

Book Reviews

Early Tantric Medicine: Snakebite, Mantras, and Healing in the Garuda Tantras.

Michael Slouber. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016. Pp. 392.

Reviewed by Darry Dinnell, *McGill University*

In *Early Tantric Medicine*, Michael Slouber takes up bodies of tantric medical literature, which flourished in the later part of the first millennium CE. Slouber focuses on the Gāruḍa Tantras, a class of scriptures chiefly devoted to treating snakebites and poisoning, and named for the avian deity perhaps best known as Viṣṇu's vehicle. Despite the apparent Vaiṣṇava connection, the Gāruḍa Tantras are distinctly Śaiva, marking Śaivism's eastern branch of revelation, and they also exhibit a Śākta side as well, evoking oft-overlooked goddesses like Tvaritā (to which chapter six is dedicated). Of these medical tantras, Slouber pays particular attention to the 11th century Kriyākālaguṇotarra, and provides the first English rendering of its sections involving remedies for envenomation. This is but one of the many new paths Slouber breaks in the work, as he reinvigorates several areas of inquiry regarding tantra, Hinduism and Indian medicine previously underestimated or altogether unheeded due to scholarly inattention, elitism or a mixture of both.

Most obviously, Slouber revitalizes the category of ancient Indian medicine and also its contents by resisting the Procrustean trend among earlier scholars to represent traditions like Ayurveda as “purely rational” or “secular” (1-2), ostensibly countering magico-religious systems of healing. Instead, Slouber insists that the contents of Indian medicine should be studied on their own terms. From the very outset, he is unapologetically determined to treat tantric medicine within its emic framework – that is, as being just as much religious as medical. In this spirit, he does not hesitate to delve into texts that were hitherto labelled as “sorcery” and subsequently passed off by some academics as “lowly” (53) – as a clear case in point, the Gāruḍa Tantras have themselves been dismissed as such (43). Slouber criticizes this attitude of “intellectual elitism” and argues that more attention needs to be directed towards texts dealing in magic and sorcery, especially as they relate to medicine, so as to construct a more “holistic” vision of Indian civilization (53).

Correspondingly, Slouber reconsiders the persistent scholarly notion that the component parts of mantras are “nonsensical” – to wit, more connotative, symbolic or affective than content-driven. By contrast, Slouber characterizes the mantras in the Gāruḍa Tantras as “the precise opposite of nonsense” (57), since they were in

fact widely renowned for their efficacy, and were useful insofar as their audience accepted this effectiveness (58). Slouber then proceeds to meticulously lay out in chapters four and five the contents of mantras that were believed to neutralize envenomation such as the Vipati and Nīlakaṇṭha (among others). In the process of doing so, he elucidates corresponding ritual procedures comprised of consecrations, visualizations, and even spiritual transformation into Garuḍa, solidly establishing that these snakebite mantras were conceived of as embodied practices and not simply palliative gibberish. These mantras' reputation for effectiveness lived on, and the influence of the Gāruḍa Tantras is apprehensible in texts from a variety of traditions, which Slouber outlines in chapter seven. These include Ayurvedic works like the Hārītasamhita, mythological texts such as the Agni, Nārada and (unsurprisingly) Gāruḍa Purāṇas, as well as Jain and Buddhist approaches to curing snakebites, the latter both Indian and Chinese. Even in contemporary India, the Vipati Mantra is still recommended as a cure for infertility (62-63). Much of the contents of Early Tantric Medicine, then, bear a convincing, cumulative testament to the perceived usefulness of the mantras in the Gāruḍa Tantras across regions, religions and centuries.

Slouber's work also makes evident the much-needed scholarly reevaluation of the figure of Garuḍa. Textbook accounts typically take a Vaiṣṇava reading of the deity, portraying him as "king of the birds" who is little more than a supporting character in Viṣṇu's mythology. Contrary to the conjecture of at least one encyclopedia contributor, Slouber demonstrates by way of the Gāruḍa Tantras that Garuḍa is worshipped as an independent deity (14). In the Vipati visualization, for instance, Garuḍa is understood as a form of Śiva just as Bhairava is and, moving well beyond his station as Viṣṇu's vehicle or bird king, is actually "coterminous with the highest reaches of the universe itself" (69). In the goddess-based Tvaritāmūlasūtra, Garuḍa even battles Viṣṇu and in the end vanquishes him (95). The independence and preeminence he is afforded in these Śaiva and Śākta texts destabilize the mostly unquestioned assumption that Garuḍa is solely a "minor god" limited to the Vaiṣṇava fold.

In composing Early Tantric Medicine, Slouber has drawn upon a diverse body of resources in addition to the primary texts with which he is working, and so his citations include reading groups, internet searches, temple websites and personal communications. The resulting book is clearly the product of painstaking work within a close-knit community of Sanskritists and students of tantra, perhaps none more eminent than Alexis Sanderson of Oxford. That said, the book has at certain junctures a sort of provisional feel to it, given the volume of unpublished sources. Moreover, the work is largely textual, which Slouber readily admits, and could be considerably broadened with an ethnographic component. This would open up for study not only on-the-ground healing traditions in which these medical texts still resonate – or do not – but also analogous practices like snake-charming, a lacuna in

South Asian scholarship which Slouber correctly points out (126-128). Throughout the book, Slouber recurrently identifies a number of other areas that could not be expanded due to lack of space. With a length of just 131 pages before the appendices and endnotes, the reader is left wondering if some of these areas could not have been further developed.

These minor critiques seek not to impugn Early Tantric Medicine, but rather to underscore its exploratory nature. Quite evidently, there is much to be expounded concerning the subjects of tantric medicine, snakebites, and poison deities both past and present, textual and ethnographic, Sanskritic and vernacular. By reassessing so many fertile areas and posing so many new questions (not to mention furnishing an eminently readable translation of the *Kriyākālaguṇotarra*), Michael Slouber has initiated a career's (or more likely careers') worth of investigation. Indeed, Slouber already has translations of comparable medical texts from the *Bāla* and *Bhūta* Tantra traditions in the works. If one will forgive the strained metaphor, it appears that Early Tantric Medicine is but a seed syllable for the abundant body of scholarship soon to be elaborated and expanded by Slouber and others to follow.