

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

JEAN M. LANGFORD. *Fluent Bodies—Ayurvedic Remedies for Postcolonial Imbalance*. Duke University Press. 2002. 313 pp.

Ayurveda in the Indian context is the subject of this book. The author's main interest is in examining Ayurveda as a political discourse (page 263):

"Twentieth-century Ayurvedic practitioners redirected their practice to a nationalist task of healing particular wounds of colonialism and post-coloniality. In so doing, they sustained a tension between the modern modes of medical knowledge that are meaningful to a notion of Indian culture. Since the cannon blast that ideologically excluded Ayurveda from a universal medicine, practitioners have alternately used and "ab-used," resisted and renegotiated, embraced and wrestled with the construction of Ayurveda as culture."

Langford bases most of the book on fieldwork conducted in India, during which she interviewed Ayurvedic practitioners and analyzed texts. Her analysis is a mixture of narrative and theory. Vivid descriptions of the Ayurvedic physicians, their training, the manner in which they treat their patients, their understandings of disease entities and other issues, fill many pages of the book. She contrasts and compares the physicians and locates her ideas within various discourses of orientalism and postcolonialism. She interrogates contemporary interpretations of Ayurvedic concepts that are thousands of years old, with a particular interest in how Ayurvedic physicians position their understandings vis-à-vis allopathic medicine. The practitioners whom she interviewed had differing views on ancient Ayurvedic theory and its relevance for modern day life. Some viewed Ayurveda as timeless and relevant to any age and others translated many Ayurvedic concepts into allopathic terms.

Langford traces the educational history of Ayurvedic practitioners and various political forces that shaped institutional and curricular direction. She is also interested in 'quack' practitioners and spends many pages exposing those who 'simulate' Ayurvedic practice. Somewhat remarkably, even these practitioners allowed her to interview them and she is able to provide rich profiles of them, both personally and professionally.

Because Langford is a theoretician and is not just attempting to produce a case study of some Indian practitioners, it would have strengthened the text if she included a theoretical section that examined medicine as a global

social symbol. A vast literature exists on this subject and referencing it would have contextualized this expose of one system of Indian medicine (as there are many more systems of traditional medicine in India). Similarly, since a significant part of her book is devoted to examining charlatans/quackery within Ayurveda, she could have provided a context for this issue by placing it in the larger landscape of medicine around the world. Furthermore, because the text is mainly written in first person narrative, a critical analysis of her subject position within a discourse of intercultural power relations would have strengthened the text. Some readers would consider this text to be within the continuum of colonial anthropology because of many cultural assumptions that the author makes about her subject matter. Other readers, from a different gaze and standpoint, would consider this to be a fine example of contemporary research located within a post-modern framework.

This book demonstrates a thorough approach to fieldwork, as the texts that the author analyzed are painstakingly discussed and the silhouettes of the Ayurvedic practitioners are methodically presented. It would make a fine addition to a library of current research on the social aspects of Ayurveda.

Farah M. Shroff *University of British Columbia*

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