

Sri Lanka's Traditional Knowledge about Health and Wellbeing: History, Present Status and the Need for Safeguarding

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Abstract

This paper explores dying secrets of traditional knowledge in health and wellbeing in Sri Lanka and attempts to find ways of safeguarding it as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity. It traces the historical evolution of traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions. It considers the internal and external forces that influenced the evolution of Sri Lanka's traditional knowledge, followed by an account of the historical developments and achievements in traditional knowledge in healing and wellbeing, with examples from ancient historical and literary sources.

The challenges faced by traditional knowledge about health and wellbeing as well as the influences of colonisation are outlined in this paper. The paper identifies the contribution of international organisations as well as the government's Indigenous Medical System in protecting traditional knowledge on health. Finally the need to adopt and implement a more comprehensive, locally relevant and participatory plan to safeguard traditional knowledge about health and wellbeing is discussed.

Exploring the Concepts

Over the years various terms have been used to describe the subject matter of this paper that includes healing practices, healing rituals, dances, performances, and story-telling. These terms imply yet others including, but not limited to, 'folklore', 'indigenous heritage', 'traditional cultural heritage', 'traditional cultural expressions' and 'traditional knowledge'. There is not, at this time, an agreed legal definition of these terms, and they continue to be under discussion in a number of national, regional and international fora.

This paper uses the terms 'traditional knowledge' and 'traditional cultural expressions'. A useful starting point in considering the meaning of traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions has been highlighted by the 'Intergovernmental Committee on Intellectual Property and Genetic Resources, Traditional Knowledge and Folklore' (IGC) of the World Intellectual Property

Organization (WIPO), which has dealt most comprehensively with the protection of traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expression. The IGC defines the term traditional knowledge as:

... the content or substance of knowledge resulting from intellectual activity in a traditional context, and includes the know-how, skills, innovations, practices and learning that form part of traditional knowledge systems, and knowledge embodying traditional lifestyles of indigenous and local communities, or contained in codified knowledge systems passed between generations. It is not limited to any specific technical field, and may include agricultural, environmental and medicinal knowledge, and knowledge associated with genetic resources. (The Protection of Traditional Knowledge: Revised Objectives and Principles 2007: 19)

Elsewhere, traditional cultural expressions are defined as “any forms, whether tangible and intangible, in which traditional culture and knowledge are expressed, appear or are manifested” (WIPO 2006: 11).

In general the phrase ‘traditional knowledge’ has been described as the ‘understanding or skill possessed by indigenous peoples pertaining to their culture and folklore, their technologies, and their use of native plants for medicinal purposes’ (Munzer and Rustiala 2009: 37-8). Put another way, traditional knowledge is the cumulative and dynamic body of knowledge, know-how and representations possessed by peoples with long histories of interaction with their natural milieu. Traditional knowledge is intimately tied to language, social relations, spirituality and worldview, and is generally held collectively. Thus all indigenous peoples are traditional knowledge holders, yet all traditional knowledge-holders are not indigenous.

Attempts to define traditional knowledge and cultural expression, as well as delineate distinctions between them, are not without critics (Posey 1999: 3). Too often, traditional knowledge is conceived unsophisticatedly as a pale reflection of mainstream knowledge, in particular, science. Importantly, indigenous groups claim that their rights extend to defining for themselves the extent and characteristics of their intellectual property (Fecteau 2001: 69-84).

In Sri Lanka, existing systems of traditional knowledge include Traditional Administrative Systems, Traditional Social Systems (Caste Systems), Irrigation Systems, Traditional Legal System, Architecture including Traditional Village

Planning, Art, Religions- Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, as well as Literature and Rituals, etc. Traditional knowledge is an intangible cultural heritage of humans that portray the rich civilisation and diversity of a community. By recognising traditional knowledge, cultural diversity can be promoted. Pluralistic and multi-cultural societies give an opportunity to its members to maintain their own identity which contribute towards satisfaction and self-fulfillment. Traditional knowledge promotes Cultural Nationalism, a national identity shaped by cultural traditions and by language. Cultural Nationalism is an ideology that constructs an alternative lifestyle that rejects dominant Western culture and value systems. Traditional knowledge is a means of safeguarding the ‘National Consciousness,’ an understanding that a group of people in a certain geographic area share a common ethnic or linguistic or cultural evolution as a first step of gaining colonial independence. Due to the impact of traditional knowledge on culture, sustainable development, environmental conservation, food security, agriculture, traditional healing and wellbeing, the importance of protecting traditional knowledge internationally and nationally has been repeatedly emphasised.

The final concepts central to this paper are health and wellness.

A healthy person according to Ayurveda is one who is in a balanced condition of humors, *datun* (body elements), *agni* (digestion and metabolism), *malakiriya* (proper evacuation) and with pleasantries in physical, social and mental behaviour (Kusamaratane 2005: 5).

Wellbeing can refer to:

- a. a positive state of being;
- b. a person’s overall sense of health and wellness;
- c. a person’s feelings of happiness or general satisfaction with his/her quality of life; and
- d. the experience of contentment and fulfillment with one’s life circumstances (PADHI 2009: 19).

Wellbeing is a dynamic concept, where one should work towards achieving the state of wellbeing by fulfilling one’s needs. The achievement of wellbeing is determined by psychological and social dimensions, that is, the individual efforts and the social context in which the individual is placed (PADHI 2009: 19).

Sri Lanka's Traditional Knowledge: A Brief History

The evolution of Sri Lanka's traditional knowledge has been influenced by many internal and external forces. One of the main forces that contributed towards the evolution of traditional knowledge was the island's strategic location on the silk route connecting the East and the West. This strategic location enabled the infusion of Eastern as well as African and Middle Eastern cultures into the indigenous culture in the process of evolution and development of traditional knowledge. India, being the closest neighbour and the homeland of a rich civilisation, had a major influence on Sri Lanka's civilisation and knowledge.

Healthcare in Ancient Sri Lanka goes back about 5,000 years according to ancient legends. King Ravana is said to be a great physician and is supposed to have written several books on healthcare. Some forms of indigenous medical treatment had existed long before the arrival of Vijaya and the Indians. Mother Goddess, Ancestral worship like the *Nee Yakku* of the Veddhas, and Tree worship have been part of the treatment for ailments before Vijaya's arrival.

Achievements in Traditional Healing and Wellbeing

There have been numerous achievements of traditional knowledge in health and wellbeing in Sri Lanka. The country claims to be the first in the world to have established dedicated hospitals. According to the *Mahavamsa* (the primary historical chronicle of Sri Lanka), hospitals had been established in Sri Lanka during the reign of King Pandukabaya during the fourth century BCE (Geiger 1960: 102). There were four types of hospitals in Ancient Lanka: (a) Monastic hospitals where in-house treatment was provided for ailing monks for short or long periods; (b) hospitals for laymen (c) maternity homes and (d) hospitals where only outdoor treatment was provided (Siriweera n.d.).

Some surgical instruments found during archaeological excavations reflect high standards of technology and bear similarities with the surgical instruments in modern western science (Aluvihare 2012). Furthermore, *Sarartha Sangrahaya*, a comprehensive manuscript which Sri Lankan physicians still use for reference was written by King Buddhadasa in 398 CE ('Historical Perspectives' IAAM n.d.).

Ancient inscriptions on rock surfaces reveal that organised medical services have existed within the country for centuries and have been used to treat humans as well as animals.

References to healthcare in ancient Sri Lanka suggest awareness among the people on medical treatment methods as well as performance of surgery on humans and on animals.

Traditional Medical Practices

Sri Lankan beliefs and knowledge have been used in healing practices. Some forms of traditional healing in Sri Lanka include Ayurveda, *Kadum Bidum* and *Rasa Shastra*.

Ayurveda is a system to control, direct, build-up and finally prolong life by warding off illness and ageing. The guiding principle of Ayurveda is that the mind exerts a profound influence on the body (Liyanaratne 1999: xvi). According Section 89 of the Ayurveda Act No. 31 of 1961, Section 89, currently Sri Lanka has Ayurveda (North Indian traditional medicine), Siddha (South Indian traditional medicine), Unani (medicine of Arabic origin) and indigenous (based on medicinal recipes passed down in certain families) medical systems.

Kadum bidum (Orthopedics) is an authentic traditional healing system to treat fracture and dislocation. There are many schools practicing the traditional healing methods for Orthopedics. The western medical profession treats a fracture instantly through an operation by fixing wires or plates. Indigenous method of orthopedic treatment is different. They demobilise the limb with the fracture or dislocation, apply oil and tie it with a medicinal (herbal pack) bandage called *thel paththuva*. This bandage is removed after 2-3 days. If there are any changes in the alignment of the bone then the *thel paththuva* is repeated. This practice continues till the fracture/ dislocation is completely healed. (Personal Communications: S.M.H. Seneviratne and S.M.K. Nimal Karunarathne).

Rasa Shastra has a cure for all health problems in the twenty first century CE. It is a highly effective way of treating illnesses using alchemical fusion between mineral and organic compounds including such diverse materials as mercury, gold, silver, tin, lead, zinc, sulfur, copper and diamond. The raw metals and organic compounds used in *Rasa Shastra* are subjected to various purification processes called *Shodhana*, *Marana* and *Bhashma*. *Rasa Medical System* can treat

HIV/ AIDS, all types of cancer, diabetes, leukaemia, all types of skin diseases, neuro and spinal disorders, cardiac problems, hypertension, urinary disorders, kidney problems and sexual disabilities including impotency. This system helps avoid surgical operations (Personal Communications: Kularathne and Kularathne).

Rituals pertaining to Mental Health and Wellbeing in Sri Lanka: A Brief Account

Local Sri Lankan beliefs, knowledge, and practices were used in protecting mental health through rituals and performances such as *pirith*, meditation, *bodhi pooja*, *pahan pooja*, vows, yoga, astrology, palmistry, healing through spirits, exorcism, *tovil*, charms and amulets, *adi veil* and *hetme ritual*.

Pirith is the recitation or chanting of the word of the Buddha to ward off illness, fear, and danger from evil spirits as well as to invoke the blessings of the Triple Gem for protection. It is a ritualistic function and can be chanted individually or as a group ('Pirith Paritta or Protection' n.d.).

Meditation is a practice in which an individual trains the mind to control complex emotions and regulate attention to realise benefits including physical wellbeing and emotional balance (Lutz *et.al.* 2008). Meditation is a powerful tool for mental health as it can help to overcome depression, anxiety, stress and negative emotions. Meditation can also have an impact in curing physical ailments such as high blood pressure and cancer (Personal Communication: Priyantha).

Bodhi Pooja is the veneration of the *Bodhi* Tree. It is a widespread ritual in Sri Lanka performed by Buddhists. *Bodhi* tree, being a sacred object of Buddhists, has become a necessary feature of every Buddhist temple in Sri Lanka. The *Bodhi Pooja* ritual includes bathing the *Bodhi* tree with scented water, offering flowers, herbal drinks, milk rice, fruits, betel and coins, hanging flower garlands or flags on the *Bodhi* tree, lighting of oil lamps and camphor and reciting *gatha* (verses). The ritual is concluded by the usual transference of merit to deceased family members and the deities that are believed to be protecting Buddhism's presence in the world. It fulfills the emotional and devotional needs of the devotees. It is performed to obtain mental relief, avert evil influences, and make a wish or fulfill a vow.

Pahan Pooja, the lighting of oil lamps as an offering, is another popular ritual. It is sometimes performed simultaneously with the *Bodhi Pooja*. The objective of the *Pahan Pooja* is to avert the evil influence of inauspicious planetary conjunctions.

A vow is a sacred voluntary oath between a human and a deity, where the deity is both the witness and recipient of the promise (s.v. ‘Vow’ *Encyclopedia Britannica* n.d.). A vow goes beyond usual social and religious requirements, as it commits oneself and members of one’s family or community to a special obligation, render some service, or devote something valuable for a particular deity’s use or to practice some form of ritual when the vow is fulfilled. Vows are common in all the four major religions in Sri Lanka namely Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam.

Yoga is a form of exercise that contributes towards spiritual, mental and physical wellbeing. A regular practitioner of Yoga could reap benefits such as a healthy body and mental happiness.

The traditional word for astrology in Sinhalese is *Jyotishaya*. It means ‘science of the light’. Astrology is an occult subject which tells about our future. Astrology is used widely in Sri Lanka on occasions such as giving a name to a child, cutting the first hair of a child, giving first solid food to a child, reading the first letters to a child, the first menstruation celebrations, identifying a partner to get married, marriage ceremonies, building a new house, starting a new business and engaging in agriculture. After reading their horoscopes, astrologers also guide people on various forms of rituals, poojas, good deeds, talismans and charms they should use to get over mental or physical problems (Personal Communication: Perera).

Malayalam Palm-reading is a very important and vast field of astrology which has been practiced over the years by the *Rodia* community of Sri Lanka (Personal Communication: Leela). It is an art of forecasting the future by reading the lines of one’s palm and hence it is also known as Palm-reading or Chirolgy. It is practiced in the whole world but with numerous cultural variations.

It is believed in Sri Lanka that health problems can be caused by demons. These could be physical or mental disorders. *Daha Ata Sanniya* or the 18 ailments are believed to be caused by the impact of demons. These ailments include blindness, paralysis, excess heat, body sores, insanity, dumbness, ear diseases,

delirium, death, vomiting, diarrhea, nausea and parasitic worms, evil dreams, loss of consciousness, bile-related disease, rheumatism and epilepsy. A *yakadura* (demon doctor) will diagnose the sickness and arrange treatment. These rituals involve prayers and invocations to gods and demons, trances and possession, chanting, dancing and drumming.

There are many forms of *Shanthi Karma* (a ritual consisting of chanting, drumming, and dancing aimed at warding off evil spirits) practiced in Sri Lanka for the health, protection and wellbeing of individuals as well as the society at large. *Gammadu Shanthi Karma*, *Devol Madu Shanthi Karma*, *Bali Shanthi Karma*, *Kavadi Shanthi Karma* are some forms of *Shanthi Karma* practiced today in Sri Lanka ('Shanti karma' n.d.).

The *Tovil* is a psychodrama (Jayatunga 2012) performed by exorcists to combat diseases believed to be caused by demons and ghosts (Sri Kantha 2004). It is all a therapeutic encounter for the patient, an entertaining public gathering of friends and relatives, and a religious discourse.

As *vaha* (evil eye), and *kata vaha* (evil mouth) are countered by *mathirima* (chanting) for protection. It is believed by Sri Lankans that if someone feels jealous or says something with jealousy it will cause injury or bad luck for the person at whom it is directed.

Aadi Vel Festival is a celebration of the Kataragama deity's triumph over evil forces and his marriage to the Sri Lankan Veddha girl Vallone. It is one of the most important Hindu festivals hosted in Colombo since 1874. The rituals, including colourful processions in Colombo, chariot processions, coconuts being smashed, worshipping with camphor and flame and Kavadi dance contribute towards the mental and spiritual wellbeing of the Hindu devotees (Muttulingam 2012).

Hethme Ritual is a traditional method of sorcery of the indigenous *Veddha* community. This traditional cultural item is normally performed to ensure safety and protection of the *Veddha* people and to dispel diseases and calamities while praying to gods to invoke blessings on them. ('Audio Visual Conservation Record of 'Hethme' Ritual for the Preservation of Cultural Life and Value System of Veddha Community' n.d.).

Importance of Safeguarding TK in Health and Wellbeing

While traditional beliefs, knowledge and practices have been, and continue to be, socially and economically important there are a number of challenges for traditional beliefs and practices. Sri Lanka's is a complex socio-religious and political history that mixes Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim, Buddhist, Islam, Hindu beliefs, as well as the influences of colonisation.

Although the long history of foreign influence in Sri Lanka could be dated back to third century BCE, it was only the Europeans who attempted to colonise. Sri Lanka was occupied by European Colonial powers from 1505-1948 CE. The colonial influence resulted in an erosion of the traditional beliefs, knowledge and practices of the country to a considerable extent. Perhaps the most significant development during this time was that the Sri Lankan state supported and encouraged Christianity, first in the form of Catholicism and later Protestantism. Indeed, many Buddhist and Hindu temples were destroyed by the Portuguese during the sixteenth century CE. This disoriented the colonised from their traditional art of living including the life styles, religious beliefs and arts and crafts.

Giving state priority to western education, religion and culture had severe negative effects on the traditional knowledge of Sri Lankans as the state structure and the social system in place to protect traditional knowledge were replaced by the new systems introduced by the colonisers.

Re-educating the western educated was the primary problem in gaining colonial independence. Coomaraswamy (1979) states "I have no idea how many it might take to outgrow a missionary college education, or to recover from a course of lectures on Comparative Religion offered by a Calvinist" (10).

The introduction of a capitalist mode of production resulted in the destruction of the rich civilisation Sri Lanka inherited. The capitalist mode of production threatened the traditional knowledge and traditional social systems. Any established institution is governed by the values that drive the society in which it operates. This is portrayed by the mandates of the pre-colonial institutions, rituals, practices, as well as their arts, crafts and architecture. Most foreigners, who attacked and rejected the existing institutions such as the caste system in India and Sri Lanka, did so without properly understanding the moral basis of these institutions. The colonial powers thus introduced new value systems without

understanding the moral basis of a society, which resulted in them not being able to realise the moral commitments of these societies as well as in the breaking down of traditional knowledge systems that were based on the value systems of said societies.

In more recent times, reliance on scientific knowledge, trends in globalisation and homogenisation of cultures, have made traditional knowledge face the threat of extinction. Furthermore, the influence of western medical systems and the impact of multi-national corporations and media in marketing global medical and wellbeing products and services have become a great threat to traditional knowledge. Obtaining intellectual property rights such as patents for traditional knowledge by third parties and sharing very little rights with the original bearers of traditional knowledge is another negative impact of globalisation. The influence of information technology in creating homogenisation of culture is also threatening traditional knowledge. If the rich and diverse traditional knowledge, health, and wellbeing systems are not safeguarded from the harmful influences of globalisation, we will not be able to pass down this heritage to our next generations, which we are currently enjoying thanks to our forbearers. Colonisation of the country, trends in globalisation and homogenisation, and the extensive reliance on western scientific knowledge have resulted in the gradual extinction of traditional knowledge.

Western scientific traditions are adopted and practiced in South Asia as new 'acceptable' knowledge and are studied in universities and practiced in centers of science and technology since the eighteenth century CE (Goonatilake 1998: 24). The very process of legitimising Western knowledge in South Asia has resulted in de-legitimising the rich heritage of traditional knowledge.

An enormous share of our traditional knowledge has been lost during the colonial period due to some policies of the colonial administration. Although post-colonial revival efforts have galvanized some aspects of traditional knowledge, it still faces the threat of extinction. Reasons for this include not having a systematic procedure to pass down traditional knowledge from generation to generation, present education system not catering sufficiently to transmitting traditional knowledge, the death of the knowledge bearers, and the young generation not being very interested in following the path of their parents who were engaged in traditional knowledge based occupations.

Protecting traditional knowledge would improve the lives of traditional knowledge holders and communities who depend on traditional knowledge for their livelihoods, health and wellbeing. According to the World Health Organisation, up to 80 per cent of the world's population depends on traditional medicine for its primary health needs (WHO: 1993).

Increased use of traditional knowledge technology could increase performance by enabling greater commercial use of their biological wealth and increasing exports of traditional knowledge related products (Dutfield 2006: 12).

Traditional products and services in health have a strong role in boosting the identity of traditional knowledge bearers, which in turn contributes towards their wellbeing. Safeguarding traditional knowledge against globalisation and cultural hegemony, industrialisation and market economy, bio-pirates and copy right infringements will ensure cultural diversity and the wellbeing of communities.

Methods of Safeguarding Traditional Knowledge

This paper suggests that TK can be safeguarded in a number of ways. These include, identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission (particularly through formal and non-formal education), and revitalisation of the various aspects of such heritage.

Existing Efforts in Safeguarding Traditional Knowledge

Various aspects of preservation, protection and promotion of traditional knowledge are looked into by many international bodies. The work already carried out by certain international bodies has a tremendous impact in safeguarding traditional knowledge in health and wellbeing.

A useful starting point in considering the meaning of traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions is highlighted by the 'Intergovernmental Committee on Intellectual Property and Genetic Resources, Traditional Knowledge and Folklore' (IGC) of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) which has dealt most comprehensively with the protection of traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions. Most recently, in 2012, the IGC provided a draft text outlining various provisions of an international treaty to protect traditional knowledge and cultural expressions.

The International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) and the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues are working on safeguarding the rights of indigenous peoples around the world. The Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) and the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources (ITPGR) have come into force to protect Biodiversity internationally. The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) have been put in place to develop and enforce intellectual property law to safeguard traditional knowledge.

The Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems (LINKS) programme is a UNESCO interdisciplinary initiative that works with traditional knowledge resource management and development. (See <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/priority-areas/links/>). The United Nations University Institute of Advanced Studies has a Traditional Knowledge Initiative that seeks to build greater understanding and facilitates awareness of traditional knowledge (TK) to inform action by indigenous peoples, local communities and domestic and international policy makers. Key outputs include research activities, policy studies, capacity development and online learning and dissemination. (See <http://ias.unu.edu/en/research/traditional-knowledge-initiative.html#outline>)

Nationally there is a structure in place to promote and safeguard traditional healing. This includes the Ministry of Indigenous Medicine that was established on 14 February 1980, 62 Ayurvedic Hospitals, 208 Central Dispensaries, 1424 Ayurveda Medical Practitioners employed by the government, and 20000 registered traditional medical practitioners. In addition, there is a National Institute of Traditional Medicine, Sri Lanka Ayurveda Drugs Corporation, Sri Lanka Ayurveda Medical Council, Ayurveda Department, a Research Institute and Herbal Gardens under the Ministry (Ministry of Indigenous Medicine, Sri Lanka n.d.).

Conclusion

Although the study recognises the impact of work already done in conserving traditional knowledge in direct and indirect ways, the concern is that most of the programmes that look into preservation and promotion of Traditional Knowledge and Traditional Cultural Expressions are developed by Western policy makers

with little or no consultation with the traditional knowledge bearers and policy makers in developing countries. As a result the views and issues of Sri Lankans are not adequately represented at international level and are not properly reflected in policy making.

Some concerns at the national level are that:

- the indigenous medicine structure is not being as strong as the western medical structure, and
- the colonial laws that prohibited treatment of fever or performing surgery by traditional healers are still prevalent.

The government gives recognition only to *Ayurveda*, *Siddha* and *Unani* traditions. If the diverse forms of traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions on health and wellbeing are not given due recognition, they will die a natural death.

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