

Medicines of the Earth and Traditional Cultures: Reflections on the Modes of Resistance and Construction of a Good Living



<https://doi.org/10.56238/innovhealthknow-036>

Jaqueline Rocha Oliveira

Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG)

Maria Eliana Barbosa Pereira (Mayô Pataxó)

Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG)

ABSTRACT

This study discusses traditional medicine, understood here as practices of healing, care and knowledge rooted in the local culture. The debate on these practices permeates academic studies, public policies of the health system, and collective actions of social movements. One of the initiatives of collective actions in traditional medicine is present at Maju, the school of Traditional Cultures and Knowledge of the Earth. This school is located in Caratinga – mesoregion of the Doce River Valley of Minas Gerais – and has popular education as one

of its main methodologies. The school's students are trained as therapists of traditional cultures, inspired by the worldview of good living, and by the meetings and work carried out with native peoples, quilombolas, healers, shamans, peasants and masters of local culture. These health care practices and the exchanges with the knowledge of the popular masters of the local culture are experienced by the students of the Maju school, and unfold in the realization of therapeutic work with social movements, especially the agroecological movement. The reflections raised in this essay are the result of research and studies on the subject in question, as well as the authors' experience report on the trajectories during the body therapy course that takes place at Maju, the school of Traditional Cultures and Knowledge of the Earth.

Keywords: traditional medicine, popular education, agroecology, well-being

1 INTRODUCTION

Resist not to destroy, but to build, I say (Walsh, 2017)

Transformations are underway, and insist on resisting through the cracks of the dominant colonialist/rationalist/colonial paradigm, which perceives nature as an *inexhaustible* resource territory, *used* to meet capitalist consumer needs. From this perspective, forms of resistance are established through other ways of life in communities with their practices of healing, care, and traditional medicine whose *territory is a shelter* for all living and non-living beings (SANTOS, 1994; ANTONGIOVANNI, 2006).

This other paradigm can be understood in the form of social organization of peasant, indigenous, quilombola, riverine peoples and other peoples who experience and construct other ways of being and living, where the human being is conceived as an integral part of the environment. These peoples are the guardians of a biocultural memory (TOLEDO & BARRERA-BASSOLS, 2008) whose diverse knowledge of healing and care can be understood as a cultural experience, whether through



the use of teas, clays and so many other knowledges acquired in coexistence with the land, the rivers, the plants, the masters of traditional knowledge. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2013, p.5), traditional medicine can be defined as:

The set of knowledge, skills, and practices based on indigenous theories, beliefs, and experiences from different cultures, explainable or not, used for the maintenance of health, as well as for the prevention, diagnosis, improvement, or treatment of physical or mental illness.

In the context of capitalist hegemony and an authoritarian state in the 1970s, the medicine of traditional peoples was called alternative medicine (MADEL T. LUZ, 2005), which would place in the same scope all therapies of traditional Brazilian peoples and those originating from abroad (such as traditional Chinese medicine, Ayurvedic medicine, acupuncture and others). It is considered that all these medicines have a great contribution to health care, however, in terms of public policy, greater visibility has been given to alternative medicine from other societies (MADEL T. LUZ, 2005). In this way, valuing the traditional medicine of the Brazilian peoples is a way of safeguarding the knowledge of the local culture.

Traditional medicine, in its diversity of uses and technologies, presents itself as local and community knowledge, marked by a complex ethnic diversity through the plurality of forms of knowledge touching life, death and transcendence (ANDRADE, 2016).

Considering that the practice of traditional medicine, in its various forms, is part of a cosmological conception of indigenous, autochthonous and Afro-American societies, we observe that many of these practices experienced in the Doce River Valley in Minas Gerais, are connected from an expression known worldwide:

Buen Vivir or Vivir Bien can also be interpreted as *sumak kawsay* (kíchwa), *suma qamaña* (aymara) or *nhandereko* (guarani), and presents itself as an opportunity to collectively build a new way of life (COSTA, 2015, p.75).

The expression "good living" appeared in the Constitution of Ecuador and Bolivia from the struggle of peasant and indigenous social movements, especially on the Rights of Nature. **In the region of the Doce River Valley of Minas Gerais**, the practices of traditional medicines, which are inspired by the worldview of good living, are allies and move together with the agroecological movement.

In this sense, we seek to reflect on how the forms of care, healing and traditional medicines of the various traditional peoples (from the Rio Doce region of Minas Gerais), inspired by the worldview of good living, remain in territories of resistance to the effects of modernity/colonialism/rationalism from myths, rituals, ancestral practices of the use of medicinal plants, bamboo, clay and among other



therapies. which are learned in the spaces of meeting and exchange of knowledge at the Maju School of Traditional Cultures and Knowledge of the Earth.

1.1 SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS AND HEALTH

When the Amerindian peoples were expelled from their territories, a lot of knowledge was lost from genocide and ethnocide, which has been ongoing since colonization. Knowledge of masters of knowledge, shamans and healers recognized as true living libraries, who through oral tradition perpetuate their knowledge through the generations. However, sometimes they are expropriated by large companies that sell their patents in order to profit from the cultural heritage of traditional peoples, justifying themselves by the project of modernity in discourses guided by the fable of 'progress' and economic growth at any cost.

The current war-death system is rooted in the civilizing-Western-patriarchal-modern/colonial project and in its capital heart. This project-logic is constitutive of the war-death system (in its present and its long duration), thus, it aims to mold and permeate all modes and possibilities of living, being, being, knowing, feeling, thinking and acting (Walsh, p.21, 2017).

The major socio-environmental impacts arising from this model of hegemonic (dis)development affect, above all, the traditional peoples who live off the land. The more impacts are generated in nature by human action, the more diseases are propagated, since the imbalance caused in nature can affect all forms of life, human and non-human. It is worth remembering that the large pharmaceutical industry has laboratories that produce pesticides used on a large scale by agribusiness, many of which are banned in the countries of the European Union, and which have been proven to affect food and therefore human and environmental health, contaminate rivers and gradually reduce the fertility of the land. These same industrial chains are not interested in the medicines of the land or in traditional healing and care practices, since they commercialize medicines on a large scale that serve to 'cure' diseases that are sometimes caused by the same food model based on industrialized products produced by agribusiness.

In this sense, human health is directly related to the health of the earth. Another major socio-environmental impact occurred in 2017 in the Minas Gerais region of Vale do Rio Doce, with the collapse of the Fundão dam in the city of Mariana-MG, built and operated by Samarco Mineração S/A, a company controlled by Vale and BHP Billion. The toxic sludge reached a radius of 853 kilometers between the states of Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo, causing a socio-environmental imbalance with the loss of biodiversity, contaminating water, soils and all kinds of life and causing territorial conflicts, which dramatically affected *the Watu* (Doce River, in the language of the Krenak people who live near the river).



Faced with this context of environmental catastrophes that have implications for human health, many of the practices of ancestral knowledge and health care suffer attempts to be erased by this colonialist/Eurocentric/modern/patriarchal paradigm, however, what are the forms of resistance that operate in traditional communities inspired by the worldview of good living? How do these forms of care, healing and traditional medicines remain in the Doce River Valley?

We do not intend to exhaust these issues; however, we seek to present some reflections generated by the experiences in the Maju School of Traditional Cultures and Knowledge of the Earth.

1.2 THE MAJU SCHOOL OF TRADITIONAL CULTURES AND GOOD LIVING

The Maju School of Traditional Cultures and Knowledge of the Earth is a project built in the collective, located in the Doce River Valley of Minas Gerais, which works to strengthen the biocultural memory (TOLEDO & BARRERA-BASSOLS, 2008) of the knowledge accumulated through the generations by regional popular masters, roots, healers, healers, midwives, quilombola peoples, peoples of the countryside and the forest from the works of therapies and traditional medicine.

The school has several courses such as body therapy and natura-therapy that take place from a popular education, with the methodology of Paulo Freire's culture circle (2002), African ancestral knowledge (OLIVEIRA, 2007), and the indigenous pedagogy of mandalas and ancestral dances. The systematization of all therapies is permeated by the author Pierre Weil (2006), who in his studies integrated science, art, philosophy and spirituality – a method called 'coffee'. The students who go through the school are trained as therapists of traditional cultures, inspired by the philosophy of Good Living and learn practices of caring for the health of the community and the environment. From the Maju school, the Association of Therapists of Traditional Cultures was created.

During the training process and after graduating, the therapists work in their communities with the practices of care and traditional medicine, and also participate in events or work in other communities where they offer their care and healing practices, one of the examples of action was the assistance to those affected by the Brumadinho dam collapse. Traditional medicine therapies or earth medicines (as they are also called by traditional medicine practitioners) are carried out with natural elements such as clay, medicinal plants, bamboo, which are used to make teas, massages, agroecological food and healing and care rituals. This form of care treats health in an integral way, connecting human feelings, emotions as well as the physical and spiritual body

The medicines of the Earth, inspired by the worldview of good living, constitute a spiral thought – this is the model of indigenous peoples, where the present and the past are connected from the ancestral roots and the solidary relations of cultures that influence the way people's lives are organized, and in other forms of sociability different from the capitalist accumulation model.



There are many other relationships that are inspired by principles of unquestionable importance: solidarity, for example, which governs the functioning of social security, in addition to the various forms of reciprocity in the economies of indigenous peoples and nationalities (COSTA, 2015, p.185).

For the Ecuadorian anthropologist Viteri Gualinga, good living can be considered as a philosophy of life of indigenous peoples, whose worldview differs from the dominant Western thought, seeking the harmony of community life, between individual, society and planet. "Buen Vivir recovers this ancestral wisdom, breaking with the alienating process of capitalist accumulation that transforms everything and everyone into a thing" (COSTA, 2015, p.14).

2 FINAL THOUGHTS

Traditional indigenous, Afro-American, and quilombola peoples are peoples who have a common territorial identity, as they fought and survived ethnocide and slavery during the colonial period and who still fight today for the demarcation of their territories. Ancestral traditional medicine is practiced by these peoples as resistance, and as an oral tradition passed down through the generations.

Agroecology, the use of native seeds, medicinal plants, phytotherapy and the cultivation of pesticide-free food are essential components of 'care' for human health and the various forms of animal and plant life. The dimension of health care is essential to an agroecological practice, within a perspective anchored in the well-being of indigenous peoples, Afro-Americans, peasants and the various traditional peoples. "Good living restores the relationship between man and nature (...). In the indigenous tradition it is linked to culture: politics, economy, nature, common goods, relationships, family construction" (IBÁÑEZ, 2016). Therefore, the traditional medicine of good living also presents itself as an agroecological knowledge and practice.

It is worth considering that the ancestral medicine practices of traditional peoples and communities is also a banner of struggle and resistance for the Earth to overcome the violence and ethnocide suffered by traditional peoples and communities. The health care practices and the knowledge of the popular masters are experienced by the students of the Maju school, and unfold in the search for spirituality, self-care and community care, therapeutic work with social, academic and community movements and agroecological practices. These knowledge and practices are points of connection of an ancestral cosmology of good living, which safeguard the oral traditions and rituals of care and healing of the Brazilian peoples, especially the indigenous and Afro-descendants, who are sometimes made invisible by the coloniality of knowledge and territories (Walsh, 2017). In view of this context, we propose here a path of reflection to be deepened in research, observations and further studies on the practices of resistance that remain in the territories of traditional communities inspired by the worldview of good living.





REFERENCES

- ANTONGIOVANNI, Lidia Lucia. Território como abrigo e território como recurso: territorialidades em tensão e projetos insurgentes no norte do Espírito Santo. 2006
- ACOSTA, A. O bem viver: uma oportunidade para imaginar outros mundos. Tradução de Tadeu Breda. São Paulo: Autonomia Literária. Elefante: 2016.
- IBÁÑEZ, Mario Rodríguez. Conversatório sobre o Bem Viver Desafios do fazer político em nosso tempo. 2016
- Estratégias da Organização Mundial de Saúde' (OMS) para a medicina tradicional (2014 a 2023). > <https://terapeuticasnaoconvencionais.wordpress.com/2015/03/11/o-que-diz-a-oms-organizacao-mundial-de-saude-sobre-as-medicinas-alternativas/>
- FREIRE, Paulo. Pedagogia da autonomia: saberes necessários à prática educativa. 22^a ed. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 2002.
- LUZ, Madel T. Cultura contemporânea e medicinas alternativas: novos paradigmas em saúde no fim do século XX. *PHYSIS: Rev. Saúde Coletiva*, Rio de Janeiro, 15(Suplemento):145-176, 2005
- OLIVEIRA, S.C.; LEITE, J.C. Saber e poder popular no cuidado à saúde. In: PAGLIARO, Graciela (Org). Saberes e Práticas: Experiências de educação popular em saúde. 2011.
- OLIVEIRA, Eduardo D. Filosofia da Ancestralidade: corpo e mito na filosofia da educação brasileira. Curitiba: Gráfica e Editora Popular, 2007.
- SANTOS, M. “O retorno do Território”. In: SANTOS, M; SOUZA, M.A. de; SILVEIRA, M.L. Território – Globalização e Fragmentação. São Paulo: Hucitec, 1994.
- TOLEDO, Víctor M.; BARRERA-BASSOLS, Narciso. La memoria biocultural: la importancia ecológica de las sabidurías tradicionales. Barcelona: Icaria. 2008.
- VITERI GUALINGA, Carlos. “Visión indígena del desarrollo en la Amazonía”. Quito, 2000.
- XAVIER, J. B.; VIEIRA, L. P. O. O trabalho e seus sentidos: a destruição da força humana que trabalha. In. Desastre no Vale do Rio Doce: antecedentes, impactos e ações sobre a destruição / organizadores: Bruno Milanez e Cristiana Losekann – Rio de Janeiro: Folio Digital: Letra e Imagem, 2016. p. 197-229. Disponível em: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B7d8GZPCTtpWTIHSU8tVVRSSjA/view>. Acesso em: 10 fev. 2017.
- Walsh, Catherine. Gritos, grietas y siembras de vida Entretejeres de lo pedagógico y lo decolonial. In.: Walsh, Catherine. Pedagogías decoloniales Prácticas insurgentes de resistir, (re)existir y (re)vivir. Quito-Ecuador: bya-Yala. 2017. P.17-49.
- WEIL, Pierre, A Paz como Caminho. Educação para uma Cultura de Paz, Festival Mundial, Rio de Janeiro, Unipaz, 2006.
- WEZEL, A. et al. Agroecology as a science, a movement and a practice. A review. *Agronomy for Sustainable Development*, p. 503-515, 2009.