Rhizome networks: Turmeric's global journey from *haldi doodh* to turmeric latte

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Abstract

Turmeric has a long history of use in South and Southeast Asia going back thousands of years. Its first known reference is found in the *Atharva Veda*, one of the four Vedic texts of Hinduism. In Sanskrit it has over fifty names based on its use in cuisine, cosmetics, folk medicine, as dye and in Hindu cultural and religious rituals. Turmeric is also gendered in Sanskrit; it is feminised as *gauri* (to make fair, also a woman's name), *jayanti* (winning over disease, also a woman's name) and *Lakshmi* (prosperity, also a woman's name as well as the goddess Lakshmi). It is the base spice in 'curry', central to marriage and religious rituals among many Indian communities and a staple of folk medicine for conditions ranging from sore throats to rheumatism and as antiseptic and antibiotic (*jayanti*). *Haldi doodh* (turmeric milk) is a common folk remedy for coughs, sore throats and related respiratory conditions. Turmeric, or haldi (its Hindi name) has also entered the global self-care and health foods-wellness discourse with curcumin supplements being readily available in health shops and pharmacies. In the last few years it has also entered global popular culture with the introduction of beverages such as turmeric latte, aka, *haldi doodh*.

Using Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'rhizome thinking' (1987), which recognises connections rather than ruptures, this paper explores the global circulation of turmeric discourses as networks anchored in aspects of Vedic culture. In this framing, the metaphoric rhizome of curcuma longa is rooted in ancient Vedic culture but like the rhizome, has sprouted a multiplicity of offshoots, connections and discourses in networks of reciprocity and re-invigoration rather than only networks of cultural appropriations and cultural bastardisation. These discourses are gendered both in the deployment of the feminised attributes such as *gauri* and *jayanti* as well as in the domain of beauty and wellness branding by predominantly female food and wellness 'gurus'. The paper argues that this global circulation and sprouting of offshoots has imbricated turmeric in a globalised matrix of discursive meanings and social cultural practices that are rhizomatic.

Keywords: turmeric, haldi dhoodh, Ayurveda, turmeric latte, rhizome thinking

Turmeric is a product of curcuma longa, a rhizome, herbaceous perennial belonging to the ginger family. It is native to South- and Southeast Asia, though its exact origin is difficult to determine. India is the world's largest producer and consumer of turmeric, between 70-80% of global consumption, but it is also commonly used throughout Southeast Asia (Prasad and Aggarwal, 2011). Curcumin is the chemical in turmeric that gives it its distinctive yellow colour which is why it is also widely used as pigment dye. The word turmeric comes from the Latin *terra merita* (Prasad and Aggarwal, 2011).

This perspective focuses on the global rhizomatic networks and discourses centred on two inter-woven ayurvedic attributes assigned to turmeric, namely, *gauri* (fairness) and *jayanti*

(winning over disease/wellness); these attributes place turmeric at the centre of a gendered, globalised discourse on beauty and wellness that is distinctly rooted in aspects of Indian Vedic culture. I use the example of *haldi doodh*, or turmeric milk, and its globalised cousin, turmeric latte, to explore globalised, gendered beauty and wellness discourses and the way in which an Indian folk remedy, (*haldi doodh*), rooted in Ayurveda has been globally adopted as part of the beauty-wellness culture primarily by white women entrepreneurs. Using Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'rhizome thinking' (1987) I argue that turmeric and turmeric discourses of wellness, beauty and vitality are imbricated in rhizomatic networks of globalised discursive meanings and practices that are simultaneously decultured from its historical context in Vedic culture and tradition and recultured in what Bridget Conor (2021) refers to as 'cosmic wellness' discourses, with shades of what Islam (2012) identifies as 'New Age orientalism', predominantly in the global North. 'New Age orientalism' continues to frame the East (Orient) as the exotic 'other', this time though, as an attractive, rather than a repugnant, other. In this new age, or neo-orientalism, the 'Orient' is still framed as mysterious, mystic and exotic, but these qualities are embraced as 'healthy' antidotes to the stresses of technological ultramodernity and its attendant stresses.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Gauttari's (1987) concept of 'rhizomatic thinking' is a useful conceptual framework for charting the global spread of turmeric and turmeric discourses. The conceptual rhizome has been an invaluable 'thought aid' (Douglas-Jones and Sariola, 2009) in articulating my thoughts as well as disarticulating the parsing the interwoven and connected webs of turmeric discourses. A rhizome is a multiplicity with 'lines of segmentarity' – this permits disarticulation, with the root being able to grow at new points, into 'new lines of flight, but the (older) line of flight is part of the rhizome' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987:9). Given these lines of segmentarity, rhizomatic thinking brings into sharp focus the interconnections rather than the dualities created by ruptures. As a thought aid, rhizome thinking offers a different conceptual framework, and methodology, that eschews binary thinking, thus opening up spaces of new inquiry.

> 'A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains… A semiotic chain is like a tuber agglomerating diverse acts, not only linguistic, but also perceptive, mimetic, gestural and cognitive: there is no language in itself, nor are there any linguistic universals, only a throng of dialects, patois, slangs and specialized languages' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987:7).

Using this 'thought aid' allows one to follow the trails of sprouting lateral roots to see where they lead and what they have given rise to. In other words, as the botanical rhizome sprouts off-shoots in all directions, the conceptual rhizome has been no less prolific in its global circulation and through this, in the generation of terms, meanings and relations. From this perspective, both the botanical and conceptual rhizome are at the nexus of globalisation, history and cultural-discursive practices.

Given the ubiquity of digital media platforms in the promotion of cosmic wellness, my focus is predominantly on web platforms and wellness influencer blogs. Given the scope of this perspective I focus on nine websites/blogs. The nine websites were selected on the basis of turmeric-focused content, including turmeric product descriptions and recipes for turmeric latte or turmeric tea and other beverages. These include pukkaherbs.com, thewakayagroup.com, gardenoflife.com simplyveganblog.com, heynutritionlady.com, hauteandhealthyliving.com,

realandvibrant.com, eatingwell.com and nadialim.com. I analyse the content – limited in many cases – of these websites through a critical discourse lens. In particular, I pay attention to the way in which turmeric and wellness discourses are constructed, circulated and packaged for consumption. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) posits that language and the way it is used is critical to understanding relationships of power, dominance and control (Blommaert and Bulcaen, 2000). It is thus an analysis of the use of language in society, or as Fraser (1997) puts it, CDA considers the 'doing' of language by speaking subjects. Using CDA, I look at the ways in which turmeric products (cosmetics, powders, shakes) are described, which of its many benefits and attributes are foregrounded and whether or not turmeric's Vedic cultural roots are identified and/or mentioned. CDA, as Fairclough argues, is not simply about critiquing language but rather understanding 'power behind discourse' and 'how it figures within and contributes to the existing social reality (Fairclough, n.d). In this sense, I use CDA to analyse turmeric discourses within the larger discourse of cosmic wellness offered by largely white, female, wealthy (and middle class) wellness entrepreneurs.

The botanical rhizome and its global spread

The botanical rhizome, curcuma longa, from which turmeric is derived has a long history, especially in Indian culture, dating back to approximately 4000 years ago. The Atharva Veda, one of the ancient Vedic texts of Hinduism, is believed to be the earliest written source mentioning turmeric (Gopinath and Karthikeyan, 2018). Turmeric has over 50 names and synonyms in Sanskrit, based on its medicinal, cultural, religious, culinary and cosmetic uses. It is known as haridra in Sanskrit, haldi in Hindi, while the Latin curcuma is derived from the Arabic kourkoum (Gopinath and Karthikeyan, 2018). Based on specific uses, it is also known as *gauri* (to make fair), *jayanti* (winning over disease) and *laxmi* (prosperity), three attributes of turmeric that are also feminine, not least by virtue of these being popular women's names. I argue that it is these attributes, in particular, *gauri* and *jayanti* that are key to global turmeric discourses of wellness, vitality and beauty.

Hindu tradition considers turmeric as an auspicious spice because of its multiple attributes and applications. As *jayanti*, turmeric is central to wellness with application as a home/folk remedy for coughs, sore throats, colds, rheumatism and as antiseptic. As *gauri*, turmeric is believed to be the first known cosmetic, possibly globally but certainly in the South Asian context, able to reduce acne, facial hair and improve skin tone and complexion, to make fair (Gopinath and Karthikeyan, 2018). Appadurai argues that 'cooking in India is deeply embedded in moral and spiritual beliefs and prescriptions' with implications for health, purity, moral and mental balance (1988:5). Food therefore has 'soteriological' implications (Appadurai, 1988). Turmeric, as one 'pan-Indian' spice (Shankar, 2020) is ubiquitous throughout India, whether in cooking, religious or cultural ceremonies. As such it is entangled in a matrix of social, cultural and religious rituals and traditions. As a pan-Indian spice, turmeric is essential to the pan-Indian *haldi* ceremony, the ritual smearing of turmeric paste on the bride and groom before a wedding ceremony represents both the *gauri* and *laxmi* attributes, intended to impart glow, vitality and prosperity and fertility on the bridal couple. The *haldi* ceremony combines both the cosmetic as well as cultural and religious value of turmeric – what Charukesi Ramadurai identifies as a 'blessing-meets-beauty' ritual (Ramdurai, 2020).

Arabs introduced turmeric to North and East Africa in the 7th century (Kaur, 2019). Further Indian Ocean entanglements between Indians, Arabs and Africans, especially with Indian migrants, entrenched turmeric as a staple in Moroccan, Ethiopian, Nigerian and Swahili cuisines. Turmeric's westward spread is credited to Marco Polo, who made reference to a root with a saffron-like colour, hence turmeric's medieval name, Indian saffron (Kaur, 2019). Indian indentured labourers in the Caribbean introduced turmeric (along with 'Indian cuisine' more generally) to the New World in the 19th century. Since then, and especially in the last two decades, turmeric has become a global 'superfood', or as GQ magazine claimed, 'another stone-age staple has graduated to superfood du jour' (GQ, 2016).

According to Rafi (2016) the global market for turmeric is expected to generate USD 94.3 million by 2022, while a Fairfield Market Research report in 2021 states that by 2025, the global curcumin market will be worth USD 112.6 million by the end of 2025 (Bloomberg, 2021). These projected global sales are believed to increase as science eventually catches up with folk and indigenous knowledges about the properties and value of curcumin. Apart from scientific trials to validate indigenous knowledges, the uptake of curcumin by the cosmetic industry and what the Bloomberg press release identifies as millennial 'café culture's' fondness for turmeric latte is also expected to drive global sales (Bloomberg, 2021).

Outside of the global North, two global South regions, excluding South, Southeast and East Asia, with burgeoning turmeric markets are Nigeria and Jamaica, along with other Caribbean nations. Turmeric has been referred to as the 'Caribbean's spice of life' (Ewing-Chow, 2021). According to Jamaica Promotions Corporation – Jamaica's investment and export promotion agency – Jamaica exported more than USD 1.4 million worth of turmeric in 2019, predominantly to North America. The Jamaican Agricultural Commodities Regulatory Authority in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN, is aiming to improve turmeric yield by 25% of the 2500 metric tonnes it currently sells. In Jamaica, turmeric is used in a wide range of products from ginger and turmeric ice-cream, to beauty soap and cosmetics (Ewing-Chow, 2021).

Nigeria is the 4th largest global producer of turmeric – accounting for 3% of global sales. The Nigerian government provides support for turmeric farming through the National Roots Crops Research Institute. Street drinks such as zobo (a hibiscus-based drink infused with turmeric/ginger/garlic) are immensely popular. Most typically, the rhizome is boiled and sipped for treatment of malaria, yellow fever, gastric ulcers and high blood pressure, amongst other ailments (Idoowu-Adebayo et al, 2020). Nigerian immigrants in South Africa produce and consume a herbal concoction of the rhizome bottled in alcohol for a range of ailments including joint pain and inflammation. (Jagganath, 2019)

The conceptual rhizome and turmeric discourses

I now turn to a discussion of turmeric and wellness discourses using Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'rhizome thinking' (1987) as a 'thought aid' (Douglas-Jones and Sariola, 2009), in my analysis of the online platforms mentioned above. Douglas-Jones and Sariola (2009:2) deploy Deleuze and Guattari's concept of 'rhizomatic ethnography as an anthropological methodology'. As a historian teaching world history, I would argue for the usefulness of rhizome thinking as historical methodology as well, precisely because of the emphasis on

connections and multiple lines of flight (off-shoots) giving rise to new discourses, or in the case of the botanical rhizome, new plants which yet remain connected to the central rhizome. I would argue that turmeric (and curcumin) as a conceptual rhizome has also spread globally and given rise to new discourses that yet remain connected to its historical origin in Vedic culture. The aim however, is to consider the kind of discourses that have arisen from the conceptual rhizome and what these mean in the larger context of cultural meanings attached to foods. In other words, as the botanical rhizome sprouts off-shoots in all directions, the conceptual rhizome has been no less prolific in its global circulation and through this in the generation of terms, meanings and relations.

Two distinct yet intertwined lines of of flight from Vedic culture right through to the contemporary elevation of turmeric as superfood is the turmeric-wellness-vitality-beauty discourse. Or keeping with the example of *haldi doodh*, the flight and metamorphosis of *haldi doodh* to turmeric latte. The continuing line is turmeric's importance in Ayurveda for: vitality, general wellbeing and specific cure-preventative as well as beautification through fairness and glow. These two lines of *gauri* and *jayanti* have branched off, expanded and entered a global market of object-commodities and discursive contexts dominated by white, middle- and upper-class women and women celebrities such as Gwyneth Paltrow and Ella Mills. Rachel O'Neill describes digital wellness culture as the 'glow of white women' (O'Neill, 2020a:628). Wellness entrepreneurs in the UK, she argues, are 'young, slim, class-privileged, able-bodied and almost uniformly white' (O'Neill, 2020a:629). Conor echoes this characterisation by describing digital wellness culture, which she labels as 'cosmic wellness', as 'gendered, racialized and classed' (Conor, 2021:1265). Not only is this trend a 'postfeminist neoliberalization of self-care' (Martinez-Jimenez, 2022) but also an extension of 'caring femininity' (Conor, 2021) into new domains of expression and commercial enterprise.

Two significantly high-profile women who have become cosmic wellness entrepreneurs are Gwyneth Paltrow with a product range and practises branded as Goop, and Ella Mills whose healing journey-turned-commercial enterprise is known as Deliciously Ella. Both women are social media influencers with large followings, especially on Instagram, who brand themselves less as 'gurus' and experts of wellness based on natural living and eating, and more as women who have (re)discovered themselves through experiential learning. Both women started their cosmic wellness journeys by writing and posting about themselves – Paltrow started with a digital newsletter (Conor, 2021), while Mills started with a blog about her medical condition (O'Neill, 2020b) – before venturing into their respective entrepreneurial enterprises. Mills' healing journey in particular started with a diagnosis of postural tachycardia syndrome (POTS) which she addressed through 'holistic, natural approaches to healing' (O'Neill, 2020b:2). These are two high-profile examples of a larger trend of mediated and curated self-care where the 'self is created, perfected and maintained through food consumption' (Tiusanen, 2021:1383). This process of self-creation through care is a public narrative of a journey – from illness to wellness, from ignorance to enlightenment, from gluttony and indulgence to asceticism and from ill discipline to rigorous self-discipline through regimens and rituals apportioned throughout the waking day and sleeping night. The end goal is optimal health and optimal balance between body-mind-spirit, the triumvirate of cosmic wellness. Both women meticulously document, curate and post daily routines (exercise and beauty) and what they consume to achieve vitality and glow.

Neither women focus exclusively or overwhelmingly on turmeric and curcumin but do have curcumin products on sale. Deliciously Ella offers a golden turmeric latte recipe made from almond or oat milk with turmeric, ginger and cinnamon. The images and accompanying description of the drink frame the drink as warming, delicious and soothing, especially just before bedtime (https://deliciouslyella.com/recipes/golden-turmeric-latte/). The Goop website on the other hand has a number of turmeric infused cosmetics, drinks and snacks such as a ginger turmeric sour and turmeric coated cashews respectively, as well as meals such as turmeric chicken kebabs and turmeric pickled eggs. The turmeric based cosmetic and beauty products include words such as glow (Turmeric Glow Foaming Cleanser by Kora Organics) and brightening (Turmeric Brightening and Exfoliating Mask, also by Kora Organics). In addition to products for sale, Goop also includes blog posts by both Paltrow as well as guests. In a rare infusion of colour into the wellness whiteness, one blog focuses on Sejal Patel, ceo and co-founder of Plantkos, a 'beautifully original, scientifically tested clean skin-care line' (https://goop.com/beauty/skin/my-morning-routine-plantkos-skin-care-founder/). In keeping with the journey narrative format, Patel's journey to entrepreneurialism was personal and fraught with health and image concerns, this time her daughter's persistent problem skin. Turmeric and 'Ayurvedic herbs' are essential ingredients in the Plantkos skin-care line, hence the tag, clean. Another 'clean' Goop product is the Reset Cereal Blend made from seeds and nuts, maca root and turmeric powder, as part of the G.Tox 7-day reset process meant to cleanse and infuse health and vitality.

A more substantial discussion on 'clean beauty' is offered by another blog on Goop focusing on the debate on the 'clean beauty movement'. One product that is prominently featured is the Beautycounter Counter+ which combines 'two forms of vitamin C with turmeric in this ultrahydrating, brightening, skin-smoothing, sunny-looking serum' (https://goop.com/beauty/skin/top-beautycounter-products/). According to Rubin and Brod (2019) the clean beauty, or natural skincare, industry experienced a growth of 23% between 2017 and 2018. However, what constitutes clean beauty is still up for debate and in the absence of a clear understanding of this concept, 'greenwashing' is a common practice by retailers to make skincare and beauty products more attractive to consumers (Rubin and Brod, 2019:1344). This greenwashing is frequently accompanied by stern warnings and fearmongering, as evident in the Goop example highlighted by Rubin and Brod, which asks consumers, 'Do you want antifreeze (propylene glycol) in your moisturizer? We're going to guess, no' (Rubin and Brod, 2019:1344). The clean beauty concept has nested neatly into the wellness discourse with its emphasis on holistic health, beauty and vitality and has thus incorporated 'superfoods' like turmeric into this discursive matrix.

The 'clean, healthy, warming, nourishing' descriptors for turmeric appear on several other websites that were selected. The simplyveganblog describes it as a 'great, healthy alternative to coffee' with benefits to the reduction of inflammation, help with digestion and to lower cholesterol levels (simplyveganblog.com), while realandvibrant describes it as a 'delicious warming Indian beverage' (realandvibrant.com). The Pukka brand describes turmeric as 'one of Pukka's hero herbs' which 'has been used for centuries to help keep the skin pure, the blood clean and the life long' (pukkaherbs.com/uk/en/). The Wakaya Group on the other hand describes turmeric as 'one of the most exciting natural remedies' and offers two distinctly branded turmeric supplements, namely, Organic Fijian and Organic Nicaraguan turmeric. The organic in the brand names again draws attention to clean, natural, and thus

wholesome and beneficial for wellness (thewakayagroup.com/blogs/). Only three of the websites, Goop, Pukka and realandvibrant mention turmeric's Indian connection; Pukka, indirectly through its very name which in Hindi means real/really/pure. Conversely, heynutritionlady describes turmeric latte as American cuisine, which rightly enough is true as it is distinctly different to *haldi doodh* (heynutritionlady.com).

What becomes evident from the above discussion is that turmeric as root and cure-all has become simultaneously deterritorialised and reterritorialized as a form of new age orientalism. Put differently, and extending Boehmer's metaphor beyond the literary/cultural dimension, the 'raw action' in the colony is processed and repackaged in the 'traditional centres of capital concentration' in a format that is familiar to the consumers in these centres (Boehmer, 1998:18). However, an essential element of new age orientalism is a reverse flow from the metropole to the postcolony as shown in Islam's research on the increasing popularity of wellness and spa culture in India (Islam, 2012). Citing Dirlik, Boehmer argues that postcolonialist critics, writers, and nationalists have become complicit in 'a highly mediated and disguised yet ultimately participatory relationship with the intellectual [and cultural] extension of global capital' (Boehmer, 1998:18). To concretise what I mean by this: the idea of turmeric latte (as opposed to *haldi doodh*) is completely anathema to Indians, not least because of its commodification but also because of ways of preparation where milk has been replaced by either almond/coconut/cashew mylk for lactose-free, pure plant-based options. Sen describes this as 'America's newest tonic of the monied masses was really just India's medicinal nectar in dress up' (Sen, 2017: food52.com/blog/19083-how-indian-is-your-turmeric-latte). Despite this anathema, and difference, turmeric discourses in the larger cosmic wellness movement, frame turmeric products, including turmeric latte, as ideologically benign, and in deed wholesome reinterpretations of Ayurvedic applications of turmeric and *haldi doodh*.

This metamorphosis and reinterpretation simultaneously deterritorialises *haldi doodh* while reterritorializing turmeric latte into a different discursive context. Writing from his American context, Mayukh Sen argues that attempts by Indians and Indian Americans to understand the phenomenon of turmeric latte, are essentially attempts to 're-culture' *haldi doodh* – basically a double movement of reterritorialization. But more than this, Sen believes that turmeric latte also calls for a refamiliarisation – for Indians, including in the diaspora – with culture in order to access global discourses of 'indigenous cultures.' Global circulations of culturally specific foods act as cultural reflectors, requiring a refamiliarisation with one's own culture and foodways inflected by the accretions of variant discourses. (Sen, 2017: food52.com/blog/19083-how-indian-is-your-turmeric-latte). These global circulations and the processes of deculturation and reculturation are neither benign nor efforts at cultural validation of the 'other', as the 'other' remains unknowable unless repackaged in familiar ways for consumption, in Boehmer's, 'traditional centres of capital'.

In conclusion, using Deleuze and Guattari's concept of rhizome thinking I have tried to link turmeric discourses, as part of the cosmic wellness discourse, as a conceptual rhizome with Vedic culture as the older rhizome which has sprouted multiple global off-shoots that have retained some link with Vedic culture. Two intertwined Vedic attributes of turmeric, *gauri* and *jayanti*, have entered the cosmic wellness discourse in relation to self-care, wellness, vitality and beauty promoted predominantly by white, middle- and upper-class women as well as celebrity influencers such as Gwyneth Paltrow and Emma Mills. What becomes

evident is turmeric's 'semiotic chain' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1897) which, like the botanical rhizome, has agglomerated mimesis, and a specific cosmic wellness patois that has gained global currency. A secondary argument has been that national foodways, either as 'national' cuisines or its constituent elements (such as turmeric in the case of India, and Shylashri Shankar in her book *Turmeric Nation*, identifies turmeric as the one pan-Indian spice[1]) offer an opportunity to explore and conceive of intersections between globalisation, historical connections and meaning-making as networks of reciprocity and re-invigoration, problematic as these may be, rather than only networks of cultural appropriations and cultural bastardisation. Despite, and perhaps because of the agglomerations of wellness discourses attached to turmeric and the presence of turmeric itself, turmeric latte is at a generous stretch a very distant cousin to *haldi doodh*.

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[1] Turmeric is very much a pan-South Asian, and some would argue, pan-Asian, spice; however, given the Indian context of Ayurveda, I am keeping Shankar's descriptor of pan-Indian.

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