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RESOURCECULTURES Dialogue

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The Universal and the Global: Ayurvedic Herbs and Practices in Europe

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Fifty years ago, South Asian medicines were regarded as ethnomedicines devoid of scientific credibility as they were not verifiable under controlled laboratory conditions, whereas biomedicine was based on universal and replicable models and methods of the modern sciences. By the nineties however, South Asian medicines entered the global health market despite the opposition from scientific lobbies. While physical therapies as acupressure, shiatsu, yoga and ayurvedic massage have gained ground more readily, drugs and medicaments for internal consumption face restrictions both from the state and individual consumers. Ayurvedic drugs have come to be marketed as nutraceuticals and consumed by European niche customers who have cultivated a sense of belonging towards Hindu religious cults and groups. Unlike Asian cuisines and garments taken to foreign lands by immigrants, yoga and ayurveda were directly accessed and consumed by the white middle and upper middle classes in Europe and were paid for privately. Does globalisation of ayurveda mean that it has also become universal? What is the relation between biomedicalization of Ayurvedic drugs in India and its spiritualisation in Europe? What is the social life of herbs in European ayurveda? How do we grapple with the differing logics in the flow of things, ideas and people in the globalization of ayurveda? Based on fieldwork with European practitioners of Ayurveda in Germany, Switzerland and the Netherlands, this paper intends to trace the trajectory of global ayurveda through the experience of its European practitioners, and their clients, in order to address some of these questions.

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