

# Vernacularizing, Braiding, and Plurigenericism

## *An Expanding Toolkit for Histories of Knowledge in Non-Settler Postcolonies*

▼ **FORUM ARTICLE** in *Decentering the History of Knowledge*

▼ **ABSTRACT** This contribution argues that a single conceptual framework cannot possibly accommodate the range of histories that will emerge from a genuine decentering of the history of science. It uses the example of the “decolonial” approach to show the pitfalls of trying to write global histories using a single framework. The paper then argues that “non-settler postcolonies” such as China, India, Turkey etc. demand their own, specific critical apparatus that are more sensitive to their historical specificities. Finally, the paper briefly reviews three conceptual devices, viz., vernacularizing, braiding and plurigenericism, that might be used to write specific histories of knowledge in non-settler postcolonies.

▼ **KEYWORDS** nationalism; exogenous; vernacular; global; postcolonial; subaltern

▼ **ISSUE** Volume 5 (2024)

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**Cite this article:** Projit Mukharji, 'Vernacularizing, Braiding, and Plurigenericism', *Journal for the History of Knowledge*, 5 (2024), 189–198  
<<https://dx.doi.org/10.55283/jhk.18370>>

DOI: 10.55283/jhk.18370

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BREPOLS

The “planetary consciousness” of the history of science has had a paradoxical career.<sup>1</sup> Its early stirring patently and unapologetically served to recenter Europe. Both Marxist universalism, which imagined a “confluence” of knowledge traditions, and American liberalism, which spoke of “dissemination,” ended up making the contemporary “West” the standard by which to measure non-Western histories and knowledges.<sup>2</sup> More encouragingly, over the last decade and a half, a small but growing body of scholars has been more reflexive about the need to transcend this Eurocentrism. They have done so by invoking the rubrics of a “brokerage,” “circulation,” “conjugation,” and “emplacement.”<sup>3</sup> More recently, “translation” has emerged as another new tool for decentering the history of science.<sup>4</sup> Finally, there are the calls to “decolonize” the history of science by attending to “indigenous” knowledges and cosmologies.<sup>5</sup> The wide and varied possibilities offered by this array of conceptual devices attests to the energy, creativity, and urgency with which the program of decentering has emerged in our field.

What I find less reassuring is the persistence in the belief that any single tool or concept can successfully be deployed to study the history of knowledge anywhere in the world. Such a belief has only served to once again sneak back in a tacit EuroAmerica-centrism into our critical toolbox.

Take, for example, the employment of a decolonial approach with scant regard to issues of scale, context, and historical specificity. Recently, the pitfalls of such a move became eminently clear when Walter Mignolo, one of the founding fathers of decolonialism, blurbed a blatantly Islamophobic book authored by a lawyer closely aligned with the right-wing Hindu nationalist party in power in India. Though Mignolo withdrew his endorsement in the face of widespread criticism, it was clear how he might have misunderstood the book in the first place. The author had drunk deeply at the wellsprings of decolonial theory, citing Aníbal Quijano, Ramón Grosfoguel, Enrique Dussel, and, of course, Mignolo himself. He had then followed his intellectual loadstars into casting the Hindus as an “indigene ... [an] ecumenical decolonial avenger.” This “indigenous Hindu” stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the Aymaras, the Quechuas, the Navajos, the Maoris, and other global indigenes.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, India’s substantial Muslim and Christian minorities were recast as external aggressors and conquerors, and, more importantly perhaps, the constitutional safeguards of minority rights and religious tolerance introduced by the founders of the postcolonial republic were dismissed as lingering “colonial consciousness.”

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1 I borrow the phrase “planetary consciousness” from Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*.

2 Needham, Lu, and Sivin, *Science and Civilization*; Basalla, “Spread of Western Science.”

3 Schaffer et al., *The Brokered World*; Raj, *Relocating Modern Science*; Anderson, “From Subjugated Knowledge”; Seth, “Putting Knowledge.”

4 Alberts, Fransen, and Leong, *Osiris*.

5 Kowal, *Haunting Biology*.

6 Sen, “J Sai Deepak’s India.”

The problem is that neither the history of colonialism nor the politics of indigeneity in Latin America (which is where much of the decolonial theory was developed) and South Asia are identical. Most of the Latin American states have mainstream majority populations that are derived from the colonizing group, and those claiming to be indigenous are socially and politically marginalized. By contrast, India, like China and Nigeria, is not a settler-colonial state. It is a majority-national state, where it is the empowered majority who claim to be indigenous. Contrapuntally, marginalization is operationalized through aspersions of exogeneity.

The rampant Islamophobia that has today become disconcertingly mainstream in both India and China thrives on precisely this cooption of indigeneity by national majorities. Muslims and anything Islamic are seen as being insufficiently Indian or Chinese in these respective nation states, rendering exogeneity the pretext for political and social exclusion.

Certain scientific disciplines have played a crucial role in such ascriptions of exogeneity. Not only in India and China, but in a host of other similarly majority-nationalist countries ranging from Iran and Israel to Turkey, South Korea, and Japan, historians have documented the mobilization of human and population genetics in consolidating “indigenous” and “exogenous” identities of diverse groups.<sup>7</sup>

That these countries have also emerged as major sites of modern scientific knowledge production makes the whole issue even more pressing for historians of science. That is why I would argue that clubbing China together with, say, Australia, or India with Brazil, on the pretext that they are all former colonies, is an analytically vexed move.<sup>8</sup> Such clubbing not only mistakenly flattens significant historical nuances—such as between settler and non-settler colonies—but also completely misunderstands the contemporary landscapes of knowledge in these spaces.

Another instance would help clarify my last point about a distinctive knowledge landscape. Consider the official position of modernized versions of traditional medicine in these countries.<sup>9</sup> Keeping aside the issue of unquestionable epistemic and infrastructural hierarchies between biomedicine and traditional medicine, it is a matter of fact that countries such as India and China have a legal space both within their public health establishments and in the privatized medical markets within their borders for modernized traditional medicines. In both China and India, a physician trained at a college for Traditional Chinese Medicine or Ayurveda can go on to obtain a job in a government-run hospi-

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<sup>7</sup> Mukharji, *Brown Skins, White Coats*; Cheng, “Is Peking Man”; Burton, *Genetic Crossroads*; Hyun, “Blood Purity”; Hyun, “In the Name.”

<sup>8</sup> While China was never formally colonized, according to Rogaski in some ways it might even be called “hypercolonial” because of the presence of multiple colonial powers within Chinese borders. Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity*.

<sup>9</sup> Mukharji, *Doctoring Traditions*; Hsiang-lin Lei, *Neither Donkey nor Horse*.

tal.<sup>10</sup> Amazonian or Australian Aboriginal shamans, though they too possess medical expertise, do not have the same type of state backing or resources at their disposal. Herein lies one major difference in the knowledge landscapes of Australia and China or Brazil and India.

States such as India are simultaneously postcolonial and majority-nationalist. They are also states which have significant bodies of precolonial or “traditional” knowledge that was already highly codified before the onset of colonialism. This latter archive of codified knowledge, though greatly modified and restructured during both the colonial and the postcolonial eras, today has a continuing practical, political, and symbolic relevance in these polities. This is why I find it persuasive to think of these countries as a distinct group—i.e., “non-settler postcolonies.”

Historical analysis of knowledge in such non-settler postcolonies demands a distinct set of analytic concepts that are attuned to the historical specificities of these states. In the rest of this essay, I will outline three such conceptual devices that I have developed and deployed in my own work.

**Vernacularization:** There are a number of distinct bodies of scholarship that deploy the rubric of “vernacularization” both within and outside of the history of science. In the former would be studies such as those that interrogate the ways in which a Latin “republic of letters” gradually gave way to European vernaculars as the language of scientific writing,<sup>11</sup> while the latter includes studies ranging from histories of literary forms used in the Sanskrit cosmopolis to the study of localized cultures of history-writing, capitalism, and even film viewership.<sup>12</sup>

Vernacularization has also emerged as an important conceptual resource among historians studying science and medicine in South Asia.<sup>13</sup> While some of these works look directly at issues of language change, others explicitly use a linguistic model to interrogate broader social processes.<sup>14</sup>

These studies all emphasize the localization and adaptation of “exotic” European science, technology, and medicine in South Asia. Moving away from the dissemination and innovation-centric focus on origins of ideas, things, practices, etc., they look instead at localization as a creative, historically contingent, and complex process. Where the rubric of “circulation” had emphasized how things move, vernacularization accents how they land.

No matter how smoothly or “hydraulically” things circulate, their landing always necessitates complex negotiations between the exotic entity and the

10 Langford, *Fluent Bodies*; Farquhar, *Knowing Practice*.

11 Fissell, *Vernacular Bodies*; Crossgrove, “The Vernacularization of Science.”

12 Pollock, “The Languages of Science”; Aquil and Chatterjee, *History in the Vernacular*; Sheikh, “Jibhabhu’s Rights to Ghee”; Bratu Hansen, “The Mass Production.”

13 Mukharji, *Nationalizing the Body*; Das, *Vernacular Medicine*; Singh, “Science in the Vernacular?”

14 For an analysis of linguistic change, see Singh, “Science in the Vernacular?” For an explicit attempt to use vernacularization as a model that goes beyond language use, see Mukharji, “Vernacularizing the Body.”

ground reality.<sup>15</sup> Vernacularization thus peels back the appearance of a smooth global surface to reveal a series of distinctive and granular local contexts. In my own work, I have mostly used vernacularization to look at how “Western” or “daktari” medicine, once an exotic colonial imposition in India, came to be widely embraced, redeployed as a tool for very literal nation-building—i.e., (re)building of national bodies, spaces, and societies—and eventually positioned India as one of the biggest exporters of medical manpower to the West.<sup>16</sup>

**Braiding:** As I have mentioned, one of the characteristics of the non-settler postcolony is the existence of a significant archive of codified precolonial knowledges. These knowledges are often variously referred to as “indigenous,” “traditional,” and, much more problematically, “alternative.” Both “indigenous” and “traditional” need clarification in this context.

To return again to the questions of scale and codification, we find that tacit, haptic, and oral knowledges, notwithstanding their age, either remained uncoded until fairly recent times or were coded in a way that is no longer fully transparent to contemporary actors without taking recourse to modern science and technology. An instance of old, but uncoded, knowledges and the difficulties in historicizing them can be seen in many of the herbal knowledge traditions of Africa.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, an example of a patently coded form of precolonial knowledge whose historical legibility today is equivocal is the Amerindian system of knots called *quipu*.<sup>18</sup>

In countries such as India, China, Korea, Vietnam, etc., on the other hand, the archive of coded precolonial knowledge remains largely legible, though undoubtedly transformed, to postcolonial historians and practitioners. As a result, it can be partially revived as an extant knowledge resource. The emotive and political charge invested in indigeneity and precolonial inheritance in these postcolonies means that such mobilization is frequently attempted. Medicine is the clearest and most consistent arena in which coded precolonial knowledges are sought to be redeployed in the present. But there are also similar efforts in a few other fields, such as, for example, the new field of “Ayurgenomics” in India. Braiding allows us to analyze this particular process.

Reinserting these precolonial, and more often than not premodern, knowledges back into a modern context necessitates their transformation at the interrelated institutional and epistemic levels. Since medicine, for example, under modernity needs to function through either a bureaucratized state or a highly anonymized medical market, the premodern and precolonial epistemology of

15 I borrow the critique of the circulatory as hydraulic from Anderson, “Making Global Health History.”

16 Mukharji, *Nationalizing the Body*. For India’s role as a medical manpower exporter, see Alam, “Cold War Crises.”

17 Osseo-Asare, *Bitter Roots*.

18 Cañizares-Esguerra, *How to Write*.

compounding medicines to individual patients gives way to mass-produced medicines. Here, epistemic change is driven by the demands of institutional change.<sup>19</sup>

While superficially similar to the concept of hybridity in postcolonial studies, braiding is different in two important ways. First, it avoids the racialized overtones of the word “hybrid” that are obvious to any historian of science in a way that they might not always be to historians of culture. Second, and more importantly, it avoids the implication that the hybrid is born out of the coming together of two more or less homogenous parents.

Instead, braiding recognizes that the parent traditions are themselves heterogeneous and made up of numerous individual strands. The person who braids exercises creative and active agency in selecting the strands within parental assemblages and then, subsequently, creating a pattern out of them. Also, unlike the hybrid, the braid can also be undone later, just as it might also be incorporated as a strand into a thicker braid.

For me, the advantage here is our ability to recognize the diversity of both precolonial and colonial modern intellectual traditions and practices. Braiding resists the homogenization of the two sides in the colonial encounter and thus forestalls the naturalization of the colonial divide.

Furthermore, in my study of modernized Ayurveda, I also push the concept another step and use small technologies or objects as the spindle around which the knowledges and practices are braided together. This move prevents the braids from becoming overly rarefied discursive entities.

**Plurigenericism:** Epistemic choice is bound up with a choice of genre. This is the key insight that has led me to think of plurigenericism. The existence of well-developed languages long adapted to the communication of codified precolonial knowledges means that in non-settler postcolonies there are multiple genres in which science might be produced or communicated.

Genres set expectations of plausibility, frame authority, inform choices of physical forum, and insinuate particular types of publics. The combination of old genres, derived from the archive of precolonial knowledges, and new genres encountered through colonialism together led to the appearance of what Charu Singh has called “discursive laboratories” or broad-based scientific journals where a wide variety of genres ranging from history to detective stories were used for the communication of scientific ideas and practices.<sup>20</sup>

The fluidity with which the same set of ideas was able to move between genres and the strikingly different reception they had within distinct genres are also remarkable. As I have shown in my study of hylozoic anticolonialism, the same set of ideas shuttled between science, science fiction, and even theology.

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<sup>19</sup> Bode, *Taking Traditional Knowledge*.

<sup>20</sup> Singh, “The Shastri.”

Yet who ended up reading the ideas and what they made of them depended in large measure on the genre in which they encountered them.<sup>21</sup> In a similar but much later exploration, I document how agricultural science manuals were quoted at length in early Pakistani science fiction.<sup>22</sup>

In the long run, as scientific communication began to become more monolingual,<sup>23</sup> we notice a clearer, more impervious divide between genres. Whereas earlier ideas and politics had traveled between genres otherwise categorized as “factual” and “fictional,” by the interwar decades we notice greater alienation.<sup>24</sup> As scientific publication became more and more mainstreamed into the English language and located increasingly in specialized scientific journals, the writing in non-English languages and in genres other than the research article and monograph began to diverge more obviously in its political and moral vision. I have recently documented this bifurcation and alienation in my book on race science.

In the book, *Brown Skins, White Masks*, I go further and try to learn from my archive directly. Recognizing that the past did not happen in a single genre or a small number of genres, I refuse to contain my own writing to a single genre either. Drawing on a host of inspirations from Saidiya Hartman, Gabrielle Tarde, Amitav Ghosh, and others, I experiment with multiple genres in a bid to reopen the continuing epistemic, moral, and political possibilities in contemporary science.

Plurigenericism therefore is not only a historical object to be studied in order to illuminate the specific promiscuities of the scientific publics, it is also a writing technique that seeks to reproduce and instigate some of the older contingencies. In short, it is a strategy to push back against the technocratic closure of the enchanted and radical possibilities of science in the non-settler postcolony.

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21 Mukharji, “Hylozoic Anticolonialism.”

22 Mukharji, “Technospatial Imaginaries.”

23 Gordin, *Scientific Babel*.

24 Mukharji, *Brown Skins, White Coats*.

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