

COVID-19 AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE: CASE STUDIES IN KYRGYZSTAN

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INTRODUCTION

The pandemic caused by COVID-19 in 2020 has significantly affected Kyrgyzstan. Amongst the negative impacts, a sharp decline in provision of the medical services was the most significant which was caused by the increased burden on the healthcare system when hospitals were not able to provide appropriate services to people, especially the most severe patients. The costs of the medicine were unaffordable for the majority of residents. This was one of the reasons for many people, especially in rural areas to reminisce the folk medicine which in past was based on traditional methods, skills and indigenous knowledge kept by the Kyrgyz people for many centuries. Traditional treatment using medicinal herbs has become in high demand during the pandemic period, and a large number of people assumed that medicinal herbs could relieve COVID-19 symptoms and protect them.

The current paper presents the findings of the research conducted in three regions of the Kyrgyz Republic in 2022. The study was focused on the identification and documentation of the traditional knowledge practised by local people during the pandemic and post-pandemic periods. Research also included analysis of possible changes and modifications of the traditional practices as a result of the impact of COVID-19. The approach of overall research was built on qualitative research methods. Communities for the research were selected in the districts which are characterized by rich biodiversity and good climatic conditions for the collection and cultivation of medicinal herbs. Interviews and meetings were conducted with custodians of traditional knowledge who have wide experience in folk medicine and the collection of medicinal herbs for traditional use. Custodians of Traditional Knowledge are individuals who keep, revive, and transmit traditional knowledge that they possess. They are respected in their communities and well-known for their knowledge, experience, and activities related to the treatment of different diseases. The majority of the custodians are familiar with

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different types of medicinal herbs and useful plants from childhood and have been collecting medicinal herbs for treatment for many years. It was important to involve custodians as direct practitioners in research to review the dynamic of traditions, changes and modifications in the use of traditional practices and what are the reasons for those modifications and if/how the pandemic has affected them. Research revealed that folk medicine and indigenous knowledge became used more actively in comparison to the pre-pandemic period. This is particularly true concerning not only folk medicine but also spiritual practices which have been reshaped and become more vital and relevant in the last few years.

IMPACTS OF COVID-19 IN KYRGYZSTAN

The first cases of COVID-19 in the Kyrgyz Republic were detected on 18 March 2020. Starting from the end of March the entire country was placed on an emergency with the introduction of strict lockdowns in big cities and rural areas. Quarantine measures have significantly affected the country's economic stability and social situation contributing to the escalation of the crisis. The stress caused by the coronavirus pandemic has affected various aspects of people's lives – livelihoods, nutrition, education, working hours and job opportunities, however, issues related to healthcare were extremely drastic and complicated. According to official statistics,³ for the period from March 2020 to February 2023 in total 206,599 cases of COVID-19 were recorded in the country and the number of deaths was equal to 2,991 people. Available statistical data⁴ demonstrated that 62 percent of those households where at least one family member was exposed to COVID-19, faced problems related to access to medical services and obtaining necessary medicines, among which about 39 percent of people experienced difficulties accessing medical services, and 58 percent in obtaining necessary medicines. Additionally, risks related to mental health, and emotional and psychological well-being increased significantly and have become considered noteworthy. Statistical data confirms that 66 percent of interviewed households indicated that at least one member of the household experienced depression, stress, and anxiety associated with the disease and pandemic.

FOLK MEDICINE AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

In Kyrgyz culture from the older times traditional medicine, folk medicine, and traditional knowledge are attributed to the domain of the nomad lifestyle and traditional husbandry. Before and during Soviet times, women in Kyrgyz families

³ Official data is collected and provided by Coronavirus Research Center at Johns Hopkins University of Medicine. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/region/kyrgyzstan>

⁴ Research conducted by National Statistical Committee of Kyrgyzstan 'Impact of the pandemic caused by COVID-19 on household', 2020. <http://stat.kg/ru/publications/vliyanie-pandemii-COVID-19-na-domashnie-hozyajstva/>

used to be responsible for treating children and family members using medicinal herbs. Men had expertise mainly in curing animals: sheep, cattle, etc., which was determined by the conducted activities. This determined the practical way of transmission of knowledge when skills are acquired through active involvement in productive activity. Traditional knowledge is linked to lifestyle, tools and techniques used for conducting economic activities, and spiritual practices for cultural development. Such knowledge received from ancestors is changed, supplemented, adapted, and modified in the course of the life of a single person or whole society.

The demand for medicinal herbs and folk medicine was significantly high during the dissemination of COVID-19. Custodians of indigenous knowledge confirmed that the number of people asking for traditional treatment based on folk medicine has notably increased with the start of the pandemic in 2020. Increased interest in traditional knowledge was closely associated with the emerging risks of being exposed to COVID-19 and finding other alternatives for the official medicine which became inapproachable during the pandemic. Economic issues also forced people to find other possibilities to replace expensive medicines and drugs with available resources, such as medicinal herbs and spiritual practices.

Living close to the forests or pastures gives rural people the opportunity to harvest different herbs, however, people collect very simple plants that are found even in the backyards of their houses. Wild useful and precious herbs and berries namely chamomile, wormwood, black currant, sea buckthorn berries and many others are used as tea, infusion and tinctures, while other plants like juniper are used for cleaning the air and aromatization. The use of those herbs and plants is mostly linked to the treatment of influenza and pneumonia. Barberry is known by ancestors as a plant to cure infectious diseases due to its high concentration of vitamin C. Lately traditional recipes and treatment practices have been enhanced using new ingredients like lemon and ginseng to make treatment more efficient. Such treatment was assessed by custodians as effective enough, at least in the prevention of COVID-19 and in relieving the symptoms. Custodians emphasized the importance of prevention of diseases and boosting the immune system to mitigate possible negative consequences of diseases. The application of traditional practices based on the use of medicinal herbs was mentioned by custodians as an efficient prevention measure. Some of the custodians also reported that they practice other types of traditional folk medicine, like pulse diagnosis as a traditional technique which is combined with medicinal herbs treatment.

Folk Medicine is one of the activities largely practised by Kyrgyz people from ancient times (Figure 1). It is closely linked to the abundance of medicinal herbs and useful plants widely spread on the territory of the country. There are suitable conditions for the collection and cultivation of medicinal herbs. Many types of rare and valuable medicinal plants are found in all zones and heights on the



Figure 1. The process of drying of the calendula. (Photo: RDF)

country's territory (Rogova and Sodombekov, 2009). The number of the higher plants is equal to 4,100 species, of which 800 species are considered to be useful plants and around 200 plant species are used in traditional medicine (Aldayarov, 2022) by healers and custodians. Kyrgyzstan during the Soviet times was one of the main suppliers of medicinal herbs in the medical industry – up to 90 percent (Altymyshev, 1976).

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES AS A COPING STRATEGY

Kyrgyz people often rely on folk medicine or traditional treatment methods including non-material and religious practices. Most of those spiritual practices were lost or forgotten during the Soviet times when official medicine used to be perceived as the only way to heal diseases, and other traditional and folk methods were forbidden and were practised informally by a few healers. With the dissemination of the COVID-19 the interest in spiritual practices has become more elevated. COVID-19 has significantly impacted the mental health of people. Many people had such symptoms as anxiety, aggressiveness, and change of behaviour and attitudes, including existential crisis amid COVID-19. Performing spiritual practices and rituals has allowed to decrease the high level of anxiety and its symptoms (psychological and physical).

Rituals are based on performing some actions that are aimed at relieving symptoms, for example, relieving a headache or getting rid of styes on the eye faster. For example, the juniper is used by people for the fumigation of houses since it is believed from ancient times that archa protects from evil spirits. Custodians noted that people often have headaches when the energy in the room is changed. Juniper helps to clean the air in the room so the headache diminishes or disappears. However, the key action needed to be undertaken during the fumigation is to accompany the process with best wishes, good words and songs, otherwise, no results might be obtained. The fumigation with archa has a therapeutic effect, which is based not only on the physical impact but also on the mental relief. This is especially true taking into consideration the high level of stress and anxiety that emerged as a result of the dissemination of the coronavirus and pandemic.

Previously spiritual practices have been largely used during ceremonies, family events, and in normal life, for example, the baking of bread should be accompanied by good wishes, or the initiation of a new activity should be done after the blessings. Such practices have a therapeutic effect since it is mainly linked to self-motivation for a positive outcome. Nowadays, traditional treatment supported by spiritual rituals and rites is used widely and transformed into a new form of knowledge and effective method to heal mental problems. The impact of the pandemic is still ongoing, and every day people discover new side effects like headaches, loss of concentration, physical weakness and asthenia, social phobia and isolation. Spiritual practices along with the support of psychologies can be an effective approach to coping with such difficulties.

Another unexpected practice that was observed is related to the blessings when people mullahs and custodians of indigenous knowledge ask for good blessings directed towards the ending of the COVID-19 pandemic. In general, custodians mentioned that such spiritual practices as blessings, prayers, and benedictions have always been a fundamental part of the culture and lifestyle of Kyrgyz people, nevertheless, over the last few years, those practices have also been

transforming and receiving greater attention – the field of application of those practices has been extended: health, ceremonies, business. Custodians reported that they had been invited to many ceremonies and events to grant their blessings and benedictions for a better future, good health and improved well-being.

MODIFICATION AND TRANSFORMATION OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

Dissemination of COVID-19 has increased the demand for traditional knowledge and demand on additional knowledge and education not only on folk medicine but also on other types of human activities – agriculture, housing, food systems, and nutrition. In order to apply traditional knowledge under modern circumstances (livelihoods, treatment, income generation, education of children and resilience to climate change) people and custodians adapt traditional knowledge using new technologies. Adaptation and modification of traditional knowledge lead to effective, cost-efficient, participatory, and sustainable strategies for maintaining livelihoods. The combination of traditional knowledge and new technologies has a dual purpose: for the younger generation to enhance their knowledge by making traditional knowledge revived, restored and actively practised in modern days, while for older people – custodians and local communities – to be engaged in sustainable income generation activities – the cultivation of medicinal herbs and popularization of folk medicine, indigenous practices for coping impacts of the climate change, new strategies for environmental sustainability thus contributing to the conservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage for future generations. Traditional knowledge became significant in terms of sustainable income generation. The pandemic and restrictions have introduced new ways of receiving and sending information and knowledge, including traditional knowledge and practices. Social media and digital tools made it possible to popularize indigenous knowledge through new ways of presenting the information. Not only youth can use new approaches to the presentation of data – short videos, creative advertisements and films, but also the older generation since digital tools have become accessible and understandable.

SUMMARY

Traditional folk medicine is an affordable practice to treat different diseases and improve the health state since it is based on herbs and resources which are accessible and effective. This is one of the key reasons for the increase in the level of interest of people in medicinal herbs collection and cultivation during the pandemic and post-pandemic period. Research participants agreed that the dissemination of COVID-19 contributed to the strengthening of people's interest and confidence in traditional knowledge and spiritual practices. Traditional knowledge has changed – it has become more priced and valued, heard and visible.

Traditional knowledge is modified and enhanced following the real demands and available resources. The important finding presented by custodians was the statement that traditional knowledge can be powerful and may influence decision-making processes in such sectors as healthcare, agriculture, climate change resilience, sustainable environment and cost-efficient income generation activities. Traditional knowledge empowers local communities to be more active in the promotion of their wisdom and experience. New technologies are a tool for enhancing traditional knowledge and traditional practices whether it is folk medicine or spiritual practices are an approach for more sustainable and resilient development of local communities.

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