Linguistic strategies of de-Islamisation and Colonial science: Indo-Muslim physicians and the yûnânî denomination

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Linguistic strategies of de-Islamation and colonial science: Indo-Muslim physicians and the yûnânî denomination

During the colonial period, Indo-Muslim physicians began to define and differentiate their traditional medicine from other traditional medicine by using the Arabic adjective yûnânî (or unani according to English pronunciation) literally meaning ‘Ionic’ or ‘Greek’. Indo-Muslim physicians today would rarely, and never within (unani) health care and research institutions, define their medicine as Islamic, but as Greek. What were the scientific, political and linguistic motivations driving this terminological change?

The earliest known Indo-Persian medical work that uses it in its title is the Takmil-ye yûnânî (Greek perfection), a treatise on treatment of diseases ordered after the foundation of the Delhi Sul-tana in the early thirteenth century. In Indian Arabic and Persian pre-colonial medical literature, the adjective yûnânî is quite uncommon; the discipline was simply called tibb (literally, medicine). In the Indo-Persian medieval literature this adjective is mostly found referring to the Greek philosophers.

The idea of a common origin assisted the assimilation of modern medicine by unani physicians: its technology and collegial associations, the trend of scientific communication through conferences and medical reviews. The idea was that Western medicine with its clear debt to Islamic science was not so different from unani, but a recent variant with some technological innovations which could easily be integrated.

The Indians were already using the term unani with some finesse, the equivalent of yûnânî, for referring to the Greeks, the Romans and later to the Arabs and their sciences. A coeval process of the tradition’s Islamization took place: the first known translations of Islamic medical sources into Sanskrit appeared in the eighteenth century, while Hindu scholars started to write works on tibb in Persian, a trend that continued in Urdu in the colonial period.

Not all the leading physicians agreed with this linguistic innovation and its implications. An eminent voice against it was that of Hakim ‘Abd al-Latîf, who had developed Arab science in Lahore and the Punjab. Those who had developed Arab science were the Syrian, Christian and Persian. The Indians were already using the term unani, in the colonial period. The idea of a common origin assisted the assimilation of modern medicine by unani physicians: its technology and collegial associations, the trend of scientific communication through conferences and medical reviews. The idea was that Western medicine with its clear debt to Islamic science was not so different from unani, but a recent variant with some technological innovations which could easily be integrated.

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