

BOOK REVIEW

Anthony Cerulli, *The Practice of Texts: Education and Healing in South India* (Oakland: The University of California Press, 2022), pp. xiv+221, '2,700.00, paperback, ISBN: 978-0-520-38354-8.

This book studies ayurvedic practice in South India, particularly in Kerala. The author, Anthony Cerulli, conducted ethnographic research for fifteen years and studied the texts of ayurveda to present this important study. The practice of ayurveda (an ancient system of Indian medicine, meaning 'science of life', which emerged around the sixth century BC) has changed and evolved over the centuries. There is a visible difference between the classical gurukula, which was an important part of ancient Hindu educational structure where a pupil resided in the home of a guru or teacher and learnt different subjects or philosophies there, and the gurukula of modern times. Cerulli highlights the dual role of a practitioner as a teacher and a healer. This book describes the changes in ayurvedic education between the 1890s and 1970s and how the practitioners, despite the changes, still adopt the techniques and knowledge of classical texts. Cerulli traces the history of ancient ayurvedic education and changes brought about by the ayurvedic revival movements and professional societies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to present the discourses of educational politics of ayurveda in the current times.

In the first chapter, Cerulli highlights how Orientalist scholars set the platform for Hinduism and science during the rule of the British East India Company. The European doctors considered ayurveda a flawed system, and British rulers tried to impose biomedicine on the local population. The shortcomings of biomedicine during epidemics gave indigenous medical systems a chance to improve their medical practices. Cerulli presents how revivalists of ayurveda, through various platforms, responded to the questions of nationalist leaders who were apprehensive about ayurveda. After independence, the Union Government of India and state governments fixed the admission policies, curriculum, and examination system for ayurvedic education; the degree system enhanced the authority of ayurveda practitioners. There was a difference in regional progress, and ayurveda grew with the foundation of hospitals, dispensaries, and journals. The conversation between a student and a teacher happens in the local language. However, the lack of Sanskrit training in later generations of students led to difficulty in understanding the classical texts.

In the second chapter, Cerulli focuses on the practice of texts. The practice of texts is a systematic way of knowing the date of texts and their arguments, intertextual references, and modes of explication, always and already as a valid expression of therapeutic practice (p. 72). Cerulli observed the mukhā-mukhan (face-to-face) practice of instructions, an age-old learning practice, at Mookkamangalam and Shantimana, and describes its origin. These centres of ayurvedic learning have kept the traditions of instruction alive in the modern age. Biomedicine is taught along with ayurveda at colleges, and hence some students do not consider it as pure ayurvedic education. Because of this, the bachelor's degree holders of ayurvedic medicine come to these places to enhance their healing skills. Earlier, only students from family or extended family were allowed to study at gurukulas, but now outsiders are allowed too; however, the dominance of upper castes still prevails in this domain. The teachers adopted new ways to describe the old textual teachings. Vyākhyāna (i.e. detailed interpretation of something and the tantrayukti) helps students to connect with texts while seeing patients. There are three phases of mukhāmukhan practice; vākya, vākyaṛtha, and arthāvayava, each more advanced than the previous one, respectively.

In the third chapter, Cerulli provides an overview of how knowledge sharing is considered a way to exchange gifts. The physical or mental illness symptoms shared by the patient and the healing wisdom imparted by the healer are two crucial parts of this process. The healers try to keep professional duties and religious rituals separate. Cerulli describes the importance of gifts in classical texts. The gifts received by healers are primarily social and emotional in the form, but the economic condition of a practitioner

also matters here. In the classical ayurveda texts, any form of monetary gift was considered as fraud committed by a practitioner. The classical dāna theory of ayurveda is concerned with moral value rather than the redistribution of sources.

In the fourth chapter, Cerulli focuses on a ritual (i.e. blowing therapy of ūtu) which was performed at the time of snakebite. Cerulli describes both the link between ritual and religion and the distinction between performing ritual and religious practices. The rituals are vital as they emotionally support the patients and build trust. The rituals have three components: sociality, reformation, and cynosure. The people and objects involved in this ritual become sacred. The fifth chapter discusses the practice of texts in modern ayurvedic education. The lack of training in primary medicine texts has been critically pointed out, leading to the disconnection between classical literature and modern-day healing practices. Cerulli mentions the important ayurvedic texts and diseases mentioned in these. The practice of texts brings ideas of well-being to bear on the people who present themselves for care (p. 176).

The strength of this work lies in the results obtained from the extensive fieldwork, conversations, and observation of the healer–student–patient relationship. Cerulli’s emphasis on philological research of classical texts, and his vital study of the importance of knowledge exchange as gifts and rituals, fills the gaps in scholarly research of ayurveda in South India. Philology helped Cerulli understand the use of classical and local literature in modern-day education and practice. Earlier works on the social history of medicine in South India overlooked the significance of teaching methods and the problems of modern-day education, but the findings of this work address these issues. Cerulli provides new insights on crucial issues such as the medium of language debate between purists and reformists and what problems occurred during the shift from Sanskrit to the English language, the politics among ayurvedic revivalist organisations, the attitude of Indian elites towards ayurveda, the role of British rulers, the importance of Orientalist societies established during the nineteenth century, and the impact of government policies on ayurvedic education. Many works emphasise the differences between ayurveda and biomedicine, but Cerulli traces the integration between biomedicine and ayurveda back to the nineteenth century. Cerulli examines the rituals from a practice-oriented perspective rather than a secular-sacred notion. This work presents how ayurvedic technical knowledge looked in the ancient times and how students used to learn texts in their entirety. The lively presentation of activities by the author at Mookkamangalam and Shantimana helps readers grasp this book’s essentials.

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