

History of Science in South Asia

Anthony Cerulli, *The Practice of Texts: Education and Healing in South India* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022)

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Volume 11, 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1105979ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.18732/hssa105>

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Éditeur(s)

University of Alberta Library

ISSN

2369-775X (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Khalikova, V. (2023). Compte rendu de [Anthony Cerulli, *The Practice of Texts: Education and Healing in South India* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022)]. *History of Science in South Asia*, 11, R8–R11.
<https://doi.org/10.18732/hssa105>

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MLA style citation form: Venera Khalikova. "Book Review: Anthony Cerulli, *The Practice of Texts: Education and Healing in South India*." *History of Science in South Asia*, 11 (2023): 8–11. DOI: 10.18732/hssa105.

Online version available at: <http://hssa-journal.org>

HISTORY OF SCIENCE IN SOUTH ASIA

A journal for the history of all forms of scientific thought and action, ancient and modern, in all regions of South Asia, published online at <http://hssa-journal.org>

ISSN 2369-775X

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History of Science in South Asia

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Book Review: Anthony Cerulli, *The Practice of Texts: Education and Healing in South India*

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Anthony Cerulli, *The Practice of Texts: Education and Healing in South India* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), ix–xiv, 1–221. \$34.95, £30.00 hard copy and free open access digital publication. ISBN: 9780520383548. DOI: [10.1525/luminos.120](https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.120).

MANY ACADEMIC BOOKS ON Ayurveda have been published over the past two decades, but Anthony Cerulli's *The Practice of Texts: Education and Healing in South India* distinguishes itself as a rare exploration of ayurvedic pedagogy. Although the book's blurb suggests that it examines two types of educational settings—the ayurvedic college and the *gurukula*—the focus leans on the latter. By combining historical, philological, and ethnographic approaches, Cerulli analyzes the transmission of knowledge from a practicing *vaidya-guru* (physician-teacher) to students in central Kerala.

The book's structure comprises an introduction followed by five chapters. Chapter 1 delineates the history of debates and policy shifts in ayurvedic education and practice, encompassing diverse views on *śuddha* (pure) or *miśra* (mixed) Ayurveda. Chapter 2 ethnographically explores how knowledge from classic ayurvedic texts is learned and taught in the contemporary *gurukula* setting. Chapters 3 and 4 proceed to elucidate how this knowledge is applied in clinical practice. Specifically, in Chapter 3 Cerulli examines physician-patient interactions, the physician's duty to heal as articulated in the classical texts and practiced today, and the nature of the ayurvedic gift. Chapter 4 presents a perspective of healing as ritual, then moves to the question of "worthiness" and "neediness" of patients from the perspective of classical ayurvedic texts and contemporary *vaidya-gurus*. The concluding chapter revisits key arguments and offers reflections on conceptions of wellbeing and patienthood, as well as the role of physicians and attending persons in the healing process.

As reflected in the title, Cerulli's primary thesis posits that in a *gurukula* the study of classical ayurvedic texts is inseparable from the practice of heal-

ing. Texts are not merely passive repositories of knowledge; they serve as active, performable components of a medical encounter. Texts are “fluid and conversational resources open to rearrangement and supplementation with other texts” (40). Gurukula students learn to master the contents of various ayurvedic texts to be able to deploy their arguments, methods, and references for therapeutic purposes while also being cognizant of “the poetics of ayurvedic expression” (35).

This is why Cerulli calls such a pedagogical approach of vaidya-gurus “gurukula philology,” where he understands philology to be “a discipline that depends on the primary tasks of making sense of texts” (73). The author acknowledges that philology is not an *emic* term that vaidya-gurus use to describe their practice, but he employs it as an analytical tool to underscore “the enduring impact of premodern texts in ayurvedic education and practice in south India today” (82). Cerulli’s rationale for using such terms is convincing because it is grounded in extensive ethnographic fieldwork with three generations of gurukula physicians (the grandfather, the daughter, and the grandson) in 2003–2017. He observed that for vaidya-gurus and their students the study of medicine transforms into a philological exercise as they spend hours interpreting classical ayurvedic texts, commentaries, and vernacular sources.

This proposition is both novel and stimulating. Key to Cerulli’s argument is an emphasis on the texts as usable and shareable. They are not simply read, memorized, and interpreted; instead, they must be embodied and put into clinical practice. This process is creative, improvisational, and formative because texts are contextualized within regional specificities and situated against previous patient cases (87, 164). Cerulli points out that the gurukula philology is different from studies of classical medical texts in biomedical schools in India or the United States. While the gurukula practitioners approach classical texts as practical guides to provide contemporary treatments (159), biomedical students chance upon classical medical texts as part of elective subjects under the rubric of the history of medicine. For these students, the texts “are not sources for obvious integration” in clinical work (161). The same holds for many government ayurvedic colleges in India, where Sanskrit texts, despite being a mandatory component of the curriculum, are studied in excerpts and primarily “through filters of biomedical epistemology and healing techniques” (34). The scant attention given to classical ayurvedic literature in the ayurvedic college system has resulted in the “near erasure of the Sanskrit classics from training in the ayurvedic college” (165).

Cerulli traces the roots of this situation to the Ayurvedic Revitalization Movement (ARM) in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Here it is particularly remarkable how the author uses ethnography to converse with histor-

ical studies. Many historians have noted that because of the dominant ARM discourse that Ayurveda must be built as a modern institution, the gurukula system began to be seen as an institution of the past, lacking relevance in a changing world. However, as Cerulli decisively shows with his ethnographic material, gurukulas continue to be in demand in the twenty-first century. Many gurukula students he interviewed were graduates of modern ayurvedic colleges who had been dissatisfied with their training and sought to complement it with what they saw to be a more “authentic” learning in the gurukula. The gurukulas in central Kerala observed by Cerulli saw a steady stream of students from diverse backgrounds and regions, including North India.

While Cerulli makes general arguments about gurukula education, he also shows how some of its aspects vary across time and region and depend on the character of individual gurus. For example, he emphasizes that gurukulas in South India have regional specifics and have historically been more “successful at resisting colonial and postcolonial pressures to translate their practices” into biomedical methods (38). He also provides insights into the slightly different teaching styles of the three vaidya-gurus that he observed to show how gurukulas are “at once similar and distinct, revealing a common form of training that is adaptable to the differing interests of each site’s physician-teacher” (40).

As an anthropologist, I found Chapter 3 very rewarding. In it, Cerulli discusses medical consultations as a form of gift, i.e., a gift of knowledge of long life given by the vaidya-gurus to their patients for free, refusing any form of compensation. By analyzing this case of nonmonetary healing in relation to both Marcel Mauss’s general theory of gift and the Indian theory of *danadharma* (that forbids the reciprocation of certain gifts), Cerulli argues that the ayurvedic gift differs from yet also expands and contributes to both these theorizations of gift exchanges. The ayurvedic gift is another example of how physician-doctors practice texts when “philologically informed knowledge impacts clinical practice and the vaidya-guru’s commitment to promote wellbeing” (116).

Chapter 4 would be more of interest to scholars of religion and ritual. By analyzing the case of an emergency therapy of *ūtu* (blowing of herbs onto the patient) administered to a person bitten by a venomous snake, Cerulli calls for the need to move away from the dichotomy of religion-medicine or sacred-profane, often found in the studies of religion, and to see ritual as practice that can be found in medicine as well as other spheres of human activity. In other words, a ritual does not have to be religious. This isn’t a new idea to anthropologists (which Cerulli himself acknowledges), but some scholars might benefit from his theorization of three features of ritual, sociality, reformation, and cynosure. These features help one to see ritual as a special activity that stands out from other daily deeds, by resolving a conflict, without appealing to the transcendental. For example, a practice-oriented analysis of ritual reveals that the blowing therapy is done to

resolve the contradiction between “the envenomed physiology of a patient and an ideal physiology outlined in texts on ayurveda” (156).

What I particularly appreciate about *The Practice of Texts* is that it moves away from the dichotomous categories such as sacred/profane discussed above, as well as pure/mixed and traditional/modern. Cerulli shows that there are multiple Ayurvedas in India today, and gurukula students are not necessarily traditionalists who seek unaltered ancient knowledge. Instead, they are “part of a new generation of physicians whose commitment to being informed professionally entails the regular deployment of classical knowledge in their contemporary practice” (70). Although the book does not provide a discussion of the ayurvedic college system that is as in-depth as that which is offered for the gurukula, Cerulli makes an excellent observation that both the gurukula and institutionalized Ayurveda are profoundly variable and changing. Both are embedded in cultural politics, history, and demands of the day (180). Rather than viewing the gurukula as traditional and the college as modern, he urges the reader to appreciate both educational settings as having unique histories, contemporary significance, and futures.

In sum, *The Practice of Texts* is an engaging, nuanced, and dense book, with many vivid ethnographic episodes and conversations. Cerulli’s theoretical and methodological versatility across the disciplines of history, anthropology, philology, religious studies, and South Asian studies will certainly make this book a valuable and enjoyable read for diverse scholars and students.

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