

**INDIGENOUS MEDICINAL KNOWLEDGE IN PALM-LEAF  
MANUSCRIPTS COLLECTION AT THE LIBRARY OF  
UNIVERSITY OF SRI JAYEWARDENEPURA**

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**Abstract**

There is much evidence supporting that ancient ancestors of Sri Lanka had developed much glorious technology thousands of years ago before the emergence of modern technology. Their technology, traditional knowledge, creativity and things they did in everyday life perfectly embodied their intellectual knowledge. These include life experiences and oral tradition, which are called “indigenous knowledge”. Indigenous knowledge brings what they have seen; the things that were heard; and the teachings of elders learned by generation after generation. From generation to generation, indigenous knowledge was inherited from the native community of their ancestors. Accordingly, the native community as well as indigenous knowledge is an interconnected phenomenon. Indigenous knowledge mainly consists of two components: recognized knowledge and unacceptable knowledge. After the emergence of civilizations, the knowledge recognized by scholars and society was transferred into books, which is considered as recognized knowledge.

The characteristics of indigenous knowledge in the book of *Best Practices on Indigenous Knowledge*, a publication of UNESCO (2002:12-13) are as follows:

- Indigenous knowledge is location and culture specific
- Indigenous knowledge is the basis for decision making and survival strategies
- Indigenous knowledge is not systematically documented
- Indigenous knowledge concerns critical issues of human and animal life; primary production of human and animal life, natural resource management
- Indigenous knowledge is dynamic and based on innovation, adaptation, and experimentation
- Indigenous knowledge can be oral and rural in nature

It is clear that indigenous knowledge is diverse. Our old ancestors did not forget writing it on palm-leaf referring to autochthonous knowledge. Among the aggregation of indigenous knowledge written in this manner, the collection of palm-leaves manuscripts in the library of University of Sri Jayewardenepura, which is being conserved, is important.

On the other hand, indigenous knowledge has evolved from man's practical life-styles and therefore can be considered as a means of understanding their life based on this knowledge. Moreover this indigenous knowledge includes everything from Agriculture, Arts and crafts, Food and nutrition, Housing, Irrigation, Medicine, Folk beliefs to Forest lore which could be used simply to describe the day-today lives of the people without much effort.

Therefore, it is important to bring out the indigenous knowledge included in palm-leaf manuscripts, as it will facilitate using them whenever necessary. This study is an attempt made to analyze the content of the palm leaves collection in the library of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura.

The specific objectives of the study are to categorize the palm leaves collection according to the subjects and conduct a content analysis on medicinal palm-leaves manuscripts. The study is qualitative in nature and it adapts the content analytical technique using the secondary data included in the medicinal palm-leaves manuscripts collection in the Library of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura.

The palm-leaf manuscripts collection of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura comprises of 20 manuscripts, which were numbered from 1 to 20 for analytical purpose during the study. There were 18 palm-leaf manuscripts on indigenous medicine and they were considered for the content analysis. These included manuscripts written in Sinhala and Sanskrit languages, which are composed as both prose and verse.

These include same treatment methods for variety of physical and psychiatric illnesses in consistent with different medicine. Treatment methods are Churana, Guli, Kalka, Nasna and Vireka etc. It also included some recipes on treatment methods, such as, Churana (Choorna is a dry powder made by crushing and powdering the herbs), Guli (tablets), Kalka (Kalka is made by crushing the herbs and plants to make a paste), Nasna (medicine inhaled through the nose) and Vireka (purgative) for various diseases mainly fever, worm infection in children (ringworm), toothache, boils, stomachache, cough, strangulation, diarrhea, rickets, hypochondria, catarrh and headache.

In addition, some remedies and medicines for human skin diseases and all kinds of snakebites; as well as elephant diseases and treatments have been identified.

According to the content analysis, various prescriptions for some major diseases of human, treatment methods and medicines, as well as all snake toxins, treatment methods and medicines; also elephants' diseases, treatment methods and medicines could be identified. Therefore, it reveals that the Library of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura has a valuable palm-leaf manuscript collection on indigenous medicine.

**Keywords:** *Diseases, Indigenous Knowledge, Medical Treatment, Palm-leaves, University of Sri Jayewardenepura.*