

ABSTRACT

Configuration of tradition in Siddha medicine

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Cittavaiyyar today are often grouped with diverse medical practitioners throughout the world under the rubric of “traditional” doctors. Many *vaiyyar* embrace this designation of traditional, wielding it in ways that lend authority to their practices and distinguish them from the hegemony of biomedicine. While the historical study of medical knowledge and practices has greatly advanced over the past two decades, the nature of authority entailed in calling something traditional, as well as the continuities and fissures between this contemporary designation and prior ways of specifying medical identity and difference, have been little studied. In this project, I will bring into dialogue the pre-modern and modern self-referential practices of South Indian *vaiyyar* who trace the origins of their knowledge to the Tamil *cittar*. I will examine the ways that these *vaiyyar* have transformed themselves over the past two hundred years. In demarcating clear divisions between Tamil, Sanskrit, and Western medicines, *vaiyyar* today consider themselves to occupy a unified medical space called “siddha medicine” or “Tamil medicine.” However, a look at pre-modern medical writings in Tamil indicate that individual lineages took preference over broader considerations of a pan-Tamil medicine. By comparing these premodern writings to contemporary accounts of siddha medical tradition, I will map shifts in the self-referential practices of medical practitioners from *vaidya* to *cittavaiyya*, to *Tamil vaiyyar*, and to *traditional vaiyyar* (*parampariya vaiyyar*).