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# Traditional knowledge in Folklore Practices - A Review

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## ABSTRACT

Traditional knowledge, often referred to as TK, is a fundamental concept that is closely tied to the traditions and cultures of different nations across the globe. It primarily encompasses the extensive experiences and enduring practices of specific regional, indigenous, or local communities. Moreover, it includes the collective wisdom, knowledge, teachings, and accumulated experiences of these communities, typically passed down orally from one generation to the next. As it is rooted in the unique knowledge held by ordinary individuals, including ethnic communities residing in specific regions or countries, this knowledge is limited to the genetic and non-genetic resources accessible within their immediate surroundings. This article emphasizes the significance of case studies, which hold potential interest and valuable information for AYUSH doctors and researchers engaged in drug development and related research and development programs. The majority of case studies included in this publication are previously unidentified or less widely known, and may not be documented in conventional *Ayurvedic* literature.

**Key words:** *Traditional Knowledge, AYUSH, Ethnic communities, Ayurvedic literature.*

## INTRODUCTION

The indigenous knowledge-based traditional system of medicine is a wise approach that has proven to be life-saving for people in various regions. Since 1970, the World Health Organization (WHO) has been promoting the conservation of national heritage pertaining to ethno-medicines and ethno-pharmacology. Additionally, they advocate for the reintroduction of medicinal and aromatic plants into the primary healthcare systems of their member countries.

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According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 80% of the global population residing in developing nations, predominantly, rely on traditional medicine as their primary form of healthcare.<sup>[1]</sup> The significance of traditional knowledge (TK) is underscored by the fact that over 80% of the essential requirements for survival among the world's impoverished population rely directly or indirectly on the utilization of biological resources and the associated TK. However, TK is currently facing rapid erosion due to the evolving lifestyles of individuals. As a result, there is an immediate requirement to systematically record and document this valuable information for the well-being and improvement of future generations. Therefore, an endeavour is being made to collect diverse knowledge from folk practitioners.

The health tradition of the Kani tribe, residing in the forests of the Southern Western Ghats region in Kerala, is considered one of the most comprehensive knowledge systems of Tribal Medicine in India. The Kanis, an indigenous tribe predominantly found in the

Thiruvananthapuram District of Kerala, have an ethnic background characterized by a mix of Dravidian, Veddoid, and Negrito traits. Within the tribe, the tribal physician, known as "Plathi," serves as a repository of invaluable medical wisdom.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The collection of all scientific data and documents is sourced from pertinent literary references and published articles.

### Case 1 – Sudorification<sup>[2]</sup>

Sudorification is a form of medicinal steam bath that involves inducing artificial sweating over a span of 7-14 days. This treatment is prescribed for various dermatological conditions and for the management of insect bites. Alongside the steam bath, a decoction is prepared using specific medicinal substances, which are also recommended for internal consumption. The primary goal of this therapy is to cleanse and purify the impure blood within the body.

### Procedure

The special hut comprises two chambers positioned at different elevations: the Ground Chamber and the Upper Chamber. The Ground Chamber contains a sizable conical hearth and an earthen pot equipped with a medium-sized bamboo pipe. In the Upper Chamber, there is a platform constructed from bamboo stems, covered by a large cylindrical structure measuring five feet in height and three feet in diameter. This covering, made from *Ochlandra* stem (Bamboo stem) and coated with cow dung, ensures a sealed area of steam around the patient who is seated on the platform. Throughout the process, the top of the covering is sealed with a blanket. A total of 68 raw drugs, thoroughly cleaned and crushed, are placed in the earthen pot along with water in a 1:4 ratio.

When the hearth is uniformly heated, steam flows through a pipe and enters the upper chamber where the patient sits. Consequently, the patient sweats profusely, and it is advised to remain in that position for 15 to 40 minutes, as instructed by the healer. This treatment is suitable for different skin conditions caused by snake, dog, spider, or scorpion bites or

poisons, as well as for Psoriasis. Additionally, a decoction made from 47 medicinal substances is recommended for internal consumption. The primary goal of this therapy is to cleanse the impure blood within the body.

### Case 2 – Thiruvizha Chardi

Thiruvizha *Chardi* is a specific treatment method used to induce vomiting by administering a medicinal plant called *Lindernia crustacea* (Scrophulariaceae), which is locally known as *Meenagani* or *Nilakanthiram*. The term *Thiruvizha* refers to a location, while *Chardi* means vomiting. One such practice is still prevalent in a Shiva Temple located in the *Thiruvizha* area of Alappuzha district, Kerala. For instance, inducing vomiting is a common method used to treat various ailments such as asthma, mental disorders, poison elimination, and intoxication. The primary objective of this treatment is to purify the nerves, respiratory system, and digestive system.

### Procedure

*Thiruvizha Chardi* is a distinctive and unusual ritualistic procedure utilized for the purpose of detoxifying the entire digestive system. The ritual commences on the previous night with the Guruthi Pooja, aimed at purifying the patient's mind and body as a necessary prerequisite. The following morning, the medicinal herb is gathered freshly, and its juice is extracted. This juice is then combined with cow's milk and offered to the deity, seeking Lord Shiva's blessings to enhance the potency of the medication. Subsequently, the *Prasadam* (medicine) is administered to the patient while chanting the *Panchakshari Manthra*. Right after the treatment is administered, the patient is instructed to walk around the shrine. Thirst is relieved with the consumption of lukewarm water, and patients begin to vomit successively. The ritual concludes with the patients drinking tender coconut water, followed by consuming *Payasam*, a sweet dish made from rice gruel, milk, and jiggery/sugar. This treatment method is highly effective in treating conditions such as insanity and alcoholism (as a de-addiction measure). Additionally, it serves as a medicinal means to detoxify the entire body and mind.

**Case 3: Amrithapala (*Decalepis arayalpathra*)**

*Amrithapala*, a unique plant species that is native to the forests of the Southern region of the Western Ghats in Kerala, is utilized by the local 'Kani' tribe as a potent remedy for peptic ulcers, cancer-like conditions, and as a rejuvenating tonic. Research conducted on Ayurvedic literature suggests that this plant may correspond to the '*Thampra Rasasyani*' mentioned in Thayyil Kumaran Krishnan's *Oushadha Nighantu* (1906).

**Method of Preparation**

The juice obtained from the freshly crushed or pounded tuberous root of *Amrithapala* is combined with an equal amount of fresh coconut kernel juice. The mixture is then boiled until it reaches a semi-solid consistency, and after cooling down, it is administered in doses of 10-15 grams twice daily for a period of 15-30 days. This treatment is effective in curing various types of peptic ulcers and cancer-like conditions. Additionally, it is suggested as a stamina enhancer and blood purifier.

**Case 4: Fumigation therapy of tribes from Vellaramkuthu colony**

This case describes an innovative approach to fumigation therapy specifically used for treating piles. The therapy involves a unique wooden stool with a hollow shape, on which the patient sits. Inside the stool, there is a compartment that contains a specially formulated mixture consisting of three raw drugs, such as dammar and *Achyranthes aspera*. Additionally, a small piece of flesh is obtained from the head of a forest cane turtle (*Kareelama*) without causing harm to the animal. These ingredients are then fumigated within the stool. The patient suffering from piles or hernia is instructed to sit on the wooden stool for duration of 5 to 10 minutes. This distinctive treatment was created by the tribes (Muthuvan, Malaarayar, Mannan, and Kurichiyar) residing in the Vellaramkuthu colony of Kuttampuzha, Ernakulam district.

**Case 5: Extraction technique of Python Fat.**

In the past, it was customary for the Kani tribe to frequently extract fat from pythons.

The aerial roots of the *Ficus benghalensis* tree, commonly known as Peral, are utilized by the Kani tribe to ensnare Pythons. The snake is secured with these roots and placed in a position where its ventral side faces upwards, supported by two sticks on either side. A cut approximately one foot in length is made in the abdominal area. The blood is wiped away using a clean cloth, and fat deposits are extracted using a small piece of wood. The incision is then closed using fibers from the *Helicteres isora* plant (*Idampiri valampiri*) and a needle made from the stem of the *Ochlandra* (Bamboo) plant. Finally, the Python is released back into the wild.

**Medicinal Properties**

The Kani tribe utilizes Python fat and flesh both externally and internally to treat a range of conditions, including skin diseases and injuries caused by trauma.

**DISCUSSION**

In this context, five separate instances of treatment demonstrate the impact of herbal plants found in various tribal regions. The effectiveness and medicinal properties of many plants remain unexplored. Sudorification, which involves an artificial steam bath, is primarily utilized for insect bites. However, according to Ayurvedic references, *Swedana* (sudorification) is contraindicated in cases of *Visha* (poisoning). Interestingly, it is mentioned in the chapter of *Susruta Samhita* dedicated to *Keeta Visha Chikitsa*<sup>[3]</sup> (treatment of insect venom). Although *Thiruvizha Chardi* cannot be directly equated with *Vamana* in Ayurveda, the medication used in *Thiruvizha Chardi* possesses qualities that help eliminate harmful toxins while also nourishing the blood (*Raktashodhaka*).<sup>[4]</sup> The *Amritapala* herb has attracted significant research attention and has been granted multiple patents. According to the narrative, Hanuman consumed the creamy extract of this plant to alleviate his fatigue and uneasiness. The fourth case involves fumigation using *Apamarga* (*Achyranthes aspera*). In the ancient texts, numerous references to *Apamarga* were found in the context of *Arsas* (piles). As per *Ashtanga Hrudaya Arsochikitsa*, a formulation has been described consisting of the powder made from the bark and fruit

of *Kutaja*, along with the paste of *Apamarga*<sup>[5]</sup> and pills prepared with *Apamarga*, *Bhunimba*, and *Guda* (Jaggery), to eliminate the piles.<sup>[6]</sup> According to *Susrutha Samhita*, the roots of *Apamarga*, when washed with rice water and combined with milk, serve as a remedy for *Arsas*.<sup>[7]</sup> These are some *Ayurvedic* insights that can be connected to these tribal treatments.

## CONCLUSION

The current endeavour involved in compiling five distinct medical treatments that are practised in tribal regions. The villagers possess extensive traditional knowledge regarding medicinal plants and their applications. The people living in rural areas of this district heavily rely on these medicinal plants due to their easy availability, affordability, and proven effectiveness. It is crucial to preserve these valuable medicinal plants by cultivating and domesticating them. Prioritizing the comprehensive documentation of these medicinal plants is essential for the benefit of future generations, as the valuable knowledge may vanish once the local healers pass away. Nonetheless, additional research is required to explore the chemical components and conduct clinical studies.

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