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Understanding Medical Syncretism

Subjectivity, medical knowledge and institutions in contemporary Siddha

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Abstract

The epistemic tension between traditional medicines and biomedicine has long been a theme of anthropological interest. Those seeking to trace the trajectory of traditional medicine in contemporary times point to the adaptive processes that eventually lead to their biomedicalization. But what if we view medicines from the subjectivity of the practitioner? How are these tensions played out in her/his lifeworld? This paper tries to look at contemporary developments in siddha medicine in terms of the practitioners and their social background. Rather than viewing medical epistemes as incommensurable texts and discourses, this paper seeks to understand how they converge in the lifeworld of the practitioner today. Though ayurveda and siddha share the same base in terms of medical theory, therapeutic and pharmacological principles, siddha is deeply embedded in the Shaivite traditions of South India as well as in the South Indian languages Tamil and Telugu, following centuries of dissemination of medical knowledge with mysticism in folk idioms by wandering mystics. Though different streams of traditional medicines encountered similar future with the post independent Indian state, regional characteristics put their stamp through not just ecological, political and social imperatives on the ground, but also through the culturally imbued subjectivity of the physicians who chose the profession. Drawing upon fieldwork among individual practitioners as well as institutionally located clinical and research faculty in siddha, this paper provides a holistic understanding of the epistemic and ontological correlates of contemporary siddha in the Tamil region.