the first archaeological evidence of wine production in Gandhāra. Via a comparative perspective, an ethnographic study is proposed on the production of alcoholic, fermented products and traditional fermentation starters (and their related ritual uses) among the indigenous *ādivāsī* communities of India.

Keywords Shamanism. Palm wine. Alcohol. Altered states. Psychoactive drugs.

Summary 1 The Drink of the Gods in South Asia. – 2 A Modern (Watered Down) Wine Debate. – 3 Towards an Anthropology of the Substances. – 4 The Palm Wine Variation: A Case Study. – 5 Conclusion: Winy Ontologies.

Man’s tendency to use psychoactive substances to transcend the phenomenal world and come into contact with the divine, the subtle world and the non-human has its roots in the mists of time. The bond is so close that the first reconstructed testimonies regarding altered states of consciousness are all to be traced back to religious or spiritual contexts.¹ Yet this is a slippery subject, about which,

¹ Robertson 2004.

proceeding with methodological accuracy, there are many fewer things that can be affirmed than those that can be described with certainty. The lesson on the problematic nature of religions in the protohistoric period is long, and passes through the work of scholars who have emphasised as in the absence of reading codes, therefore the researcher remains fettered in the context of the possibility and the hypothesis rather than in the thesis.² The perfection of many cases documented in prehistoric art, its very high formal level, the profound ability to abstract symbols and signs linked to the animal world, hunting, etc. testify to the existence of archaic civilisations of admirable culture, whose religious thought remains a mystery with jagged and still ephemeral outlines. By analogy it is interesting to note that even the history of the use of substances, in particular those with psychotropic principles, is equally problematic for similar reasons.³ Today it is almost taken for granted that the use of drugs or entheogens (as they are defined today) is *ab origine* intrinsically linked to much of the human religious experience, by virtue above all of countless historical testimonies and literature, in particular starting from the Dionysian cults of the western classic world onwards.⁴ Moreover, it is notorious that the wine, fully consumable among the sacred and psychoactive substances, has very ancient origins. The oldest archaeological remains place the appearance of the first cultivated vine around 6000 BC, in the Caucasus, close to the contemporary borders of Turkey, Georgia and Armenia.⁵ The cultivation of the grape, as ancient as that of the cereals, coincides with the very first settlement of the man, when the hunters-gatherers become farmers-herders. But it is also true that the fermentation process is a phenomenon of great interest for historians of food and, more generally, scholars within cultural studies. A naturally occurring metabolic process responsible for the conversion of sugars to alcohol, fermentation has been employed for the storage and processing of food, to increase the nutritional value of various edibles and, in some cases, for the development of drugs and medicinal concoctions. Therefore, by releasing alcoholic production from the vine plant proper, it is possible to infer that the discovery and production of fermented products from any type of food is very ancient and almost lost in the oblivion of human history.

² Leroi-Gourhan 1964; Dickson 1992.

³ McKenna 1993.

⁴ McGovern, Stuart, Katz 2003.

⁵ McGovern 2019, 41.

1 The Drink of the Gods in South Asia

The literary approach, where materials are available on this matter, is no less problematic due to a recurrent and similar lack of interpretative codes in an exegetical context. India in this context is an excellent example, for the richness of its sacred tradition and as the cradle of one of the oldest civilisations it is an intriguing scenario for this research. The enigma on the relationship between the nectar of immortality and a salvific path of light has almost become, in the history of Indian studies, the paradigm of an archetypal quest, also often in relation to the more or less contemporary Mesopotamian civilisation. Practically since the beginning of Indology and Iranology, scholars have been trying to identify the plant that plays a central role in Vedic and Avestan hymns and that is called Soma in the *Veda* and Haoma in the *Avesta*.⁶ What is the plant mentioned in the *Rgveda*, 8.48.3?

We just drank the Soma, we have become immortal, we have come to the light, we have found the gods. What can enmity do to us now, and what the mischief of a mortal, o immortal one?⁷

Moreover, in *Atharvaveda Samhitā* 11.6.15:

The five kingdoms of plants, having Soma as their chief, we address; the *darbhá*, *hemp*, *barley*, *sáha* - let them free us from distress.⁸

The importance of the concept of Soma as the key to achieving immortality is undeniable. Nevertheless, it is equally well-known that this very ancient text, which is the basis of the Indian literary tradition, dating back to around four thousand years ago (but which the Indians tend to backdate) is essentially cryptic. The drink of the gods, Soma (from a Sanskrit root which indicates squeezing, distilling, sprinkle, obtaining a liquid or juice) is also called Amṛta (coming from the root *√mṛ*, meaning 'to die', with the inclusion of the negative a-prefix) it has been compared to Greek ambrosia, or a nectar of immortality. The most famous myth in the Hindu tradition about the discovery of the sacred drink is called *samudramanthana* or 'the churning of the ocean of milk'. As is known, in the cosmic struggle between gods (*devas*) and antigods (*asuras*), since one cannot prevail over the other, both decide for a truce. They collaborate to churn

⁶ Houben 2003; Albrile 2013.

⁷ Griffith 1896-97, 198.

⁸ Whitney 1905, 642.

the oceanic diluvian expanse, a sort of sea of milk (*kṣīrasāgara*), using the cosmic serpent Vāsuki wrapped around the sacred mountain Mandara (a sort of *axis mundi*) as a gigantic churn. The process of symbolic thickening of the ocean of milk into butter allows the emergence on its surface of precious treasures and magical weapons, but also extremely dangerous poisons. From a psychological and introspective perspective, such churning seems like an exploration of a metaphysical unconscious, giving rise to virtues and vices. Also in a cosmogonic perspective this poietic process concretises the multifaceted multiplicity of the manifest world from an unfathomable and indefinite primordial ocean. In both cases, the emergence of the ampoule containing Soma/Amṛta, depending on its declinations, stands out as a drink of immortality or rather the enlightened emancipation (*mokṣa*) from the conditioning of space and time.

The attempt to understand, outside of the metaphor, the nature of this drink and its possible ingredients or formulas was figuratively a sort of search for the Grail of Indology, in an empirical ritual dimension even before a spiritual perspective. The act of drinking the substance immediately linked it to something alcoholic, primarily wine or similar fermented products. There has been a strong tendency by scholars over the years to maintain that *bhaṅga*, a closely related substance, was based on the processing of *Cannabis indica*. This theory is at once both intriguing and difficult to support due to the lack of exhaustive descriptions and numerous contradictions in the identifying terms that emerged in ancient literature.⁹ In contemporary studies the prevalence of Sanskritists leans towards the hypothesis of mycotoxins such as muscimol and ibotenic acid obtained from the processing of mushrooms probably of the amanita type (*Amanitaceae*). Some go so far as to deduce that the drink was even the urine of priests who had previously ingested the substance, preserving it thus filtered through a physio-metabolic process.¹⁰ I believe it is wise to stop the analysis when faced with the exegetical problem of the lack of an interpretative code which in botanical matters is the result of various elements: problems of dating of works and authors, umbrella definitions of botanical species or nouns indicating clusters of similar plants, synonyms often used for preparations and medicines, significant divergences in semantic roots and spelling, and processes of canonisation of sometimes uncertain oral traditions.¹¹ *Vijayā* (lit. 'victorious'), for example, is the recurring and interchangeable name of deities and mythological characters, but also of a medicinal recipe,

⁹ Southworth 2005, 214-24; Wujastyck 2002.

¹⁰ Kazanas 2015; Polosmak 2010.

¹¹ Nyberg 1995.

whose actual active ingredients are difficult to identify today.¹² Incidentally, in India, increasingly precise descriptions of plants, with their foliage and inflorescences, as well as investigations into the so-called *materia medica* utilised in the pharmacopoeia took shape in the Common Era, in particular around the Middle Ages and in the Ayurvedic context.

Incidentally it should be noted that in antiquity the most relevant evidence of grape wine consumption in the subcontinent is attested among the Dardic/Kafir cultures of the Hindu Kush/Karakorum, which appears to be part of ancient Paropamisos, homeland of Dionysus according to some traditions; but the theme in this volume is treated by fellow archaeologists, therefore I merely suggest some essential references.¹³ However, if it is not possible contextually today to demonstrate that Soma was wine, at least in the modern meaning of the term, in this article I intend to propose a reflection on the depth of the problem, and consider the importance of the connection between the use of psychotropic substances and religious experience in the history of Indian subcontinent.¹⁴ To do this I will proceed with the analysis of some paradoxes in the modern scientific approach to the subject, then including the case study of the production of palm wine and other fermented alcoholic products among the indigenous populations of the Subcontinent. This is a methodological comparison that certainly does not seek to establish a connection between ancient and tribal India, but due to a series of analogies it can at least offer interesting ideas for our investigation.

2 A Modern (Watered Down) Wine Debate

The link between religion and vine wine, in particular among all psychoactive substances, is a theme that is not questioned today, though of course there are numerous testimonies in antiquity and in the classical world, with the very first evidence dating back to Egypt.¹⁵ In the Eucharistic transubstantiation of Christianity, this link was confirmed throughout the Middle Ages. In France and Germany, religious centres played a strategic role in the development of the wine trade. French Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries were granted large tracts of land by the nobility and wealthy landowners in the

12 Victoria, Victory, Vittoria, Victoire or similar, paradoxically, are recurring names among contemporary products and brands of European wineries famous throughout the world.

13 Filigenzi 2019; Olmo 1996; Callieri et al. 2006.

14 McHugh 2021.

15 Poo 2009.

hope that this would ease their passage to paradise in the afterlife. The soils were often of poor quality but proved excellent for growing vines. But it is in the modern era, therefore after the discovery of America and new trade routes with the Indies and the Pacific, that the West expanded its knowledge and exploration of fermented and psychoactive products from the East. Their use in the religious context does not seem to particularly capture the interests of European commercial companies in the colonial era, who were instead rather attentive to their economic potential. After evaluating and subsequently discarding the possibility of taxation of cannabinoid substances in South Asia, the United Kingdom considered it more fruitful to engage in the so-called Opium Wars (1839-42; 1856-60) against China. And yet there remained a great interest in possible scientific, medical-botanical applications of the oriental pharmacopoeia of fermented, distilled and psychoactive substances in general.¹⁶ Even in France we can say that there was no particular disfavour toward substances and their experimentation. A clear example is hashish, the use of which reached Europe following Napoleon's campaign in Egypt and Syria (1798-1801). Antithetical tendencies contrasted a trenchant judgment on the dangers of mental alienation linked to its use¹⁷ against the exaltation of the artistic-aesthetic experience of the 'cursed poets' of the so-called hashish fashion.¹⁸

But it is also true that from 1700 onwards, wine, and other alcoholic beverages were questioned by religious movements, starting with the Methodists in the eighteenth century, who considered alcohol harmful to workers.¹⁹ Although the Catholic clergy was generally lenient regarding wine, the Church in France suffered a setback when the revolutionary government nationalised and sold all vineyards and other ecclesiastical land in 1790. This ended the centuries-old connection between the Church and wine production in France. Nineteenth-century temperance movements in the United States and Northern Europe were often led by Protestant women who questioned the health and other benefits often claimed of wine. Methodists and Presbyterians in particular associated alcohol with domestic violence and a growing lack of morality among the poorest of the population. Religious and evangelical organisations, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and the Salvation Army, adopted abstinence policies and campaigned for the abolition of the use of wine in communion services. Prohibition as such appeared in

16 Goodman, Sherratt, Lovejoy [1995] 2014.

17 Moreau 1845.

18 Booth 2015, 128.

19 Phillips 2021.

several Western countries starting in the mid-nineteenth century.²⁰ In Canada, the prohibition movement began in 1864 with the Temperance Act (also called the Dunkin' Act) adopted by the Parliament of United Canada which authorised counties and municipalities to ban the retail sale of alcohol on their territory but, ironically, not the production of alcohol, permitted for medicinal, sacramental, scientific, industrial and even artistic purposes. In 1878, this law was extended to all provinces of British North America. The prohibitionist movement became radicalised in Canada and the United States, so much so that throughout the first half of the twentieth century alcohol was considered a threat to health and social peace. These hanging sectarian tendencies managed to make inroads into the institutions and ended up influencing and corrupting even contemporary scientific thought.

The Victorian era and the first decades of the nineteenth century were extremely important for archaeological discoveries and the literary and critical study of Eastern cultures. This is the period in which a new and revolutionary science was born with an innovative perspective on human behaviour: anthropology, which was first physical and anthropometric, and then matured into its modern cultural and social forms. Yet all this literature seems, from a very general point of view, to suffer the effects of the trends of the time. There is almost a stigma, an austere reserve, in dealing with the topic of substances, drugs and wine in particular, found throughout past academic literature. In other words, I have the impression that up until the end of the nineteenth century there could have still been a sincere curiosity, at least for medical-pharmaceutical purposes, about the use of substances, even if alcohol addiction, which today is considered a clinical disease, was then labelled as a condition of moral compromise in the medical literature.²¹ But it is with the growth of prohibitionism in the twentieth century (especially in North America) that the topic of substances becomes a taboo, particularly if related to a spiritual quest or religious experience.

A clear example of this watering down of the scientific debate is the work *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase* of Mircea Eliade (1907-1986),²² a famous historian of religions who in particular also dealt with shamanism, ecstatic and/or altered consciousness phenomenology. His work was not ethnographic field research, but a hermeneutical synthesis, an attempt to taxonomically canonise the shamanic and trance phenomena. A milestone in the history of studies, today considered obsolete by many, he was able

20 Fuller 1996.

21 Sarkar 2021.

22 Eliade 1951.

to animate the debate on these issues. Although he does not dedicate specific chapters to substances, whenever there is reference to them the terms are generally disparaging. With regard to shamanic practices, he emphasised the knowledge of ‘mechanical’ techniques to self-induce a state of trance, such as the music of possession cults and the percussion of the drum which is widespread in central Asia, from the Himalayas to the Siberian steppes. The use of psychoactive substances to achieve an altered state of consciousness is defined as a degradation of shamanic knowledge.²³

The reasons for this are not, in my opinion, sufficiently discussed. The general skepticism of Eliade, who was a child of his time, remains implicit. At the same time, for those who are able to grasp it, there is a certain perennialist influence in the interpretation of the shamanic phenomenon. The techniques of ecstasy are ‘archaic’ not so much (or not only) because they are probably a pre-religious phenomenon in an evolutionary perspective which at the time had not yet been completely undermined. But moreover they are such because they belonged to previous ages of man, such as the golden age in a Hesiod perspective. Eliade certainly does not go as far as saying, like René Guénon (1886-1951),²⁴ that the shamanic ability to induce oneself into an ecstatic condition is a sort of relic of what man’s knowledge was in previous cosmic eras. It is a treasure that the last indigenous peoples, not completely aware of this, are presumed to still preserve in the most remote corners of the planet. But if that profound mystery of the vision of divinities and parallel worlds through the state of trance, which he compared to ecstasy, had needed psychotropic support, this would be a clear sign to the scholar of the decadence of the times.

3 Towards an Anthropology of the Substances

Interestingly, however, Eliade does not criticise the presence of wine and other substances in a ritual context per se, but rather their application in achieving a condition of trance or altered consciousness. Whatever the reasons for this, his criticism meets a factual reality observed to a large extent in Asian countries, from India to Mongolia. Among native peoples there are various psychoactive substances considered sacred for this reason; the diffusion and consumption of fermented alcoholic products in particular is part of the daily life of many communities. Like fermented mare’s milk for the steppe nomads (Turkish/Mongolian: *airag/äärag*; Kazakh: *qymyz*), or palm wine

²³ Kamiński 2017, 396.

²⁴ Guénon [1945] 2001, 177-84.

(Hindi: *tāḍi* anglicised 'toddy'; Tamil: *kallu*; Oriya: *salpo*, etc) for indigenous minorities of the Indian Subcontinent, today are increasingly replaced by modern industrial distilled products. However, in general, due to an almost archetypal conception that filters through the different currents of Hinduism and Buddhism (but is also characteristic of shamanism), the ritualist abstains from it for reasons linked to a dynamic of purity in the ritual. In other words, the *pūjārī*, the lama, the monk, but also the shaman, in the period preceding the ritual, avoid contact or proximity with the sick, the deceased, cemeteries, pregnant or menstruating women, in short everything that implies a state of liminality or transformation. They also abstain from anything that could be contaminating, such as the consumption of meat, blood, altering substances, non-vegetarian food. Indeed there is often a practice of absolute fasting for preparatory and purifying purposes. This is generally observed by the shaman who must reach the state of trance and in many possession cults where in fact music has a prominent role. When the shaman is finally possessed by deities or spirits of ancestors, then it is quite possible that he takes in profusion sacred and potentially psychotropic substances as offerings subsumed by the entities right through his own mouth.

It is also intriguing to note that Eliade's position almost seems like a hardening against a world that was now changing. Shortly before the Second World War the era of prohibitionism ended and the 1950s were characterised by the youth movements of the Beat Generation. Seeking a way of emancipation from a patriarchal culture, now perceived as bigoted, that dominated the United States in the previous half century, the collective debate of artists, poets and writers, in a certain sense legitimised the theme of drugs, alcohol and encouraged exploration of Eastern doctrines, as well as interest in ritual practices among the cultures of native peoples. This increasingly prevalent branch of pop culture also influenced - this is beyond question - the academic perspectives on the topic of substances, starting from the United States and then reaching Europe. The Beat Generation was followed by New Age and the psychedelic revolution in the 1960s and 1970s.²⁵

We will therefore observe that in recent decades the anthropological perspective on altered states of consciousness has also increasingly shifted towards an openness and an experimental dimension. By virtue of the emic point of view and participant observation, several scholars, in particular relating to South and Meso-American studies, began to experiment on themselves for scientific purposes with the psychoactive substances used by indigenous peoples in their rituals. In this period of reorientation of trends, it is interesting to note

²⁵ Shepard 2005.

that within Christianity, and in particular since the 1960s, the liberation of wine during Mass is no longer a problem.

The first publication in Paris of Eliade's work on shamanism dates back to 1951, republished in the United States in 1964; the generally intransigent interpretative canons imposed by this work on the topic of substances seem in a certain sense to contrast with the wave of interest that in the same years was mounting on research mainly of an anthropological nature. This trend probably developed one of its first significant expressions in the publication edited by Michael Harner (1929-2018), *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*.²⁶ Harner was an ethnologist who had done research on the shamanism of communities in the Ecuadorian and Peruvian Amazon. Following his doctorate research on the Jívaros of Ecuador he became a pioneer of investigation on substances and altered states of consciousness. Paradoxically, he later abandoned both the academy and his passion for drugs, becoming the famous founder of Core Shamanism, a neoshamanic movement which mixes, in my opinion somewhat arbitrarily, notions of indigenous Mesoamerican religiosity and New Age spirituality, but which spread with some success in the United States and Europe.

However, the debate on substances and the role of the humanities and scientific research in this area reached maturity in the 1970s. So much so that expressions of a certain elegance, appreciated by Eliade and the old school of history of religions, such as 'psychotropic' in the sense of psychoactive and generally indicating hallucinogens and psychedelics, began to be perceived as stigmatising or derogatory. In other words, the need was felt to find a new definition for this type of experience, especially if linked to a sacral context. The turning point was the definition of the neologism 'entheogen' towards the end of the 1970s. If the Greek etymology (ἐνθεος + γινέσθαι) clearly alludes to an internal process in which divinity is related to an ongoing dynamic/a birth/a happening, the theoretical approach works a lot on the relationship between individual, divinity and sacred substance (or plant). Therefore the entheogenic epiphany is commonly described as a state where all distinctions and boundaries between the individual and the metaphysical realm dissolve into a mystical and consubstantial communion with the Divine.²⁷ Shaman, entheogen, and deity come to share indeed a common identity. With both the human and the god (or gods) acquiring attributes of the same ingested botanical agent that brought them together, all three become consubstantial.²⁸

²⁶ Harner 1973.

²⁷ Ruck et al. 1979, 145-6.

²⁸ Ruck, Staples 1995; Hoffman, Ruck 2004.

Linked to a past in which the aforementioned notions could be taken for granted to a certain extent, this revolutionary vision is extraordinary, since in contemporary times it is the basis of modern Alcohol and Substance Studies.²⁹ Leaving aside the clinical aspect, which is less relevant here, it is necessary to emphasise how these premises interface with neuroscience, with the study of ecology and the so-called 'mother plants', of indigenous pharmacopoeia, of environmental humanities, and even with the posthuman and the perspectives discussed in the so-called psychedelic revolution. But in all of this, it seems useful to note for the purposes of our study that the theme of wine in ancient times played a crucial role. In fact, among the great mass of scholars who animated the debate on substances, such as anthropologists, ethnographers, doctors, religious scholars, the so-called 'entheogenic theory' was essentially the brainchild of Carl A.P. Ruck (1935-) and Blaise Daniel Staples (1948-2005). Although supported by a group of ethnobotanists, they came from classical studies and classical mythology. In this period, the need to start again from studies on Dionysus and wine emerged in search of what had not yet been dared to explore.

On the other hand, Greek thought, facing the otherness of Eastern cultures, had been for the West the most shining example of the vocation to light, to rationality and to the Logos. But for some years already, to be precise since 1951, Eric R. Dodds (1893-1979) had suggested the opportunity to evaluate even that elusive sphere of an irrational, hidden world, buried under the ivy (κισσός), the wild vine to use a metaphor, which was considered the primitive intoxicating antecedent of the cultivated grape. In other words, the civilised ritual drunkenness practised by the Greeks at festivals or symposiums, within the city, which was so celebrated in literature, was contrasted with a darker, rural, orgiastic rite of the maenads considered essential to honour the wild and primitive dimension of the god. If the beverage of Dionysus is a vinous potion, balanced through fermentation and representing in a certain sense the 'cultivated' version of the god, maenadism seems to be an attempt at mediation with its 'wild', primordial, potentially deadly version, because it involves the intake of unprocessed toxics, or even mixing entheogenic plant additives with the sacred drink. On the other hand, much like the spicing of wine with other intoxicants is a common practice even today, Greece perpetuates the ancient tradition with its retsina, or resin-flavoured wine. After Dodds's³⁰ *The Greeks and the Irrational*, there is growing investigation into the possible existence of ecstatic cults, cases of possession and ritual consumption of psychoactive substances which

²⁹ Rush 2013; Wolff et al. 2016; Labate, Cavnar 2014.

³⁰ Dodd 1951.

would perhaps have also characterised classical everyday life, but which had less space in 'major' literature because they coagulated near or around the great temples or oracular centres that catalysed mostly the attention of ancient writers.

In this hypothetical cone of shadow, persistent in contemporary science, influences and syncretisms with Eastern and Central Asian disciplines may have had great importance. We could define this as a luminous abyss in which, even the shaman, or similar figures, can make his catabasis as a cultural hero. Even if after a few decades of debate, some scholars³¹ tend to downplay the hypothesis of a 'shamanism' tout court in ancient Greece, the question on the knowledge and use of entheogens still remains open.³²

At the end of the paragraph it should be remembered that a few years before the definition of the entheogenic theory, Erika E. Bourguignon (1924-2015),³³ famous above all for gender studies in shamanism and cases of possession, published a pioneering investigation in which among approximately five hundred case regarding the use of substances mainly among native populations, 90% were linked to a ritual context. This provided a further basis on which to develop the connection between religious experience and the intake of psychoactive principles.

4 The Palm Wine Variation: A Case Study

Regarding my twenty-year research experience in Asia and in particular among the indigenous peoples of India, or *ādivāsīs*, I have had the opportunity to observe different dynamics of production and use of psychotropic substances.³⁴ To tell the truth, similar to other rural communities with recreational habits, there is a widespread use of substances which are not actually psychoactive or which are mildly so: such as smoking tobacco, chewing betel nut, but also the intake of cannabinoids and alcohol. Indeed the production of alcohol is undoubtedly prevalent: the custom of drinking fermented products is commonly understood as a characteristic feature of *ādivāsī* culture. As I had the chance to observe among the *ādivāsīs* of Odisha as well as in the sub-Himalayan region and the Northeastern Frontier, alcohol is not used to induce shamans or the ritual specialists and healers into a state of trance, for the above reasons, but is anyway an essential ritual element in most ceremonies. Wine creates sociality,

³¹ Bremmer 2016.

³² Sumler 2023; Wasson, Hoffmann, Ruck [1978] 2023.

³³ Bourguignon 1973.

³⁴ Beggiora 2016.

enshrines communal relations among the clans and consecrates rites of passage such as weddings, births and funerals. Furthermore, the consumption of alcohol produced from the plants of the forest, where survival is always a challenge, contributes to reduce the levels of anxiety among community members.³⁵ Being one of the most archaic techniques used in nutrition and considering that many of these ethnic minorities survive in particularly remote and extreme environments, I had the opportunity to document the obtaining of alcohol from any type of product: rice, wheat, potato, milk and various plants of the forest. Among the Monpas in the high mountains of Arunachal Pradesh, I was struck by the observation that some villages survive almost exclusively by collecting small timber to sell at the market: they were so poor that in some periods there was nothing to eat except a distillate obtained from maceration of wheat. This was distributed to everyone, even children, as the only guaranteed element of a diet unfortunately dangerously lacking in essential nutritional values.

However, it is possible to state that the most produced and consumed alcoholic fermented product among the indigenous Indian populations is palm wine: various qualities of this drink are consumed all over India.³⁶ As mentioned above, the fermented palm sap is generally known as 'toddy', or *kallu*. Prepared from the coconut palm (*Cocos nucifera*) or from the palmyra tuber/toddy palm (*Borassus flabellifer*) the product is the most widespread type of palm wine in the subcontinent. The tribal areas of Odisha are renowned for the production of *salap* or *salpo*, a local palm wine made by infusing the juice of the *salap* tree (*Caryota urens*) from which it takes its name. Generally speaking, palm wine is a popular beverage among lower-income groups and is prepared wherever palm trees are cultivated or grow wild, either on the hillsides or in the jungle tracts. The indigenous Saora community produces the so-called *ālin*, a local handmade variety of palm wine that is very much appreciated also by non-tribal people, venturing onto the hills in search of this cheap and unadulterated liquor. Besides the *Caryota urens*, alternatively known as fishtail palm for the characteristic shape of its leaves, I noted the frequent use of other species of palm trees with similar properties, such as the silver date palm (*Phoenix sylvestris*) and the palmyra tuber palm (*Borassus flabellifer*). The names of these plants may have regional variations, but they all belong to the same family (*Areaceae*) and the same order (*Arecales*) as *Caryota urens* and concurrently as the coconut palm (*Cocos nucifera*).

A palm tree requires a long time before reaching maturity, beginning to produce after at least ten years of growth. The techniques

³⁵ Dash 2009, 92-8.

³⁶ Steinkraus 1996, 398.

for the extraction of juice, and its fermentation for the production of wine, are roughly the same. The liquid can be obtained from the fruits or from the latex oozing from an incision made at the top of the trunk or on the branches in proximity to the inflorescence. In some communities, clans claim ownership or patronage of productive trees on the edge of villages. Householders supervise the collection, but often it is the young men or boys of a village who have the task of climbing the trees. Until recently they collected the full pots strategically positioned below the incisions in exchange for a certain amount of product to take home as a reward. Fresh palm sap is generally dirty brown, but it becomes pale and eventually opalescent if the yeast multiplies. The latex produced from *Caryota urens* is generally of a milky whitish colour. Although palm wines are generally sweetish, the *salap* variety can have a sour aftertaste. The consistency is strong, milky and sometimes lumpy. It is, however, a vigorously effervescent alcoholic beverage. Considering that the alcohol content is not very high, and that in the areas I visited in Odisha and the North-eastern border it has a standard content of 4-5% (but often less), the substance produced is more rightly defined as beer rather than wine. Besides its ritual and social use, this wine is traditionally believed to be good for health, particularly for eyesight. It also serves as a sedative, and it is used as a mild laxative relieving constipation. In general, it is prescribed as a tonic for those recovering from various diseases.³⁷

In some hill areas, along with palm wine, there exists a variety of liquor produced from the dried corollas of the *mahul* flower (*Madhuca longifolia* var. *latifolia*): the product is well known by various vernacular names, such as *mahua* or *mahuli*, in different states of India. But always it is associated with indigenous production. The plant, belonging to the *Sapotaceae* family (*Ericales* order), requires a more complex preparation, similar to distillation, in order to obtain the final product which is then used for the same social and ritual uses as *salap* by indigenous communities.

Production techniques may vary slightly from district to district. In some areas of the Odisha, I observed that the *salap* is simply left to ferment inside the pots hanging from the trees. The wine is thus prepared naturally. When it is believed to be ready for consumption, it is collected and sold or distributed. However the most common way to prepare *salap* requires the liquid to be preliminarily boiled and then fermented after adding a mixture of spices and roots. The process for the production of *mahua* is different. *Mahul* flowers are collected in March and April in the plains or in some remote forest areas. They are dried and stored in bamboo baskets or in cups made of

³⁷ Sekar, Mariappan 2007, 111-20.

siali leaves (*Bauhinia vahlii*) to be used throughout the year. Flowers can be sold and bought at the market, especially by those who have difficulty finding them in their area of origin. The liquor is prepared by means of a simple distillation process. The flowers are left soaking in a clay pot for few days. This is then warmed with fire and then covered with a second pot, identical in shape, which serves as a lid and, at the same time, permits internal condensation. Over these two pots, a smaller jar may be placed, which only contains cold water to foster condensation. The distillate trickles out from a side opening in the upper jug to which is attached a piece of cane, guiding the droplets into another suitably placed container.³⁸

But the true miracle of indigenous culture that has interested several scholars and which can be very useful for the purposes of our study in general is the knowledge of fermentation starters. In the most remote areas of Indian geography, the *ādivāsīs* pass down traditional fermentation techniques that suggest a profound cognition of the environment and in particular of its flora. This complex of notions, constituting indigenous knowledge of the forest, also includes an awareness and familiarity with a series of microbiological starters, which are not really known to science,³⁹ nor have they ever been used elsewhere. Collected and compressed into small balls, commonly known as *ranu* tablets (or *bakhar*), these are made up of approximately of one half unboiled rice flour and the other half a mixture of plants with various properties. The mystery is precisely this: the original recipe varies from area to area and each community generally believes that its own is better than the others. In some old publications, this was considered a note of folklore, but it was soon realised that both microbiological fermentation starters and medicinal plants from the indigenous pharmacopoeia were present in different proportions in the mixture.⁴⁰ This is why not only are informants gen-

38 There are further variations of the traditional alcohol production techniques among the indigenous cultures of Central India (Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh) including a large number of beers such as *handia*, obtained from the fermentation of rice, *paise*, from the fermentation of *rāgi*, the so called Indian millet (*Eleusine coracana*).

39 The interdependent application of plant parts and microorganisms in food processing and preservation in the absence of modern technologies associated with the process it is something extraordinary. The level of understanding of the *ādivāsīs* behind this methodology, passed down through generations, is neither clear nor easily investigable.

40 This method not only keeps intact the nutrition part in the food but also eliminates the use of chemical preservations in order to retain the desired aroma and flavouring of the product. On the other hand, the potential of microbes including several species of Lactic Acid Bacteria (LAB) to produce organic acids (phenyllactic acid, lactic acid, caproic acid and acetic acid), hydrogen peroxide, reuterin, bacteriocins, reutericyclin enables to create an unfavourable environment for the pathogenic microbes to grow within the food matrix (Banerjee et al. 2017). It also abolishes the unwelcome constituents such as mycotoxin and endotoxins to enrich with malto-oligomers, phenolics,

erally reluctant to reveal the contents and exact number of plants included in the *ranu* tablets, but it is practically impossible to obtain the exact proportions.

Among the species most commonly used by the tribal groups of Jharkhand and Odisha are *Asparagus racemosus*, *Cissampelos pareira* var. *hirsuta*, *Clerodendrum serratum*, *Coccinia grandis*, *Holarrhena pubescens*, *Smilax macrophylla*, *Woodfordia fruticosa* and *Rauwolfia serpentina*, etc.⁴¹ Overall the botanical ingredients can be 20 or 25 depending on the season and availability in each particular location. The medicinal uses, based on the active ingredients most frequently available in the literature, are the most varied. From some barks, antihelminthic and antipyretic are obtained to treat dysentery and worms (*Holarrhena pubescens*), or gastric disorders (*Homalium nepalense*). The aforementioned *Asparagus*, known in Sanskrit as *Śatāvārī*, was already used in Ayurvedic and Unani medicine for its tonic and nutritional properties and to treat typical symptoms affecting the female reproductive system. Among the *Sapotaceae*, there are also fruits (*Xantolis tomentosa*) with antiseptic and digestive properties. The root of *Rauwolfia serpentina* is used (also by indigenous South American populations) to treat malaria and snake or scorpion bites. The seeds and leaves of the *mohua* itself are used to produce an oil for use against rheumatism and to combat diabetes. The aforementioned ‘velvetleaf’ *Cissampelos pareira* is applied as an anti-inflammatory for kidney and urinary system problems, but also against coughs and respiratory diseases.⁴² In this way, it will be clear how the concept of *ranu* merges the principle of transformation of liquids into alcohol with the idea of a sort of panacea for all ills.⁴³

Some studies⁴⁴ previously emphasised the importance of alcohol consumption among indigenous people for its social value. It is very common to see groups of men and women among the villages stopping to consume palm wine on their way back from working in the fields. The atmosphere is generally relaxed, constructive, free of taboos regarding substance, it is an occasion in which community problems are discussed. In my first book on the Saoras⁴⁵ I documented

prebiotics, probiotics, antioxidants, antimicrobials and further modifies sensory qualities of the food.

⁴¹ Panda, Bastia, Sahoo 2014.

⁴² Mahalik, Singha, Parida 2020.

⁴³ Although I have not seen it personally, my informants said that cannabinoids and other intoxicants are sometimes added to increase the psychoactive effect of the product. This is attested in the ethnic recipes of the Himalayan starters, so-called *keem* and *dhelhi*, for the preparation of the alcoholic drink known as *sur/sura* (Rawat et al. 2021).

⁴⁴ Mahapatra 2011, 78-80.

⁴⁵ Beggiora 2003.

how the entire axis of negotiation and courtship between the young groom and the future wife's family was based on gifts of a vinous nature. Moreover, on market days, the sale of the product is a festive occasion. The owners of the trees position themselves at the side of the road with the palm wine in large aluminum jugs, waiting for customers. Generally the price of a glass of *salap* or *mohua* is very low, as drinking becomes an opportunity for sharing, but there are also those who buy entire jugs. This type of activity has an economic impact, so much so that it is possible to say that the simple production of wine is a supplementary subsistence activity. Certainly, the possession of one or more trees of *Caryota urens* is an asset for the family. Yet all these aspects, so incisive in everyday life, are nothing compared to the potential of the study of starters and *ranus*, which reveal intriguing implications in the medical, religious or ontological fields regarding wine production. The alchemical complexity of the ingredients coming from the jungle essentially evokes the kaleidoscopic structure of the forest itself, which in *ādivāsī* cultures is a macrocosm. The process of fermentation and transformation of wine is clearly a cosmogonic process, it evokes a sort of palingenesis and for this reason it has a sacred value.

The shaman consecrates the starters and the individual ingredients, just as he consecrates the wine before consumption. There are obvious differences in the worship and ritual gestures of each individual group, but they all reflect a certain depth and respect towards the substance and the place where it comes from. In the Himalayas, before drinking, drops of liquid are generally thrown in the direction of the forest, mountains and sacred places. Similarly in Odisha I have seen shamans sprinkling the first sip from their mouths towards the four cardinal points in honour of the spirits, or directly spitting the wine onto the fireplace as a form of ancestor worship. Conversely, alcoholism (however widespread among indigenous populations) or abusive drunkenness are necessarily seen as a failure to respect the sacredness of the substance, a careless and infamous prevalence over the inviolable sense of a certain mystery, which exposes the unfortunate to a situation of danger and imbalance. In fact, in many healing rituals the shaman identifies the accidental infringement of taboos, occurring in a state of excessive drunkenness or outside of a ritualised context, as the primary supernatural cause of accidents or illnesses.

5 Conclusion: Winy Ontologies

The famous cult of *gaumātā* (the holy mother cow) in Hindu India is clearly linked to the milk produced by cattle which is a universal food for humans and non-humans. In general it is a fundamental food for all beings that are born, so much so that it recalls the cosmic principle in the myth of the primordial ocean of milk that I mentioned in incipit. At the same time, in the botanical and *ādivāsī* world, the palm - as in our case study the *Caryota urens* - is equally a mother-tree. First of all, it exudes a latex that is sought after by all creatures. Spirits of the deceased, demons and divinities yearn for this inebriating liquid capable of becoming wine. To be born or reborn into this world, through the ritual act of the shaman, they are called to this libation or are excluded from it. Second, the tree itself is an *axis mundi*: the representation in the indigenous wall paintings of this element, supporting the cosmos, the structure of the villages, surmounted by animal forms (bees, peacocks, monkeys) linked to liminality or acting as a vehicle for subtle beings, is clear.

It is particularly intriguing to note that among the Saoras and the Konds of Odisha there exists the concept that each species of plant has a gendered connotation. Plants mature (germination and flowering) and have sexual relationships (pollination). They also enjoy social life, family and community connections. Such bonds are developed in parallel to those of human and nonhuman animals, and are consecrated by means of the various beverages, oozing from symbolically charged trees.⁴⁶ So when it is said that a tree is considered a mother plant, it truly is, just as the multiplicity of botanical species in the forest is considered to have its own agency, a sort of personhood transforming them into a people with whom relational bonds are practicable. Among the Desias of Khandamal there exists in fact the custom of adopting palm trees as members of the community, as if to emphasise the versatility of an empathetic relationship between different degrees of existence (human/non-human). So emerges a sense of collective responsibility for plant life, as trees can become part of the clan.

During the last century in India some scholars analysed the indigenous world and the related subsistence techniques, as if this were a paradigmatic observatory for understanding aspects of our prehistory. Today this approach is no longer viable because it is obviously generalising and substantially biasing towards an outdated evolutionary perspective. Nonetheless, many archaeologists today suggest how the *Sapiens*, despite belonging to different geographical locations and eras, tends to react sensitively and respond to technical

46 Beggiora 2016, 37-54.

and existential problems in very similar ways. Even though I am not an archaeologist or a Vedic Sanskritist, I was honoured to have participated in the *Wine Culture: Gandharan Crossroads* event and to be on the board of the MALIWI⁴⁷ Project. I hope that my gaze between Indology and anthropology may have brought a useful reflection on the multiplicity of contemporary methodological approaches, including entheogenic theory, and on indigenous ontologies linked to the world of wine.

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⁴⁷ *Making Libations of Wine from Golden Cups. Social, ritual, and ceremonial use of wine in the Gandharan area, from the Achaemenids to the Kushans*, SPIN 2021, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Department of Humanities.

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