COPPER VESSEL, MAGIC AND DISEASE

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ABSTRACT: The use of a copper vessel as a magic and a medical aid in South Indian Folkmedicine is described. The authors discuss its relation to the neglected external treatments of Siddha Medicine and the use of cupping glasses in West Germany. With this article they want to rise the interest in a comparative study of the different medical systems and to emphasize the use of the external treatments in Siddha Medicine, which are rarely practiced today.

Getting into contact

It was already dark when we arrived at a town on the east shore of Tamil Nadu that evening. Our bus stopped in front of a big temple, where a busy life was still going on. Pilgrims were rushing towards the temple, a smell of incense was in the air. Drums and trumpets announced the appearance of Lord Murugan’s statue, slowly moved by pilgrims on a bright golden shining wagon.

Near by the temple there was a small clinic run by Siddha physicians for many generations past. Economically this clinic belongs to the temple, initiated for the social welfare of the community.

We entered the clinic and hoped that the Siddha physician could answer some of our questions regarding Siddha Medicine. The room was divided by two benches, a woman’s and a man’s section. On the left side stood the life size statue of a Siddha saint, of about one and a half meters height. Behind this was a table with all kinds of medicine bottles and boxes. On the bench was a money box for donations, given by the patients to the temple.

Treatment itself was free.

The old Siddha physician was sitting behind a big table in the middle of the room. He interrupted the treatment of a patient to welcome us. After he had finished he openly discussed all of our questions. But at one point in our talk he smiled and made a little diffuse hand movement, obviously somewhat baffled and shy.

In this moment of uncertainty a village woman who had come as a patient and watched the scene for a while, grasped the situation and began to explain our question, enjoying presenting her knowledge.

Not only this, she also gave a small demonstration of two healing methods which are widely used by housewives in South India.

Several times we experienced similar situations at different places during the several months journey through Tamil Nadu. We made this journey to gather some basic
knowledge about the Siddha system and South Indian folk medicine.

A healing ritual

The first method demonstrated appeared to us to be similar to shamanistic healing rituals, deeply connected to the magic methods of “tristi kalippu”, which means according to our informants something like: “avoidance of evil sight”. The method itself is called “cempu karru pitippu” or “muccu pitippu” by the village people.

The patient’s body is wiped from head to foot with a piece of white cotton. Then the cotton is moved around the patient’s head three times. Afterwards the piece of cloth is burned inside a brass or copper vessel (cempu). While the cloth is still burning the vessel is place upside down on a plate filled with water. The fire inside creates a vacuum with a bubbling sound.

This rituals is performed for patients who are effected by evil sight (tristi) and the belief is that the evil spirit is caught in the vessel. After the vessel has been kept for twelve hours, the water and the rest of the cloth are thrown away out of the house.

During our months stay in Tamil Nadu, we found several variations of this healing ritual though the basic idea was always the same: the liberation of the patient from an evil sight and is effect by evacuating a vessel and placing it with its opening on a plate of water thus allowing the vessel to suck the water with a gurgling noise.

As an example of the different variations of performing this ritual the use of an earthen pot instead of a copper vessel can be mentioned. Instead of evacuating it with the burning cloth the earthen pot is filled with water and heated over an open fire. The boiling water will then be thrown away and the hot empty pot placed quickly with its opening on a water plate.

While the water is sucked, the patient has to knock with his hand on the pot three times and has also to say his name three times.

Once we also saw that three different herbs were mixed with a handful of crystal salt and added to the water in the plate. (1)

The variations of how to perform this healing ritual are many and need not be enumerated here. The day to day use of these methods shows us that it is indeed a living folk medicine. (2)

A Medical treatment

A second method of treatment which we want to describe in this context is also known as “karru pitippu” in Tamil Nadu. For this treatment a piece of cloth burning inside a copper vessel is also used. But here the vessel is directly applied to the skin of the patient, sucking skin and tissue. It is believed that the patient is relieved from too much air in his body, so it is mainly used for “gas troubles”, flatulence etc. It also has the effect of decreasing pain and can directly be applied on the affected area, mainly on the patient’s back. The housewives often hold the opinion that the vessel will only suck properly if the patient really suffers from “gas troubles”. It would not work in healthy persons.

During treatment the vessel should not be removed from the patient’s body by force. It will fall down by itself after some time. The vessel can be applied for sucking several times until the pain subsides. According to Practioners of this method, it is a sign of cure when the vessel does not suck anymore after several applications. (3)
In this treatment, too we found several variations; some people said that they use a drinking glass instead of a copper vessel. In some cases the vessel was evacuated with burning straw or even burning camphor tablets which are available for devotional purposes in Hindu households. (4)

However, the basic principle was always the same, that is, producing a vacuum in a vessel to draw in the skin and underlying tissue. So far we have described two methods of South Indian folk medicine, a healing ritual and a medical treatment, both called “karru pitippu”. In both, the main instrument is the vessel and the main principle is “sucking”. In this paper we follow this connection and view both treatment in one context.

The evil sight

The healing rituals is mainly a performance to free somebody from “tristi”, i.e. the affection of an “evil sight”. The fear of being affected by “evil sight”. The fear of being affected by “evil sight” plays a great role in South Indian life and there are a lot of different practices to avoid it. Our informants explained, for example, that somebody who is building a new house fears the jealous thoughts of others and their “evil sight” – and undertake some precautions such as the placing of a puppet in front of his house. Or somebody who is having a good meal fears the jealous view of the hungry.

This is described by other authors similarly, e.g. by O. P. Jaggi; Folk medicine: “It is believed almost all over the world, more so among the tribal people in India, that some individuals have the faculty to cast a spell on others by just looking at them. Some do it involuntarily at whoever comes in their path, others do it voluntarily because they are jealous of others and desire to possess what others have… and as they cast the evil eye, the person or the thing faces misfortune. The thing may perish, the person may get ill or more often have an accident”.(5)

We offer another quotations from S. M. L. Lakshmanan Chettiar; Folklore of Tamil Nadu:

“If a person is eating all by himself, while a hungry one is looking at him, he will get a stomach – ache. The evil eye is said to be more effective and destructive among Jealous agriculturists.”(6)

In all cases the fear of an evil sight is an expression of a hidden social and individual conflict, i.e. an unconscious feeling of guilt.
towards the social community (or a certain person) and the fear of Jealousy.

So, the performance of the described ritual frees the patient from the fear of Jealousy without having to change or analyse his unconscious feelings of guilt. 

On the other hand, this ritual releases the community from social pressure and its performance allows the individual to neglect social rules or even to break social taboos. For example, it allows somebody to spend his money for his own sake and not for the poor in the community.

The cupping method.

While the healing reminds us of shamanistic performances or magic, the second method is a true medical treatment in which the vessel is directly applied on the affected or painful area of the body. This treatment is widely known as “cupping” in English.

Wherever this method was demonstrated to us it was obvious that only women were able to perform it correctly. While women were very serious and concentrated, the man joked and could often only be provoked to do some mock demonstration which they initiated in an over eager but careless way. As we saw cupping in villages mainly and practiced by house – wives with simple medical understanding, we came to the conclusion that it is a practice of South Indian folk medicine.

At the borderline between folk medicine and Siddha system

But as the cupping method is medical treatment which can be found in several classical systems of traditional medicine: what is its relationship to Siddha Medicine, which we consider as the classical system of South India?

Some of the Siddha physicians we met clearly stated that the cupping method is not a part of Siddha Medicine, whereas others regarded it as one of the external Siddha treatments. Indeed, it is dealt with in some recent articles as “muccu kalayam” wrongly interpreted as application of heat and therefore compared to moxibustion of Chinese medicine.

But in relation to the thermostimulus, the effect of “sucking” in this method is more important. And there is no need to compare the South Indian “muccukalayam” to
Chinese moxibustion, as the cupping method itself is known in Chinese medicine.

It is obvious that the cupping method is one the borderline between South Indian folk medicine and the Siddha system today; there seems to be some difficulty in integrating it within the scope of Siddha treatments.

An ancient list enumerates 64 different kinds of Siddha medicines and treatments. They are divided into 32 kinds of internal medicines (akamaruntukal) and 32 forms of external treatments (puramaruntukal). (9)

Among these 32 forms of external treatments we find particularly bloodletting, cauterization, colonic irrigation, leech application and others.

These are the same or at least similar in all classical systems of traditional medicine all over the world and are intended to purify the body by supporting its natural ability to expel the bad and toxic body fluids.

In this very context, also, the cupping method is practiced all over the world and when we compare its medical use, we conclude that the South Indian mucci pitippu method should find its place among the external treatments of Siddha Medicine. And, astonishingly, one of the 32 external treatments in Siddha system is urincal which can be translated as “sucking”.

Unfortunately, the research on Siddha Medicine of the last decades has concentrated on the internal medicines only and the external treatments are widely running out of use.

Looking at the history

In the following we want to shift the interest regarding cupping from India to Germany.

Before that we have to emphasize again that the cupping method is used in nearly all traditional medical systems, in Chinese, Tibetan, Indian, and even African medicine. It is also known that it was already developed among the ancient Greek and even the Egyptian people. We believe that the cupping method belongs to the oldest medical practices of the world. Its use reaches back to what is called “Demonic Medicine”. The healer or the shaman of those times sucked the evil spirit out of the possessed patient. He is doing so even today, sucking the patient’s skin directly with his mouth, with the help of a bamboo tube, or a horn, or any other item. Later on, in the period of classical systems of traditional medicine, the cupping method was still used but with different interpretations. It was not the demon or the evil spirit anymore which had to be sucked out. Disease was interpreted as a disturbance of the equilibrium of the microcosmic forces and matters in man, and so the cupping method was used during this period to suck out the bad and toxic body fluids and matters. Within this theoretical context the cupping vessel is still used in nearly all classical systems of traditional medicine.(10)

It is not only the body fluid which is expelled by this treatment, the microcosmic principles of “phlegm”, “bile”, “blood”, and “wind” are also influenced in this way.

Today we use the cupping method in Germany based mainly on the theory of reflexology.

The theory of reflexology does not deal with microcosmic forces or body fluids at all. The idea behind reflexology is that inner organs are reflected on the surfaces of the body, the skin and the muscles, for example.
Thus we know certain areas and points on the skin which are connected with certain inner organs. If one of those organs is affected, the related area may be painful, red, or tight. Tender, swollen, jelly-like knots may also be present.

We apply cupping glasses on such places to treat the inner organs as well as the painful area of the surface of the body. In short, in its long history the cupping method was initially used as magic. Later it was used for sucking the bad humours, and today the effect of cupping is often interpreted as a strong stimulation of the skin which reflects the inner organs.

In this context we want to stress that the basic method of applying the cupping glasses has remained surprisingly constant throughout the centuries, whereas the interpretation of its effect changed completely.

Interpretations and applications of cupping vessels found today

| Modern trends in Naturopathy:                  |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| Sucking of particular areas on the skin       |
| according to reflexology in order to stimulate |
| related inner organs.                         |

| Traditional medical systems:                  |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| Sucking of toxic body fluids to balance       |
| the microcosmic forces in man                 |

| “Demonic Medicine”                            |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| Sucking of evil spirits to liberate the        |
| possessed patient                             |

Fig.3

This is a striking phenomenon in the history of medicine which both philosophers and physicians have to think about, but it cannot be discussed here in depth. We recognize, however, that the specific model of medical interpretations is less important in the evolution of history than is the living experience of its value as a treatment.

Cupping method in West – Germany.

As a main medical system in West Germany we find what is called unfortunately, “modern”, or “western” medicine, or even just “allopathy”.

Pages 97 - 106
We have also a few medical practitioners ("Heilpraktiker") who know by experience or by tradition different ways to heal such as chiropractice, herbal treatment, baths, plasters, leech application and also, as one among many others, homeopathy.

A typical example of these is the use of cupping glasses which we call “schroepfen”.

We use several special glasses with different shapes and different sizes. Some are connected with a rubber ball for creating the vacuum. Amongst the various ways used to evacuate the glasses, the use of fire is the preferable one. It is cheap and simple, it warms the glasses for the conduct of the patient and it creates a sufficient vacuum for the treatment. When the patient watches the practitioner handling the fire element with elegance, there is a positive psychological effect as well.

There are three main methods used to evacuate the glasses with fire:

1. A small piece of cotton wool is twirled around a “cotton carrier”, dipped into a Petri − dish of spirit (or alcohol) and lit. The flame is shortly induced into the glass which is held upside down and immediately placed on the affected area of the skin.

2. The second method is practiced mainly while the patient is sitting. A piece of cotton wool is dipped into spirit and fixed inside the glass. The cotton swab is lit and the glass is immediately placed on the affected area of the skin.

3. The third method is more difficult and has the strongest sucking effect. One or two drops alcohol are placed in the glass. The glass is shaken slowly with a circular movement so that a thin film of alcohol covers the inside of the glass. Afterwards the “glass” is lit and immediately placed on the skin of the patient.

All these methods seem to be very easy to perform and they are indeed so. Nevertheless, it takes some training and concentration not to burn the skin of patient.

Different shapes and sizes of glasses were developed for special purposes of treatment. One common example is the milk pump which is used by mothers to extract the breast milk.
Another example is the “Roeder – Set” (named after the inventor), which consists of several long, narrow, tube-like glasses used to suck the pus from the infected tonsils directly through the opened mouth.

A special glass is used also for massaging. Here the sucking glass is moved slowly on the back of the patient where massage – oil has already been applied. The edges of the glass are especially thick and round so that it will not harm the patient’s body. Furthermore, the shape should allow a comfortable handling for the practitioner. Cupping massage is very appealing to the patient and has a strong reflexive effect on the internal organs.

Finally we want to mention a combination of the cupping method with blood letting. In the treatment the skin of the patient is punctured slightly with a needle or a lancet to cause bleeding. Then a cupping glass is placed on it to suck out the blood. The indications for this treatment are nearly the same as for blood letting.

The described examples of different types and techniques of cupping show that it is an elaborate medical treatment. And, in fact, the cupping method and its specialized forms of applications are used today only by medical practitioners and a few physicians, but rarely by laymen.
The cupping method, as it is practiced in Germany today, should not be considered harm nor heal. Beyond the danger of burning the patient’s skin, there are exact indications as well as contraindications as in each and every treatment. A sound knowledge of the theory and practice of reflexology is, of course, essential for the correct use of cupping glasses on the reflex zones.

If the practitioner chooses a wrong area for cupping, he may, for instance, cause an abortion in a pregnant woman. And as another example, it is totally forbidden to cut directly above the processes of the spinal vertebrae for the bleeding – cupping method.

When the cupping method is performed correctly and with concentration it is a harmless and effective treatment. We have provided here an explanation of the techniques of cupping, but is not within the scope of this paper to describe the underlying principles of reflexology in detail. When we finally look back on our experiences in South India, we find that many of the well educated Siddha physicians look down upon this valuable treatment. The credit for its preservation goes to the village women and the housewives of South India who continue to practice this method.

Conclusions

Initially a South Indian healing ritual and a medical treatment were described, both known among the villages people as “karru pitippu”. Both, the magical and the medical aspects can also be found in the cupping methods of other countries in their development from so called “Demonic Medicine” to classical systems.

The two aspects can also be found in the Tamil word karru which includes the meanings of “air”, “breath”, and “wind” as well as “evil spirit” and demon according to the well known dictionary of T. V. Sambasivam Pillai. (11)

The cupping method is practiced today in South India at a borderline between folk medicine and the Siddha system and is related to both.

We tried to show that it has to be considered as a medical treatment as it is comparable to the elaborate cupping methods of other countries, for instance of West Germany.

We hope that the cupping method will increase in usage and find its place among the external treatments of Siddha Medicine. And, as the cupping method is only one examples of these, we want to stress further that the external treatments of Siddha Medicine should be rediscovered developed, and practiced much more in future.

We do not consider any traditional system of medicine as something “petrified” or rigid, as something which should be learned medicine has an old heritage which has to be revived again and again by each generation. And it needs not only to be learned but to be critically developed. There is nothing in the traditional medicine which is not also worthy of critique!

The comparison of the various classical systems of medicine shows that a lot of knowledge about methods and treatments were exchanged repeatedly from one country to another. And instead of claiming again and again that “our own system” is the oldest and the best one from which all medical systems of others borrowed, - instead of repeating this, we should accept
that all classical systems developed in one historical context as they all were borrowing and stealing knowledge wherever necessary and from wherever possible.

The similarities of all traditional systems, and more so, the numerous early historical reports of traveling physicians and the early translations of old medical books proves that the medical systems never developed totally independent from each other, nor are any really unique!

This might astonish some of the physicians who confuse reported stories about the genesis of their traditional system with history.

The chronicles of medical systems traditionally date their origin back to times immemorial or to the unique teaching of a guru or a god. However, we should merely regard these stories as testaments of deep respect for the traditional knowledge, not necessarily as definite historical events. Furthermore, the believe in a divine origin created over the centuries a feeling of urgent obligation in man to preserve and fully pass on this knowledge. We should thus regard such reports as what they are, “story”, but not “history”!

Whether the cupping method was practiced in the traditional Siddha system or not, we wish to stress that it fits to the external treatments of Siddha Medicine. As cupping is only an example of one of these, we hope that all the external treatments will receive more attention.

The ancient physicians have broadened their knowledge not only by meditation, experience and roading the old texts, but also by learning from foreign countries. We should use our opportunities today to compare and exchange our different ideas and methods of medicine.

Since we should not only research history but also fact the future, we hope that our small example of a comparative study on cupping methods in South India and West – Germany will inspire the search for new paths between our various traditions in medicine.

Finally we would like to say that we are happy about what we have learned about the South Indian cupping method from the village women. Also we want to thank all Siddha physicians who supported our studies.

Annotations and References

1. The three herbs are called kuppai meni (Acalipha Indica, Linn), murunkai (Moringa oleifera, Lam.; Hyperanthamoringa), and mukkarattai (Boerhavia diffusa, Linn.; B. erecta; B. repens).

2. This rituals can also be found as part of the wedding ceremony among the Hindus in Tamil Nadu. The described healing ritual is called “karru pitippu” by the village people, which is a word for an illness in its very sense. It is also called “muccu pitippu” and “muccu kalayam”.

3. We noticed that in the some cases the vessel was not applied on the skin properly so that there was no “sucking effect”. However, the women concluded that the patient did not suffer from “gas troubles” and that he might suffer from another diseases, or that he has been cured by the previous application of the cupping vessel.
4. Another variation of this method is given by O. P. Jaggi, in: History of Science and Technology in India, Folk Medicine: two photographs of this method are shown with the following note: “Pain in the abdomen is being treated by placing a lighted diya (lamp) over the abdomen and placing an inverted earthen pot over that”.

5. O. P. Jaggi: History of Science and Technology in India, Vol.3, Folk Medicine, Delhi, page 64. (1973).

6. S. M. L. Lakshmanan Chettiar: Folklore of Tamil Nadu, New Delhi, page 69. (1973).

7. One could regard these methods as a kind of psychotherapy. But unlike western psychoanalysis, unconscious feelings are not analyzed and brought to consciousness. Here, the healer treats the patient within the framework of his unconscious projections. Indian psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar has written an interesting book discussing the relationship of these different kinds of psychotherapy.

8. Comparing the following quotations with our description, it will become clear that muccu kalayam has no relation to Chinese moxibustion. It seems that the authors do not really know the practice of muccu kalyam in South Indian folk medicine. Even the small explanation of muccu kalayam given in the dictionary of T. V. Sambasivam Pillai states clearly that the cupping method or the healing ritual is meant, not moxibustion. Furthermore we could not find any medical treatment in Siddha system or South Indian folk medicine which is a direct correlation to Chinese moxibustion. Until now there is no proof for such questionable statements that moxibustion (and even acupuncture) was originally developed in the South Indian Siddha system and brought to China later on. Concerning this point we have to criticize the works of Thiru N. Kandaswamy Pillai and Prof. R. Kumarawamy. Although we respect them as among the first comparative studies on traditional medical systems with regard to Siddha medicine.

N. Kandaswamy Pillai: History of Siddha Medicine, Madras 1979, page 96: “Another method of Siddha therapy still in vogue is moxa. This involves placing small cones of combustible material on the skin directly over the diseased organ and igniting them. The patient remains immobile until these have finished burning. A blister and later a scar are formed on the skin. Favourite sites for moxibustion are the abdomen, back and pre-auricular areas of the face. This method survives in folk medicine, of Tamil Nadu under the name of “Muchukkalayam”. (Cf. also page 7 of this book). R. Kumarawamy: Correlative Studies on Tamil and Chinese Medicines, in : S. V. Subramanian (et al) : Heritage of the Tamils. Siddha Medicine, Madras 1983, page 639: “Moxaclinics are as popular as the acupuncture clinics in the overseas countries. Surprisingly this treatment when investigated turns out to be South Indian in origin especially from the tail end of Tamil Nadu. It is corroborated through ethnomedical evidence that moxatherapy is nothing but a modified version of moochchukalayam based on the thermostimulus treatment given to the nerve endings at the acupuncture sites of the lumbar and abdominal points…”
9. Cf. for example: A. Suresh; G. Veluchamy: Surgery in Siddha System, in: S. V. Subramanian (et al): Heritage of the Tamils, Siddha Medicine, Madras 1983 – K. Parthasarathy: Intricacy of Siddha Pharmacy, in: Siddhar Seyal, Tamil – English Health Monthly, Vol. 9, No.12, 1984; Vol. 10, No. 5 -10, (1984 & 1985).

10. P. Kutumbiah mentions in ‘Ancient Indian Medicine’ the cupping method practiced with the help of a cow – born or a calabash in connection with blood letting, page 162: “Cupping of blood is similarly a mild form of treatment. A cow – horn with a small piece of cloth bound round the pointed end is used for this purpose, or a hollow calabash in which a burning wick is placed. Mention is also made of mere scarification (Lekhana, prachana) without the use of a sucking instrument (S. S. 1. 13)”.

11. Cf. T. V. Sambasivam Pillai Tamil English dictionary of Medicine, Chemistry, Botany and Allied Sciences, Madras, Vol. II, Page 1420 (1931).

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