

# Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, “Concerning the Diseases and Medicine of the Malabars” (1713)

## Abstract

The Tranquebar Mission in southeast India was established in 1706 for the indigenous residents of the colony of the Danish East India Company. The German Pietists Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plütschau, both from Halle, were the first missionaries to Tranquebar (today's Tharangambadi).

The following excerpt is from a letter written by Ziegenbalg and published in the missionary newspaper *Hallesche Berichte*. In it, Ziegenbalg reports on various aspects of traditional Indian health care and medicine. He describes the diseases from which the Malabars typically suffered, reflects on their medical knowledge, and describes some of their more common medications. Ziegenbalg reported that most of the Europeans living in the colony relied on Indian medicine (Ayurveda) to cure disease. Oils, powders, and drinks accounted for the majority of Indian medicines; some of the more skillful Indian physicians also used healing stones consisting of chemical ingredients prepared from pearl, gold, and other metals. During his time in the mission, Ziegenbalg consulted with an Indian physician and experienced the positive effects of Indian medicine firsthand.

## Source

Excerpt from another of Mr. Ziegenbalg's letters, which serves as an appendix to the previous one, and is composed of questions and answers.

### First question:

Which diseases are particularly common among the Malabars?

Answer: The most dangerous diseases are 1) paralysis of the limbs; 2) obstruction of the airways, which often means quick death for even the strongest and fittest individuals; 3) the cold fever, which is likewise very dangerous here. And these in addition to many other diseases, some of which are incurable but result in a very quick death, and whose names I do not know in German. In Malabarian these are called 4) *Polawei*, which causes a large hump on the back and sometimes causes many pockmarks; 5) *Schuwasskascham*, which takes away almost all one's breath; 6) *Kannakirendi*, a ravenous cancer; 7) *Magodarawikkum*, a strange swelling in the limbs, etc., etc. I remember that a Malabarian medical man once gave me a long catalog that listed all the different types of diseases. They write and speak a great deal about the wind in the body, for which they have ten categories, but these are further divided into seventy, depending on the specific symptoms. When these are in the right order, then they say that the individual is healthy; but if they are out of order, then all sorts of diseases arise. They want to demonstrate these in their way based on a comparison with the winds of the world: for they place great value on the harmony of the *Microcosmi* and *Macrocosmi*, or the small world and the large.

### Second question:

Do the Malabars rely on medicine?

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Answer: The *ars medica* [medical arts] is the most revered discipline among the Malabars; and it is practiced by those of this profession [*ex professo*] very assiduously and well. They have written admirable books on the topic, a number of which I have read with pleasure, and I have wished that at least one of them could be translated into German and sent to Mr. D., which would surely amaze European doctors, but my duties have not allowed for this. The Europeans here, or white men [*Blancken*], go to the black *Medicos* with nearly all their diseases, for these doctors are more familiar with the conditions of the local air, weather, and diet. And these *Medicos* are quite successful with their treatments, but during the course of treatment they allow the Europeans to eat almost nothing except for those Malabarian dishes that best complement their medicines.

**Third question:**

Which ingredients do they use for their medicines?

Answer: The ingredients that they use in their medicines are entirely different than those of the Europeans: and I do not remember a single instance in which the medicine employed by the blacks was the same as what our European remedy would have been, except in cases where they had purchased materials from the local pharmacy (of the company). Most of their medicines are oils, powders, and drinks. Those who are experienced doctors, however, regularly use chemical medicines for dangerous diseases; most of these medicines are not liquors, but [are like] stones prepared from pearls, gold, and other metals, and in such a form that one can grate or shave off a dose whenever necessary: the colors are typically red and white. I have used the same myself and have felt their positive effect. I once tried to buy such a stone or solid cake of medicine from a doctor, but he wanted to have sixty imperial gulden for it. In addition, in Ceylon there is a stone sometimes found in the stomachs of swine called *Lepes do porco*, which is supposed to be good for treating all diseases. When I was in Nagapatnam with Mr. M. Gründler eight days ago, the local governor gave us just such a valuable stone and a description of its effects, which Gründler sent to N. By the way, doctors report that the European medicines do have the same potency and effect in East India as they do in the places where they were prepared.

[...]

Source: Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, "Von den Kranckheiten [und] der Medicin der Malabaren," in *Der Königl. dänischen Missionarien aus Ost-Indien eingesandte ausführliche Berichte von dem Werck ihres Amts unter den Heyden*, edited by Gotthilf August Francken, 3. Continuation (1713), pp. 147–48. Available online at: <https://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:gbv:ha33-1-23653>

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