

ABSTRACT

Research Theme: The "vital spots" - ethnography of a South Indian healing tradition

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The medical discipline of Varmam, which is considered a branch of the South Indian indigenous medicine of Siddha and at which core stands the philosophy of vital spots (varmam or marman in Sanskrit) is still to be explored scientifically and also ethnographically in detail. While both life-histories of practitioners of Varmam and the available palm-leaf manuscripts clearly hint at a special guru-sisya relationship characterised by extreme longevity of the phase of learning, intensive testing of the student's readiness and right mental state by the guru, and a strict codex of hiding of certain parts of the knowledge considered to be sacred and dangerous, it is possible to find Varmam advertised on the Internet, with an alleged modern and westernized labelling of 'Thanuology' and practitioners struggling to keep their heritage alive. Also, if slowly, Varmam is being incorporated into institutional curriculae.

At the same time, the extremely intriguing person of the guru himself, known as the Varmani Asan, who more often than not is notorious for his secretive behaviours, being known as drunkard and also as a possible master of the secret martial art of varma ati or ati murai, related to the knowledge of the vital spots, which makes him a source of danger at the same time that he is respected as a healer, seems to be transformed itself in contemporary South Indian reality of illness and healing. The related ayurvedic marman also stand in the centre of a recent trend to combine different medical systems, notably the Indian and the Chinese one in the form of Acupuncture. It will be one of the main questions of this study if local or indigenous knowledge with its often closed forms of learning can exist without giving in to developments like globalisation and related phenomena as medical plurality in a contemporary environment and how transitions come to terms with conflicting powers of tradition, modernity and healing.