

Siddha Photography. Making the Invisible Visible in Siddha Pharmacology

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Abstract

This photo essay explores the intricate practices of Siddha pharmacology in Tamil Nadu, India, as documented during field research conducted at the Puttu Maharishi Ashram in Vellore. The essay also examines the role of photography as a research tool, one that is used here to capture moments and processes in Siddha medicine that extend beyond the reach of textual description. The focus is directed toward two significant practices: Pudam, a detailed calcination process integral to medicine making, and Velvi, a full moon fire ritual symbolizing the spiritual dimension of Siddha practice. These practices serve as vital components in the construction and expression of the Siddha medical tradition, highlighting the unique interplay between material and spiritual elements. The photo essay serves as a window into the world of Siddha pharmacology, allowing for an immersive experience of its aesthetic and transformative aspects. Photography is employed not merely as a documentary tool but as a medium for intersubjectivity, inviting readers to engage with the subtle intricacies of this ancient healing tradition. The essay aims to render the invisible spiritual dimensions of Siddha medicine visible.

Keywords: Siddha medicine, pharmaceutical anthropology, Tamil Nadu, Pudam, Velvi

Introduction: From photographing Siddha medicine to Siddha photography

In this essay, I aim to draw parallels between photography and medicine making, with a particular focus on traditional Siddha pharmacology. During my fieldwork in Tamil Nadu, I used photography to extensively document the medicinal practices for preparing Tamil Siddha medicine. I sought to capture the aesthetics of this earthly alchemy and the transformation of materials into powders imbued with life forces (Tamil: *uyirsattu*).

In applying the Siddha *vaidyas* (healers) perspective on medicines to my own photographic practice, I produce what I call “Siddha photography,” with the aim of making the invisible spiritual dimension in their pharmaceutic practice visible. My broader aim is to use photography as a tool for intersubjectivity, by making the research process tangible while engaging the reader with ethnographic photography and visual anthropology.

In the following pages I will describe my journey to understand Siddha pharmacology and to reveal its perspective. My goal is to demonstrate using by photographic means the specific Siddha approach to substances and processes. Furthermore, I will depict the wider spiritual practice of Siddha medicine-makers and healers, which is central to their craft. For a general overview over Siddha medicine in Tamil Nadu the works of Sebastia (2015), Sujatha (2003), and Sieler (2015) can be recommended.

As my understanding of Siddha medicine progressed, I began to apply its principles to my own photography. Visual anthropology seeks to capture the subtleties of daily life and cultural context, making the invisible visible and transporting the viewer into the field. The challenge was to transmit the essence of these specific practices and transform the viewer’s perspective through my photography. Taking inspiration from Tomas, who has connected the study of rituals with the concept of photography, I will apply both the process of medicine making in Siddha medicine and also its wider cultural context to my own photography and photographs (Tomas 1982).

Furthermore, I set out to demonstrate that Siddha medicine encompasses both an earthly aesthetic and a subtle spiritual dimension that are present in its artisanal craft of medicine making.

In a first step, “Siddha photography” uses photography to convey the esoteric dimension of Siddha pharmacology. In a second step, the essay draws parallels between photography’s capacity to capture and protect essences, and what it is that Siddha healers do when accessing spiritual and life forces in their medicine making processes. My essay highlights that both practices are dedicated to the capturing, transmission, and protection of the subtle essences of the world.

The photographs in this essay aim to capture the subtle essences of the world of the Siddha *vaidyas* and to transmit the essence of Siddha pharmacology to the reader.

Introducing the field site

The field site is the Puttu Maharishi Ashram in Vellore. *Puttu* is the Tamil term for an empty termite hill in which a snake (often a poisonous cobra) has taken refuge. The termite hill represents a powerful space for worship in contemporary Shaivite Tamil temple scapes. The “ascetic in the termite hill” is a repeated narrative in ascetic yogic stories. It refers to a deep state of meditation that cannot be interrupted by outside influences—for example, by the annoying tickling of flies, ants, or termites. This state, however, is not only deep but also long in duration so that termites can build a termite hill surrounding the yogi without disturbing him.



Image 1: A termite hill at a Shiva temple close to the Puttu Maharishi Ashram in Vellore
© Justus Weiss

Puttu Maharishi was a Siddha who is said to have lived in Vellore around the 16th century, having emerged from such a termite hill out of his deep state of meditation. He was not only an enlightened ascetic, but also a practitioner of medicine. In Vellore, several Siddha family traditions trace their lineages back to the teachings of this Siddha.

The Puttu Maharishi Ashram was established by the Siddha Vaidya K.P. Arjunan. He is the eldest son in a family of eight brothers, of whom six were involved in the practice of Siddha medicine since their childhood.

The area that comprises the Ashram is located at the outskirts of Vellore, enshrined by several hills. It entails a temple devoted to the Siddha Puttu Maharishi, a teaching center, a meditation hall, a treatment room, a medicinal preparation unit, a documentation center, and a meeting place where food can be served to guests. Vaidya Arjunan continuously hosts many students of Siddha medicine at this compound and has devoted it completely to the teaching of Siddha medicine and particularly to the lineage of Puttu Maharishi.



Image 2: The Puttu Maharishi Ashram © Justus Weiss

During my fieldwork, I was welcomed as a regular guest at this Ashram, where I was able to interact not only with Vaidya Arjunan, but also with his brothers in their day-to-day activities. These included for the most part the treatment of patients and the preparation of medicines. Large amounts of time, however, were devoted to regularly discussing various topics. Vaidya Arjunan was referred by all of those close to him in a respectful way, simply as Periaiya or Aiya, which means “the elder one;” these names refer to his position as eldest brother or his being a senior in terms of his acquired knowledge in general. Getting to know him and his brothers meant being introduced to a fascinating Siddha tradition in the making. In the course of making their acquaintance, I became integrated into a family project that is dedicated to the development of Siddha medicine for which Arjunan was the center. During our stay, Arjunan’s two younger brothers, Dhambachari and Raja, were regularly working at the Ashrams.



Image 3: Arjunan while teaching Siddha medicine, seated at the feet of the family guru Puttu Maharishi © Justus Weiss

Dhambachari was involved with the religious and spiritual teachings at the Ashram as well as with the treatment of patients in the evening, most of whom were coming for bone-setting. It was mainly with Dhambachari that we were engaging on a regular basis since he came every evening to the Ashram and we could put the time between his medical consultations to good use for our discussions.

Raja was responsible for preparing the medicines needed for the day-to-day practice. He could usually be found working steadily on the preparation of medicines in his medicinal workshop.



Image 4: Dhambachari, his son Bhasker, and my research assistant Chakravarthy at one of our regular discussions in the evening © Justus Weiss

Staying and learning at the Ashram, I was captivated by the earthly dimension of Siddha medicine making.

With a background in both anthropology and pharmacology, I am accustomed to modern laboratories with their glass vessels and high-tech equipment, as well as to naturalist ways of thinking about medicinal efficacy. I typically rely on the logic of chemistry and biology to understand medicinal plants and other concepts of healing

efficacy in natural science. However, in Siddha medicine, the laboratory often exists under the open sky, where it utilizes clay tools, stone mortars, and pestles. The labor-intensive process involves grinding repetitively, adding juices, and, using cow dung cakes, firing substances in sealed clay pots.



Image 5:A workspace at the Ashram © Justus Weiss

Siddha medicine is practiced in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Within India's medical pluralism, it competes for significance against other medicinal systems like Ayurveda. A key question that arises when studying Siddha medicine pertains to its defining feature or essence since it shares many epistemological bases with Ayurveda. Local healing practices in India share epistemological bases regarding how the body and medicine are understood. Local medicinal systems vary according to their use of the *materia medica*, which is specific to the regions where those systems are practiced.

India and South Asia are incredibly diverse regions; local cultures and flora heavily influence these medicinal systems. Siddha medicine is influenced by Tamil local culture. Throughout its history, ascetic movements have impacted all of the medicinal systems

comprising India's system of medical pluralism. In Tamil Nadu, these ascetic groups were dominant during the medieval period and they used specific substances in their tantric alchemical practices for spiritual goals. They understood these substances through the lens of their yogic worldview.



Image 6: Depiction of the Siddha body image, influenced by tantric philosophy © Justus Weiss

The term “Siddha” refers to a tantric Yogi who developed spiritual knowledge and powers, using elixirs alongside meditation and rituals. In Tamil Nadu, this yogic tantric knowledge amalgamated with local healing practices and classical Tamil medicine to form a system that highly values the spiritual dimensions of medicine making. Sujatha has called Siddha medicine a yogic offshoot that developed into the fully formed medicinal practice it still is today (Sujatha 2003).

Siddhas remain enigmatic figures in Tamil culture. Their medicinal system traces back to Siddha Agastya, a famous Indian sage. In this essay, I argue that within the context of family traditions these yogic dimensions are very much alive and essential to understanding what makes Siddha medicine unique. During my fieldwork, I was

fascinated to gain access to a family tradition that showcased these spiritual dimensions in contemporary Indian medicine. However, these traditional practices are framed by a modernized counterpart of Siddha medicine that is taught at universities and practiced in dedicated hospitals. This post-colonial, modernized Siddha system has undergone in Latour's term a purification and separation (Latour 1994) of many spiritual and tantric practices that are still essential, something that has been analyzed and described by Sax and Nair in the context of the local healing practices of Kerala (Sax and Nair 2014, 232). The spiritual aspect of this medicinal practice is predominantly preserved and maintained within family traditions. Throughout my fieldwork, I encountered numerous students from government-affiliated Siddha colleges who expressed a keen interest in exploring these spiritual dimensions that were notably absent from their academic curriculum. Furthermore, Marten Bode (Bode 2018) describes the asymmetrical charge of the contemporary Indian medical pluralism, in which biomedicine and Ayurveda take center stage against the other medical systems. This is something which is mirrored in the asymmetrical relation between state-approved, modern Siddha doctors and their colleagues who were trained as part of a more oral and experience-based context.



Image 7: Raja praying before lighting the cow dung cakes © Justus Weiss

In this context, it was crucial for me to examine the current state of yogic elements within contemporary Siddha medicine. This investigation commenced when I first engaged with my teacher, Dhambachari, and delved into the intricacies of Siddha medicine. While participating in the preparation of various remedies, I gradually learned to recognize the esoteric dimension that is interwoven with the physical alchemy that I was observing.



Image 8: Raja collecting medicinal plants on the outskirts of Vellore
© Justus Weiss

Ethnopharmacological approaches toward Siddha medicine: The example of Pudam

My experiences in the field transformed my understanding of pharmacology, prompting questions about what makes a medicine effective and what heals in different cultural contexts.

Ethnopharmacology researches a culture's specific understanding of medicinal efficacy and how that understanding is manifest in pharmaceutical practices. Pharmaceutical practices often focus on the identification of efficacious principles, furthermore, on their proper extraction, storage, and the ideal ways for applying them to the patient. Whereas medical anthropology focuses, among many other things, on cultural dimensions of a specific understanding of the human body and of healer-patient interactions, ethnopharmacology scrutinizes the meeting point between an understanding of the world and the human body. How are the elements of the world mediated in relation to the body to aid its healing?

These essential steps of medicine making are expressed in Siddha medicine, where they are found in yogic tantric metaphors like *uyirsattu* or life force (one of the Tamil terms for efficacy), in the purification of substances (*sutti*), in the transmission of essences, and in the protection and control of substances and the enhancement of their respective life span. By further examination, these concepts resemble a vocabulary and imagery of yogic bodily transformation and perfection. This is something that has also been described in detail by Dagmar Wujastyk, citing the example of Ayurvedic texts, and that can clearly be found in contemporary Siddha healing practices (Wujastyk 2013).

Siddha pharmacology as practiced at the Puttu Maharishi Ashram mirrors many concepts of a yogic and tantric worldview. During my research at the Ashram, I found that subtle spiritual life forces and essences, mostly accessible by practicing Siddha *vaidyas*, are essential to medicine making in Siddha medicine. Local Tamil Siddha healers perceive an interconnectedness between matter and spirit. Through spiritual practice, essences can be transmitted from one substance to another, creating a fluid development between medicinal materials. The pharmaceutical process mirrors the ideal spiritual path of a Siddha practitioner. This process focuses on the purification of the human body and on concentrating spiritual forces within it, thus resulting in a medicinal form that contains concentrated within itself imperishable life forces that cure diseases and restore vitality. Seen in an ecological context, the Siddha transmits essences from perishable plants to the protective matrix of mineral-metallic complexes.



Image 9: Raja purifying Sulphur with milk © Justus Weiss



Image 10: Raja adding plant juice to a formulation in between calcination steps © Justus Weiss

In the alchemical realm of Siddha medicine, the practice of Pudam serves as a cornerstone, embodying the intricate process of medicine making.

Pudam involves a complex, repetitive process of calcination in cow dung fires using mineral-metallic substances in clay vessels. This practice, though grounded in physical elements like clay and cow dung cakes, transcends mere materiality. Each stage of calcination and mixing with specific plant juices is meticulously carried out, imbuing the final medicine with potent life forces and healing properties. Pudam, while seemingly grounded in its earthiness, is a reflection of the Siddha philosophy of interweaving the tangible with the spiritual.

The clay vessel serves as a protected space in which the essences of substances can be safely transmitted from one to another without interference and disturbance. The Pudam is like a microcosm, like a yogic body, in which the substances can be purified, and their essences exhaled and inhaled.



Image 11: Raja taking care that the Pudam is properly enclosed, sealing it with clay.
© Justus Weiss

The Siddha pharmaceutical process can be seen as a foolproof way to extract essences through repetitive calcination and grinding. However, this is only one aspect of the medicinal practice. The other aspect involves the pharmacist's initiation into the spiritual practices that grant them access to subtle powers within their own body and that enable them to extend that spiritual life force into the prepared medicinal substances.

Dhambachari explained in one of our interviews that after undergoing initiation he began to experience the essence of the rules of medicine making in a new way. From then on, he experienced firsthand how the traditional rules of medicine making were structured to work correctly with substances deeply imbued with life forces and to guarantee their protection throughout the entire process. Accessing and safeguarding these life forces in medicine making is only possible through spiritual practice, which profoundly influences the creation of effective medicines.

Spiritual practices at the Ashram: The example of Velvi

In contrast to the earthy nature of Pudam, Velvi, a full moon fire ritual, unveils the spiritual matrix within which Siddha pharmacology is enmeshed. This elaborate ritual, performed under the luminescence of a full moon, involves chanting, offerings, and a large, enduring fire. It connects the participants to the celestial forces, bringing forth the spiritual dimensions typically invisible in our daily lives. Velvi's vibrant decorations and symbols resonate with the cosmic energies and essences pivotal in Siddha medicine, making the invisible spiritual aspects palpably visible.

The Velvi ritual begins at nightfall with the lighting of the fire in the central ceremonial firepit, accompanied by the chanting of mantras. Participants of the Velvi ritual gather around a large open fire that burns for hours. The fire is continuously fed oil, wood, fruits, and offerings, nearly smothering its flames. As the ritual progresses through hours of chanting and feeding the fire, participants experience an intoxicating mix of scents, brightness, and trance-like states.



Image 12: Careful decoration of the ritual space in preparation of the Velvi © Justus Weiss



Image 13: The *kalasam*, a metal vessel that concentrates and protects the essence of the ritual and the full moon © Justus Weiss

At its core, the Velvi serves to make visible the spiritual dimensions invisible to us. Symbols and elements within the ritual represent and celebrate the cosmological powers, essences, and qualities that are integral to Siddha medicine. The vibrant decorations, including flowers, incense, oil lamps, and sacred symbols, combine with chanting by Dhambachary at the fire pit to create an atmosphere that simultaneously illuminates the Siddha cosmos and makes it palpable. The full moon serves as a role model for perfection within this context, appreciated as embodying desirable qualities such as purity, nourishment, and an increased power of meditation.



Image 14: Dhambachary is the ceremonial master, organizing and enabling the powerful Velvi © Justus Weiss

While Pudam grounds the medicinal practice in its physical and transformative processes, Velvi elevates it to a cosmic level, illuminating the spiritual underpinnings of Siddha pharmacology.

Velvi and Pudam exist in the same Siddha cosmos, and spiritual practitioners amplify the practice of the Pudam through the rules and effects of the Velvi. Seeing both practices side by side with the help of photography illuminates the hidden essence of the Pudam visible through the bright fire of the Velvi.

Conclusion: Siddha photography—combining Siddha pharmacology and pharmacology

To summarize, what are the parallels and intersecting fields between ethnographic photography and Siddha pharmacology? In Siddha medicine, the transmission and protection of essences are central. This is achieved by repetitive firing to purify and transform substances and to transmit essences between them.

In the rituals of Pudam and Velvi, fire acts as a transformative agent—both in the material sense, whereby raw ingredients are alchemically changed into medicines, and in the spiritual sense, whereby offerings are consumed and messages are conveyed to the divine realms. In the modern photo camera, however, fire is replaced with electricity, and clay with silica chips, enabling the process of capturing and transmitting an essence.

Making medicines is also about capturing, freezing, and protecting rare moments, for example, in the vegetational cycle of a year, when specific plants can be found. Especially in Siddha medicine, the yogic frame of thought has enabled a low-tech pharmacology that conserves perishable plant substances in imperishable mineral substances.

Plant juices are the most perishable of all plant products. They need to be consumed immediately so as not to spoil quickly. However, when added to a mineral metallic preparation, as part of the Pudam processes, their essence is transferred to the imperishable matrix of the formulation and maintained for years or even decades.

Photography follows the same way in the sense that it is able to collect and protect highly specific moments in time, such as the fire ritual, which is celebrated only during full moon. The same can be said for personalities, for glimpses of moments in a life dedicated to healing, a life protected and remembered by means of pixels—just like the life of the late Vaidya Arjunan who left this earth recently but can still be remembered and experienced through my photographs.

Like the repetitive firing in the Pudam, which interweaves material qualities and spiritual essences, ethnographic photography condenses essences of daily life and everyday culture that are experienced by the photographer over an extended period of research.

By capturing the right moments in the right frames, deep social relations, friendships, experiences, and research are all condensed by the photographer to transmit his core

findings and realizations. He wants to create images that speak for themselves—that have a heightened agency to influence and transform the viewer, like the Siddha medicines themselves.

Nevertheless, the most important parallels between photography and Siddha pharmacology are the topics, themes, and persons—indeed, the one thousand things, the multispecies, and actant networks of the Siddha cosmos—that are portrayed in these photos. Their essence is captured and conveyed in these pictures.

As for the skilled Siddha *vaidyas*: Their daily life and ambition is to heal people, to work on themselves in the tradition of medieval alchemists, and to become better healers. Their skill and dedication to creating contemporary healing Siddha elixirs is transmitted in these photographs; for these are imbued with their message, their work, and their gift of healing and transformation.

This work was made possible by the strong bond of friendship that I was able to forge with Vaidya Arjunan and his family during my fieldwork. I express my heartfelt thanks to them all and especially to my dedicated research assistant D. T. Chakravarthy for his unwavering support and contributions throughout this journey.

I will be forever grateful to Arjunan, Dhambachary, and their whole family for sharing their knowledge with me and letting me come close—close in heart and close in framing the photographs I was allowed to take.

Their wisdom and guidance have illuminated my path, making this journey of discovery possible. I extend my profound gratitude to these living Siddhas, each with their own unique contribution to the tapestry of my research.



Image 15: The statue of Puttu Maharishi decorated for a celebration, holding his hand in the gesture of a blessing © Justus Weiss

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