

HISTORICAL DYNAMICS OF INSTRUMENTS FOR CUPPING THERAPY: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Cupping therapy, one of humanity's oldest therapeutic practices, has evolved from ritualistic healing to evidence-based complementary medicine. This article traces the historical dynamics of cupping instruments, highlighting their anthropological significance, technological development, and symbolic meanings. Using cross-cultural and diachronic analysis, the study outlines the cultural transformation of cupping devices—from animal horns and bamboo to modern glass, silicone, and vacuum apparatus—reflecting broader socio-medical paradigms of body, health, and nature. The results illustrate the interplay between material innovation, ritual symbolism, and the continuity of traditional healing across civilizations.

Keywords: *cupping therapy, medical anthropology, historical instruments, healing symbolism, traditional medicine*

Introduction

Cupping therapy represents one of the oldest known therapeutic modalities in human history (6, 8, 10, 12). This recreational influence has archaeological and textual evidence spanning over five millennia (3, 4, 10, 11). In our contemporary time Cupping therapy is part of the Wellness practices (1, 5, 9, 13-16). Its origins can be traced to multiple early civilisations — including ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, and Greece (20, 21, 26, 28). In the cited countries these practices emerged as both a medical intervention and a ritual act symbolizing purification and the restoration of bodily harmony (2, 7, 18, 23-25). The Ebers Papyrus (ca. 1550 BCE) contains one of the earliest known descriptions of cupping, primarily as a method for “drawing out bad blood” (17, 22, 27, 29, 30). Similarly, ancient Chinese medical texts such as the Mawangdui manuscripts and later the Huangdi Neijing elaborated its role in balancing qi and expelling pathogenic “wind.” In the Greco-Roman tradition, Hippocrates and Galen systematised cupping as part of humoral medicine (6, 8, 9). This aligning the cupping therapy with the regulation of the four bodily fluids — blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile (9). Throughout the Islamic Golden Age, cupping (Hijama) was recontextualised within the framework of prophetic medicine, integrating spiritual purification with humoral balance (26). Physicians like Al-Razi and Ibn Sina (Avicenna) refined its techniques and indications, linking it to specific diseases, body zones, and lunar cycles (7, 28). The practice maintained not only a therapeutic function but also symbolic and social roles, representing cleansing, renewal, and divine alignment.

Methods

A systematic review of the existing literature on various aspects of the terminology and conceptual framework of Stress, Wellness, and Professional Stress was conducted following

the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. The review aimed to explore the following key questions:

- What are the most used definitions and contexts for Stress, Wellness, and Professional Stress?
- ✚ What is the structural framework of these concepts?
- ✚ What are the strengths and limitations?

To identify relevant studies, electronic databases such as Academia Edu, EBSCO, Google Scholar, and Research Gate were systematically searched using the following keywords: (cupping OR instruments) AND (Wellness OR Therapy OR anti-stress OR healing technique) AND (Health prevention) .

Results

Over centuries, cupping instruments evolved from horns and bamboo tubes to metal and glass cups, and in modern contexts, to silicone and mechanical vacuum devices. This technological evolution reflects both advances in material culture and transformations in the conceptual frameworks underlying health and disease. Where ancient practitioners viewed cupping through the lens of vitalism and humoralism, modern interpretations adopt biomedical and biophysical paradigms, explaining benefits through mechanisms such as increased microcirculation, lymphatic drainage, and modulation of the autonomic nervous system (9, 28).

Anthropologically, cupping therapy demonstrates the continuity of traditional healing systems amidst cultural change — adapting to the epistemological shifts from spiritual to scientific yet maintaining its symbolic resonance as a means of extraction and purification. In many cultures, it functions as both a health practice and a cultural identity marker, surviving colonial medical reforms and reemerging in the 21st century as part of integrative and wellness medicine.

The present paper explores the comparative typology of cupping instruments, tracing the interplay between materials, mechanisms, and symbolic meanings. By examining the historical transformation from natural to preformed materials, and from manual to controlled vacuum methods, this study situates cupping therapy within a broader continuum of medical anthropology and technological evolution.

Historical Evolution of Cupping Instruments

The anthropological study of cupping instruments provides insight into the dynamic intersection between material culture, symbolic healing, and scientific rationalization. Each period of development—ancient, medieval, and modern—reflects a shift in how societies conceptualize disease, purity, and vitality.

1 Ancient Period (Prehistory – 5th Century CE): The earliest evidence of cupping therapy appears in Egyptian papyri (ca. 1550 BCE) and Chinese medical texts from the Han dynasty. Materials included animal horns, bamboo, and pottery. The symbolism centered on “drawing out evil” and balancing vital forces (qi, pneuma, or humors).

2 Medieval and Early Modern Period (6th–18th Century)

Glass cups replaced organic materials, marking the transition to controlled suction via fire. In Islamic medicine, cupping (ḥijāma) integrated prophetic and Galenic doctrines, emphasizing spiritual purification. European practices adapted the technique for bloodletting, linked with humoral pathology.

3 Modern and Contemporary Era (19th–21st Century):

Industrialization introduced standardized glass and mechanical vacuum cups. In the 20th century, the integration of silicone and electric suction systems modernized application techniques, while maintaining symbolic continuity—detoxification, energy balance, and stress relief. The recent global revival, including Olympic athletes' use, reframed cupping within wellness and rehabilitation contexts (Ernst, 2022).

4. Symbolism and Cultural Context: Cupping's symbolic meaning evolved with shifting cosmologies:

- ✓ Purification and extraction (ancient ritual cleansing of “evil winds”).
- ✓ Balance and restoration (humoral or energetic equilibrium).
- ✓ Scientific detoxification (modern biomedical reinterpretation).

Across Asia, Africa, and Europe, the cup served as both a vessel of containment and transformation, embodying the boundary between body and environmental symbol of healing through controlled exchange.

5. Instruments Typology (see Tab. 1):

Table 1. Symbolic and Functional Meanings of Cupping Instruments across Eras

Historical Era	Typical Instruments	Materials	Functional Mechanism	Symbolic Meaning
Ancient	Horns, bamboo tubes, clay vessels	Organic (horn, wood, clay)	Suction via oral extraction or heat	Expulsion of evil, restoration of balance
Medieval	Glass cups, metal cups	Glass, brass	Fire suction	Purification, divine or prophetic healing
Modern	Mechanical, vacuum cups	silicone, Glass, plastic, silicone	Mechanical or electronic suction	Detoxification, recovery, regeneration

- ✚ *Cultural Continuity:* Despite changes in materials, the functional logic of negative pressure remains constant. The therapeutic cup remains a tool for extraction and renewal—translating metaphysical cleansing into biomedical intervention.
- ✚ *Material Innovation:* Transition from natural to synthetic materials mirrors broader technological and hygienic modernization. Glass introduced sterilization; silicone enabled flexibility and accessibility.

- ✚ **Symbolic Persistence:** While the biomedical model demystified the practice, the ritual archetype of cleansing and rebirth persists, confirming the dual physical–spiritual nature of traditional therapies (Csordas, 1994). Figure 1 shows: horn → bamboo → glass → silicone → mechanical vacuum:

Chronological Evolution of Cupping Instruments

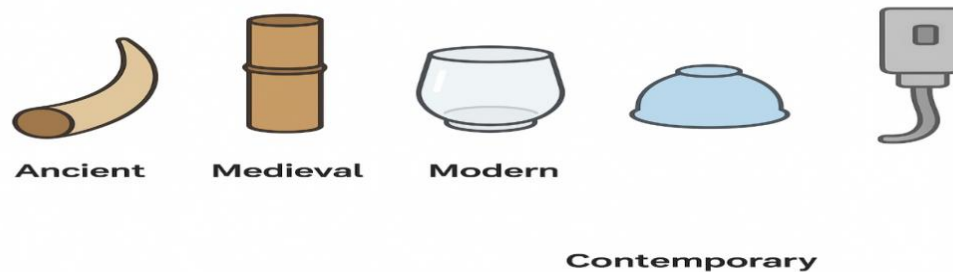


Figure 1. Chronological Evolution of Cupping Instruments

To visually compare the evolution of cupping instruments—from traditional to modern types—based on materials, mechanisms, and therapeutic functions (see tal.2):

Table 2. Classification Framework of cupping instruments

Category	Material Type	Mechanism of Action	Therapeutic Function	Cultural/Historical Context
Ancient Organic	Bamboo, horn, clay	Thermal suction (fire inside cup creates vacuum)	Detoxification, energy balance, relief of muscle tension	Used in traditional Chinese, Tibetan, Arabic and Slavic medicine
Metallic Era	Bronze, copper, iron	Conductive heating and suction	Bloodletting, local hyperemia, stimulation of meridians	Ancient Greece, Egypt, early Islamic medicine
Glass Era	Glass	Fire-induced negative pressure	Analgesic, anti-inflammatory, respiratory therapy	19th–20th century European medicine
Transitional Synthetic	Rubber, bakelite, early plastics	Manual mechanical pump or	Hygienic, reusable, adjustable pressure	Mid-20th century clinical use
Contemporary Clinical	Silicone, biopolymer, polycarbonate	Manual, electric, or pneumatic suction	Myofascial release, lymph drainage, muscle recovery	Physiotherapy, sports medicine, medical wellness
Digital/Hybrid Models	Smart cupping devices, integrated sensors	Digital pressure control, biofeedback	Monitoring circulatory response, data-driven precision therapy	21st century personalized medicine

This typology integrates historical, anthropological, and biomedical perspectives. Figure 2 shows the comparative typology of materials:

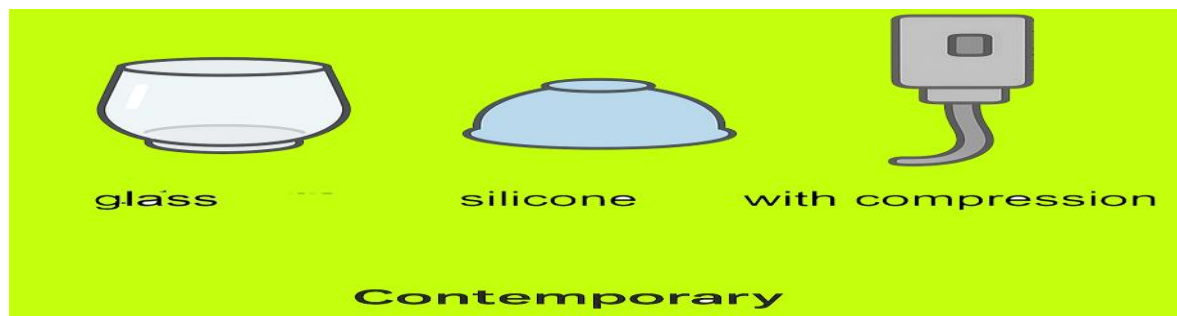


Figure 2. Comparative Typology of Functions

The cupping therapy tools have identic Functional Mechanisms:

Suction Principle:

- ✚ Thermal (fire cupping) → ancient and ritualistic origin.
- ✚ Mechanical (pump) → controlled, hygienic modern adaptation.
- ✚ Electronic → precise monitoring, safety standards.

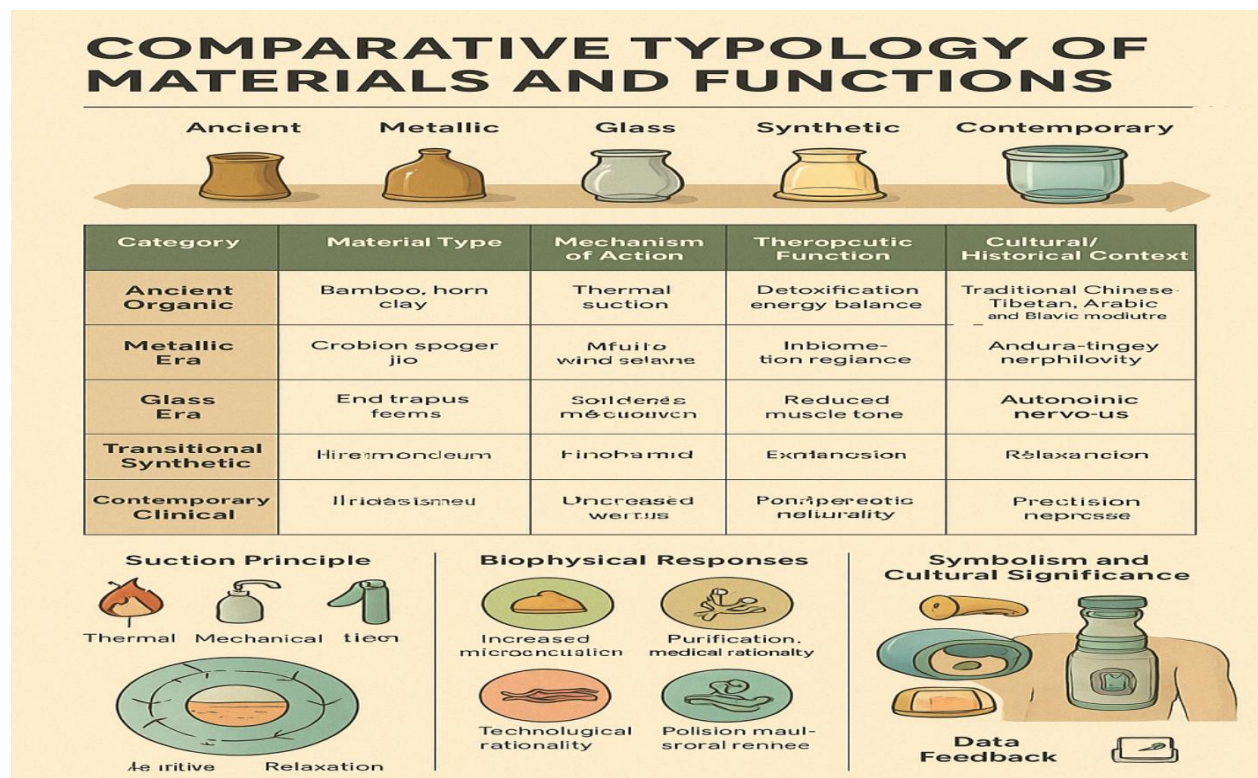


Figure 3. Comparative Typology of Materials

Biophysical Responses:

- ✚ Increased microcirculation
- ✚ Enhanced lymphatic drainage
- ✚ Reduction in muscle tone and inflammation
- ✚ Activation of autonomic nervous regulation

3. Symbolism and Cultural Significance

Horn and Bamboo: Natural connection with the body and cosmos.

Glass: Transparency symbolizing purification and medical rationality.

Silicone and Polycarbonate: Technological rationality and hygiene.

Digital Models: Symbol of precision, personalization, and quantified wellness.

4. Infographic Design Draft

Layout suggestion:

Top section: Evolution timeline (Bamboo → Bronze → Glass → Plastic → Digital)

Middle section: Comparative typology table (like above, color-coded by era)

Bottom section: Circular diagram showing functional mechanisms (suction → circulation → healing → relaxation → data feedback)

Discussion

The historical development of cupping instruments demonstrates that therapeutic technologies are shaped by both practical needs and culturally specific understandings of the body, illness, and healing. The transition from animal horns and bamboo vessels to glass, silicone, and mechanical vacuum devices reflects advances in material production, hygiene, precision, and control. Nevertheless, this technological evolution did not completely replace earlier meanings associated with cupping. Ideas of extraction, purification, restoration, and bodily balance persisted across Egyptian, Chinese, Greco-Roman, and Islamic medical traditions. From an anthropological perspective, cupping instruments should therefore be interpreted as more than functional medical objects. Their form, material, and method of application embody the beliefs and social practices of the communities that used them. Although explanatory models changed—from removing “bad blood,” regulating humors, and balancing qi to influencing circulation and pain—the underlying therapeutic logic remained centered on restoring harmony within the body. The continuing use of cupping also illustrates the adaptability of traditional medicine. Modern vacuum apparatus and standardized cups have made the practice more reproducible and compatible with contemporary clinical settings, while its ritual and symbolic dimensions remain important in many cultures. This coexistence of tradition and innovation helps explain cupping therapy’s persistence across historical periods and geographical regions. However, historical continuity should not be interpreted as sufficient evidence of clinical effectiveness. Anthropological analysis explains the cultural durability and changing material forms of the practice, whereas its safety and therapeutic value require separate evaluation through rigorous clinical research. Future interdisciplinary studies should therefore combine historical, ethnographic, material-culture, and biomedical approaches to clarify how traditional meanings influence present-day use and patient experience.

Conclusion

Cupping instruments embody a living dialogue between ancient ritual and modern science. Their evolution—from horn to high-tech vacuum device—illustrates the adaptability of

traditional healing to changing cultural and medical paradigms. Understanding this transformation enriches both medical anthropology and contemporary wellness practices by linking technological progress to enduring cultural symbolism.

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Declarations of informed consent have been signed regarding the publication of survey data. ChatGPT is used for English grammar revision and translation.

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