

Decolonizing Global Health Through Promoting Traditional Knowledge

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INTRODUCTION

Decolonizing global health is a rising movement that seeks to eliminate power disparities and challenge traditional Western-centric approaches to global health. Colonial powers dominated global health throughout colonialism by building a medical system that served their interests, frequently using it as a tool for social control and cultural assimilation. Colonial regimes disrupted indigenous health practices and introduced Western pharmaceuticals, which usually ignored indigenous knowledge and customs. They had historically ignored local people's traditional medical practices and, at times, persecuted indigenous health practitioners (Packard et al., 2003)¹. However, there was the exception too. British doctors in colonized India used local expertise to detect local illnesses and manufactured medications using indigenous plants and herbs (Packard et al., 2003)². Thus, on one hand, colonialism destroyed traditional healthcare practices in many regions and on the other hand they used indigenous knowledge and health practices in the development of health care.

COLONIALISM, TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND HEALTHCARE

During the colonial era, traditional healing and healthcare practices and knowledge were severely suppressed³. Colonial authorities did so to promote Western medical education and practices. As a result, traditional healers were marginalized, their practices were dismissed as primitive, and Western-style medical institutions and hospitals were established. Over the time, Western medical methods and values frequently took precedence over traditional knowledge and practices⁴. But, very interestingly, the Western colonial powers also capitalised the availability of traditional knowledge in developing new medicines and medical technologies. They showed a strong interest in traditional knowledge and medicinal plants in the countries they colonized throughout the colonial era. This was motivated by several causes, including their potential utility in the development of novel treatments⁵.

Scientific study aimed at discovering active compounds in traditional medicines and proving their usefulness was one-way colonial rulers used indigenous knowledge and plants. Colonial scientists frequently undertook this research in partnership with local collaborators, who gave insight into the qualities of plant samples⁶. These studies' findings were subsequently used to develop novel drugs, which were frequently promoted and sold by Western pharmaceutical companies⁷. In most cases, colonial powers attempted to control the manufacturing and distribution of traditional remedies. This was accomplished by establishing government-run botanical gardens and laboratories dedicated to collecting, studying, and cultivating therapeutic plants for use

¹Packard, R. M., Cooter, R., & Pickstone, J. (2003). Post-colonial medicine Download Post-colonial medicine. *Companion to medicine in the twentieth century*, 97-112.)

²Packard, R. M., Cooter, R., & Pickstone, J. (2003). Post-colonial medicine Download Post-colonial medicine. *Companion to medicine in the twentieth century*, 97-112.)

³<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3252714/pdf/AJT085S-0115.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3252714/pdf/AJT085S-0115.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3252714/pdf/AJT085S-0115.pdf>

⁶<https://theconversation.com/how-colonialism-influenced-modern-healthcare-69149>

⁷<https://theconversation.com/how-colonialism-influenced-modern-healthcare-69149>

in Western medicine. These institutes were frequently staffed by Western scientists and overseen by colonial officials seeking control over the manufacturing and distribution of traditional remedies⁸.

And the western countries have continued to dominate the treasures of traditional knowledge across the world through intellectual property rights, control of the global pharmaceutical market, research funding and infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, education and training, and cultural hegemony. These factors contribute to the marginalisation of traditional medicine, prioritizing western pharmaceuticals, and undermining the value of traditional knowledge and practices. In modern days, western countries' influence over traditional knowledge is nothing but the repetition of the same that happened during the colonial period. They exert such influence through various means:

Intellectual property rights: Pharmaceutical firms in the developed countries, such as Pfizer and GlaxoSmithKline, frequently patent active molecules derived from traditional medications, effectively monopolizing knowledge, and profit (Gurgula O., 2020)⁹. This procedure occurs frequently without sufficient acknowledgement or compensation for indigenous people who have used these medicinal herbs for generations.

Global pharmaceutical market dominance: Western pharmaceutical companies dominate the worldwide market, making it difficult for traditional medicine practitioners and local industries to compete. These firms' enormous marketing and distribution networks allow their medicines to reach a larger audience, often overshadowing conventional cures.

Research funding and infrastructure: The economically most advanced countries, such as the United States and the European Union, frequently devote more resources to research and development, allowing them to perform extensive studies on traditional knowledge. As a result, there is a preference for western scientific methods and discoveries, which might diminish the value of traditional knowledge and practices.

Regulatory frameworks: The developed countries frequently impose their regulatory standards and requirements on traditional medicines. Compliance with these standards can be challenging for local practitioners, leading to the marginalization of traditional medicine in favour of large pharmaceutical companies.

Education and training: At the influence of western medicines, most of the countries often prioritize allopathic medicine over traditional medicine (Thorsen, R. S., & Pouliot, M., 2016)¹⁰. Consequently, healthcare professionals may be more inclined to prescribe western pharmaceuticals instead of traditional remedies, reinforcing the dominance of western medicine in healthcare.

Cultural hegemony: Westernization has contributed to the erosion of traditional knowledge and practices in many regions. As western medicines become more widely accepted and integrated into healthcare systems, traditional medicine may be perceived as inferior or outdated, further marginalizing its role in healthcare.

To promote traditional knowledge in healthcare and guarantee that local populations receive their fair part of the benefits, a coordinated approach incorporating international agencies and drawing on best practices can be used:

Legal frameworks and benefit-sharing agreements: The establishment of international and national legal frameworks that recognize and protect traditional knowledge is critical for the preservation and promotion of

⁸<https://theconversation.com/how-colonialism-influenced-modern-healthcare-69149>

⁹Gurgula O. (2020). Strategic Patenting by Pharmaceutical Companies - Should Competition Law Intervene? <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40319-020-00985-0>

¹⁰Thorsen, R. S., & Pouliot, M. (2016). Traditional medicine for the rich and knowledgeable: challenging assumptions about treatment-seeking behaviour in rural and peri-urban Nepal. <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapol/czv060>

traditional knowledge and practices. Furthermore, these frameworks should ensure that the advantages of using traditional knowledge are distributed fairly and equitably to the communities that have conserved and cultivated this knowledge over time. The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) can both play important roles in the establishment and implementation of such legal frameworks since they have the experience and resources to design effective policies and guidelines.

In addition, traditional knowledge is frequently threatened by reasons such as globalization, cultural assimilation, and biopiracy. As a result, there has been an increase in calls for the creation of legal frameworks that recognize and safeguard traditional knowledge, as well as the promotion of benefit-sharing agreements that assure equitable returns to the communities that have cultivated this knowledge. The WIPO and the WTO can help build such frameworks by encouraging dialogue and collaboration among member states, indigenous peoples, and other stakeholders. They can also encourage the exchange of best practices, capacity building, and the establishment of guidelines for the recognition, protection, and sharing of benefits derived from traditional knowledge use. Furthermore, these organizations can assist governments in adapting existing intellectual property and trade laws to accommodate traditional knowledge's distinctive qualities, such as its collaborative nature, oral transmission, and intergenerational preservation.

The Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from Their Utilization is an instrumental example that can help address the challenges of protecting traditional knowledge. The Nagoya Protocol increases legal certainty and transparency of the use of traditional knowledge in practices and research¹¹. It promotes benefit-sharing, particularly when traditional knowledge leaves the country that provided them, and it creates more predictable circumstances for access to traditional knowledge. The Nagoya Protocol also offers incentives to protect and sustainably use of traditional knowledge.

Encourage the development of local traditional medicine industries: By promoting the interchange of information, technology, and best practices in the field of traditional medicine, international organizations can play an important role in boosting local practitioners and companies. This collaborative approach contributes to capacity building and guarantees that traditional healing methods continue to exist and serve communities worldwide.

India's Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL), for example, acts as a comprehensive library of traditional medicinal knowledge. The TKDL not only documents and protects this precious information, but it also plays an important role in combating bio-piracy and unfair patenting of indigenous healing procedures. The TKDL guarantees that traditional medicine knowledge is accessible and safeguarded for future generations by digitizing and cataloguing it. This can be followed by other countries and together the countries who find their traditional knowledge is being misappropriated by others can create a common forum or block on the matter.

International organizations can also help local traditional medicine enterprises by providing practitioners with training and capacity-building programs. Workshops, mentorship programs, and collaborative research projects that assist bridge the gap between traditional and modern medicine are examples of this. Furthermore, international organizations can help to support local traditional medicine businesses by facilitating collaborations with academic institutions, pharmaceutical corporations, and research organizations to foster innovation and the creation of new products derived from traditional cures.

Invest in traditional medicine research: It is essential to invest in traditional medicine research. One of the significant benefits of investing in traditional medicine and health care research is the discovery of novel treatments and therapies, which can improve healthcare options and accessibility for millions of people throughout the world. International organizations can play a critical role in bridging funding disparities and problems in traditional medicine research by encouraging collaboration between industrialized and developing countries.

¹¹ <https://www.cbd.int/abs/infokit/revised/web/factsheet-nagoya-en.pdf>

Create culturally relevant regulatory frameworks: Regulatory standards that are responsive to local norms and practices in collaboration with local communities and traditional medicine practitioners can be created. This technique will allow traditional medicines to fulfil safety and efficacy standards while maintaining cultural importance.

Promote traditional medicine education: Encouraging the incorporation of traditional medicine into the curricula of medical schools and health education institutions will play a critical role in promoting traditional health practices. Providing tools, rules, and best practices can assist raise awareness among healthcare practitioners about the importance of traditional knowledge.

Increase public understanding and appreciation: The governments, international organizations and NGOs should support public awareness initiatives emphasizing the worth and importance of traditional knowledge and medicine. Sharing success stories, research findings, and cultural insights can help to dispel myths and support traditional medicine's incorporation into modern treatment.

Foster international cooperation: Strengthening collaboration between countries and organizations such as WIPO and WTO to exchange knowledge, resources, and experience in the field of traditional medicine is so crucial. These organizations can help build traditional medicine companies in under-resourced countries and encourage the integration of traditional medicine into global healthcare systems by developing collaborations.

CONCLUSION

The effort of decolonizing global health through the promotion of traditional knowledge in healthcare and medicine is a critical endeavour with the potential to alter health systems and improve the general well-being of individuals globally. We can build a more inclusive and diversified healthcare landscape that respects and incorporates multiple cultural and historical views by recognising the importance and usefulness of traditional medical techniques. To achieve this, we may consider undertaking the following recommendations:

1. Promote transparency and sharing of information on the use of traditional medicine and healthcare knowledge in modern health research, ensuring that communities and individuals are properly informed and recognized for their efforts.
2. Advocate for the equitable distribution of profits resulting from inventions or developments based on traditional knowledge, ensuring that local communities or those who have historically carried down this knowledge are recognized and compensated for their contributions.
3. Encourage multidisciplinary research cooperation between traditional healers, medical practitioners, and researchers to promote the documentation, validation, and distribution of traditional medical knowledge.
4. Create culturally sensitive training programs for healthcare workers so that they can understand and appreciate the value of traditional healing techniques and incorporate them into their clinical practice when appropriate.
5. Create regulatory frameworks and norms to oversee traditional medicine practice, assuring safety, efficacy, and quality control while protecting cultural heritage.
6. Provide resources and financial support to initiatives and organizations that aim to conserve and promote traditional medical knowledge, as well as push for legislation that acknowledge the legitimacy and worth of these practices.
7. To eliminate past biases and prejudices against traditional medicine, encourage communication and mutual respect among all stakeholders, including governments, healthcare institutions, and indigenous populations.