

Containers used to store and transport proprietary indigenous medical preparations (a survey conducted in the national museum)

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Abstract

Historical sources provide evidence towards an effective pattern of health preservation and system of medicine which existed from ancient times in Sri Lanka. The traditional physicians have used containers known as *heppu* or *karandu* (pill boxes) made from various materials such as gold, silver, copper and from buffalo horns to store proprietary indigenous medicine. In case of emergency, the traditional physicians used these containers for drug transportation. However, the material primarily used to make these containers had not been investigated systematically. Thus the aim of this study was to find out the primarily used material through survey at National Museum by means of examining the inventory and collection of containers. According to the results, the number of pill-boxes made from horns amount to 27 %, from ivory 24 %, from coconut husks 3.8 %, from turtle shells 3.8 %, and from wooden material 1.4 %. Therefore it is confirmed that the buffalo horns had been more frequently utilized for producing containers. This traditional physician was more accustomed to the use of buffalo horn containers as an instrument of self-defense (40.8 %), as a walking-stick (12.2 %) and as decorators (47 %). It is also evident that this material (buffalo horn) is more suitable for purposes of storing indigenous medicine. Analysis of chemical contents of the buffalo horns is suggested for further research. If buffalo horns are used as a material of containers which are environmental friendly, it provides an additional income to the manufacturer.

Key Words – Buffalo horn, Containers, Proprietary Indigenous Medical Preparations.

Introduction

Historical and archeological sources have proved that Sri Lanka has inherited health protective patterns and medical systems, which have derived from time immemorial.

During the reign of king Pandukabhaya (4th century B.C), steps had been taken preserve health of the masses². King Buddhadasa (3rd century A.C.) who was also involved in the field of medicine apart from his role as an administrator of the state, published a medical treatise, by the name of *Sarathu Sangrahaaya*, written in Sanskrit⁵. Archeological excavations have confirmed that, the first hospital in the world was constructed in Mihintale; and apart from this, there have been hospitals at locations such as at Alahana Pirivena Polonnaruwa and Medirigiriya¹. During these excavations, a large number of varied instruments supposed to have been utilized by the indigenous physicians have been discovered and it has been further confirmed that they have been prepared from metals such as iron⁶.

The study of the collection of artifacts in the anthropological and ethnological sections of the National Museum of Sri Lanka result that items

made by buffalo horns, used for storing prepared indigenous medicines during the 17th-18th century take precedence, because its percentage value is 67 %. It is possible to have been given a prominent status.

We are also in a position to present ample evidence that there had been a continuous link between man and cow from the origin of human civilization. From archaeological excavations conducted within territories belonging to Mohenjodaro and Harappa civilizations which are considered highly advanced during the period 2500 - 1500 B.C. it has been noted that the ancient man belonging to the Paleolithic period too² has used tools made of cow horns.

While a prominent status is accorded to the cow from among mammals that helped the maintenance of human civilization for a long period of time, there are factors to justify that its horns have been made used for the under mentioned purposes:

1. As a weapon

2. As a storing - tool for purposes of storing different substances.
 - 2.1 Singilonakappa -substances such as salt used as a substance of storing and transporting.
 - 2.2 For purposes of storing explosive chemicals.
 - 2.3 For purposes of storing Ayurveda medicines.
3. As a clinical tool (For extracting blood).
4. For purposes of manufacturing a handle or frame of a tool or special instrument, a spectacle frame to fabricate the handle of items as that of a sword, dagger, knife.
5. For purposes of manufacturing artistic items which could be used to decorate a house. If all these activities were to be carried out, the man should have possessed the technical knowledge of manufacturing implements with the aid of cow horns. When fabricating implements of cattle horns; they had the ability to shape the articles by heating them according to their requirements³.

Objectives

The objectives of the study included:

- Find out which material was primarily used to manufacture the containers that were utilized, to store and transport the proprietary indigenous medicine.
- Suggest further research that is important to find out the physical & chemical qualities of the material primarily used.

Material and methods

- A collection of containers utilized during the period of 17th – 19th century A.C is to be observed in the Anthropological & Ethnological section of the National Museum.
- Inventory - the details of the containers.
- Comparing the inventory first with collection of the containers.
- Taking photographs in support of the findings.

Results

Table 1: Number of the containers according to material used

The result shows buffalo horn is the most widely used material

| Material | Number | % |
|-------------------|--------|-------|
| 1.Gold | — | — |
| 2.Silver | — | — |
| 3.Buffalo horns | 71 | 66.98 |
| 4.Ivory | 26 | 24.52 |
| 5.Coconut Husk | 4 | 3.77 |
| 6.Turtle Shell | 4 | 3.77 |
| 7.Wooden Material | 1 | 0.94 |

Table 2: According to shape - (which were made from the buffalo horns)

| Shape | Number | % |
|-------------------------|--------|--------|
| Shape of horn | 23 | 32.39% |
| Circular | 37 | 52.11% |
| Shape of walking stick | 4 | 5.63% |
| Shape of various Animal | 7 | 9.85% |

Table 3: The number of containers used for different purposes (which were made from the buffalo horns)

| Purpose | Number | % |
|------------------------------|--------|-------|
| As a weapon | 29 | 40.81 |
| As a walking stick | 9 | 12.2 |
| As an article for Decoration | 33 | 47 |

Discussion & Conclusion

According to the survey conducted at the National Museum, it has been revealed that the traditional physicians used horn containers on large scale (66.98 %) during that period:

1. Buffalo horn containers were used on large scale (66.98 %). It was observed that buffalo horn containers were used as a weapon (40.81 %) instrument of self-defense.
2. The compartments (2.10) could be observed in all of the horn shape containers. The smallest compartment was 1.5 cm x 1.5 cm x 2 cm in size.
3. Since containers manufactured from elephant tusks too are in the collection, it would reveal the wealth and social status of the traditional physician.

4. A peculiar feature is that compartments have been allotted in the weapon type containers.
5. To manufacture the containers, buffalo horns were utilized in Sri Lanka, possibly because those were easily available and also comparatively larger in proportion than buffalo horns.

Therefore suitability of containers made of buffalo horns should be further investigated. A further research could be carried out to find the physical and chemical behavioral pattern of the primary substances of the buffalo horn.

References

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