

Materia Medica in the Indian Ocean World, c.1500-1800

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My current research project takes medicine as a lens to look at connectivities and discontinuities across the Indian Ocean region. The period studied is 1500-1800, a time that is often seen as the dawn of globalisation. For traditional histories of the Indian Ocean, however, it appears something of a limbo between the medieval connectivity exemplified by the Zheng Ho voyages and the steamships that turned the region into a so-called 'British lake'.

Medicines are trade objects but also things that act on our bodies, while medical theory connects our bodies to the wider universe. I think that looking at the exchange of medical things and medical ideas in this period can provide a perspective on big questions like migration, empire, and religious change in the region. My book project takes as its starting points, 'vegetable', 'animal' and 'mineral' drugs; medical objects; the ideologies of humoralism and spirit possession; and the medicine of migrants. The book will be accompanied by a series of case studies.

The first case study is of the 'China root', species of Smilax used to treat cases of syphilis after its appearance in the Old World at the close of the fifteenth century. China root appears everywhere in records of the period, touted as a miracle remedy from the miraculous land of China. However, by the sixteenth century, an American rival had appeared on the scene, all but obliterating the western market for the China root while failing to remove it from popular use in the Indian Ocean region. I use this case study to explore the competitive global market for drugs in the early modern world and how 'western' medicine gradually differentiated itself from accepted old world medical

standards. An article is published in *Social History of Medicine* (Soc Hist Med) (2015) 28 (1): 22-44. doi: 10.1093/shm/hku068, URL: <http://shm.oxfordjournals.org/content/28/1/22.abstract>).

Another case study focuses on Sri Lankan medical objects from the Kandyan period (c. 1595-1815) in museum collections. I use the objects to reflect on some key questions about cosmopolitanism and periodisation in Sri Lankan history as well as understanding how material culture relates to medical culture. The Casey Wood collection of medical objects from Sri Lanka is discussed on this blog, written with other McGill researchers while I was studying this collection (<http://blogs.mcgill.ca/caseywoodcollectionsproject/>).

A further case study in progress focuses on the medicinal tree *Azadirachta indica*, or 'neem'. Neem has been a test-case for battles over intellectual property, beginning with the legal battle over the patent claimed by a multinational company during the 1990s. This prompted an investigation of its traditional uses and widespread advocacy for planting and using neem, so that it now grows in around eighty countries. My work investigates the earlier history of the distribution of neem, looking at botanical descriptions and herbarium specimens from the late sixteenth century onwards. I am particularly interested in the transplantation of neem to Eastern Africa by South Asian migrants and its acceptance within traditional African medicine.

In addition to my own work, I organised a conference back in 2013 at McGill University called 'Histories of Medicine and Healing in the Indian Ocean World'. The papers from this conference as well as some additional essays and an afterword by Michael Pearson were edited by Facil Tesfaye and me and published as *Histories of Medicine and Healing in the Indian Ocean World* (Palgrave, 2015; Vol. 1

<http://www.palgrave.com/us/book/9781137567604> and 2 <http://www.palgrave.com/us/book/9781137567611>). The collection ranges

from work on the writings of al-Razi to fertility medicine on the early modern Malabar coast of India to the healthcare of migrant workers in Mauritius and it includes writings by historians and anthropologists.

My British Academy fellowship has also allowed me the time to complete work on my first monograph, *Hybrid Knowledge in the Early East India World* (Palgrave, 2016; <http://www.palgrave.com/la/book/9781137380197>) and to contribute to the co-edited volume, *The East India Company and the Natural World* (Palgrave, 2014 <http://www.palgrave.com/us/book/9781137427267>).