print culture and oral temple tales of the past century have largely been responsible for shifting the Siddhas from the most peripheral crevices of Tamil religious imagination into the limelight of a nationalistic religious awareness.¹

Local television programming offers the convenience of a daily consultation with Tamil Siddha doctors in the comfort of one's living room. A growing number of temples now seem to have taken on their token Siddha tomb to celebrate the ever-imminent return of the deathless ones. In the modern imagination the Siddhas offer an ancient spiritual science for a modern secular world, a technology of the ancestors to surpass that offered on the neo-colonial global market. But is there some coherent theocratic integration beyond the vogue of pop-parlor speech and name-dropping the words “Tamil Siddha” as a kind of magic invocation of cultural authenticity?²

The Tamil Siddhas have no central authority or unifying doctrine. Though there are innumerable texts claiming to represent some nebulous Tamil Siddha “tradition,” there is no single philosophical orientation propounded in their works. Rather, innumerable philosophical threads are stretched, interwoven and unwoven again in a phantasmagoric tapestry of subjectivities, as all the while tantra looms large in the background as the loom on which the tapestry is woven. So while frustrating all attempts to attribute to them a cogent cosmological theory, there is a kind of buoyant, free-floating quality to their processes of relating to life and the greater universe. This takes the form of an unapologetic celebration of the immediacy of subjective experience and the fluid application of a variety of mutually exclusive philosophical viewpoints all simultaneously arrayed before the reader.

This brief introduction presents, an albeit, simplistic survey of some of the major thematic elements that the Tamil Siddhas emphasise and invariably reinscribe with their own unique visionary exegesis. It is in this context that this paper touches upon the irreconcilable social conflict that has raged outside the Tamil Siddhas and the perpetual role their imaginative process takes in reconciling the conflict the rages within.

The Tamil Siddhas remain an ill-defined, incongruous body of religious specialists found in the southern part of India whose origins can be only tenuously traced back to the seventh or eighth century. Here they form a distinctive part of a larger movement that spread throughout South Asia, from Sri Lanka in the South to Tibet in the north, between the seventh and eleventh centuries. Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain Siddhas everywhere share certain commonalities mostly in the realm of “(subtle) body image,” transmutational wonder tales, and physical and mental manipulations of yogic savvy. All of them are part of a “pan-Indian tantric yoga movement” which Eliade described as formulating over a five hundred year period (between seventh and eleventh centuries), but fully flowering only after twelfth century.²

Within the South Asian literary context the name Siddha originally denoted one of the eighteen categories of celestial beings. These beings of semi-divine status were said to be of great purity and their dwelling was thought to be in the sky between the earth and the sun. Later they became associated with a class of more adept human being, often an accomplished yogi. The term had been derived from the Sanskrit root sidh meaning “fulfilment” or “achievement,” so the noun came to refer to one who had attained perfection. Because the Tamil language lacks the aspirated consonants of Sanskrit so the word has been written and pronounced by the Tamils as cittar. This has led the Tamils to associate the word more with the Sanskrit term cit, meaning “consciousness.”³

This appellation is evident even in the Shaivite devotionals known as the Tevaram hymns of the sixth and seventh centuries that would later become part of the Saiva Siddhanta canon. Here the term is applied not only to one of the 18 categories of divine beings but also to God Shiva himself, who is a “cittar” because the very nature of God is consciousness. Likewise, it describes the devotee as also being a “cittar” since his consciousness is always immersed in the divine presence. By the twelfth to thirteenth century the term has taken on new

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meaning as we learn from the writings of Perumparrapuliyan Nambi who describes the God Shiva as the cittar alchemist who is working strange miracles in the city of Madurai.4

Essentially though, the term “siddha” or “cittar” has the same connotations as it does when referring to the 84 Siddhas of Vajrayana Buddhism, the Natha Siddhas of North India, or the medieval alchemists known as the Rasa Siddhas. It is a movement born of a synthesis of Vajrayana Buddhism, Shaivite Tantrism, Indian Alchemy, magic, and the Hatha Yoga and Pranayama disciplines expounded by the ascetic saint Goraknath. Although, in the present era, the term is often applied to any form of unorthodox mystic or saint. And certainly the term has a newfound currency amongst (usually non-Brahmin) Tamil religious organisations and temple institutions, as well as the pop-culture yoga institutions flourishing in the west.

A perplexing aspect of the Tamil Siddha cult is that the text which is identified as the root text of its tradition had been also amended to the orthodox Saiva Siddhanta canon (Tirumantiram) to give the Siddhantins a philosophical orientation that could hold up against the Sri Vaisnavas’ Vashishtadvaita doctrine of Ramanuja. Though difficult to measure the full extent of interpolation that the text has undergone to make it more form-fitting for the conservative sectarian context, the Tirumantiram (7-8th century AD) maintains a significant number of references that are unmistakably well rooted in this wider South Asian Tantra/Siddha complex.

Both sectarian groups emphasized different aspects of the teaching and could spin a theological line that became more and more widely divergent. The Siddhas would be scoffing at temple worship, reliance upon Brahminical authority, and proclaiming the injustice of caste; while the Saiva Siddhantins would berate the Siddhas much as M. Srinivasa Iyangar did in 1914 when he wrote that the Siddhas are “mostly plagiarists and impostors” and in addition, “Being eaters of opium & dwellers in the land of dreams, their conceit knew no bounds”. At times the Siddhantins have even engaged in an organised effort to eliminate the Siddhar faction. For example, one movement, observed in the latter half of the nineteenth century, systematically sought out any copy of the writings of the heretical Siddha-poet Sivavakkiyar, and promptly destroyed them.

The rift between the two orders may have been rooted in the Saiva/Shakta dichotomy that conflated gender conflict to cosmic proportions. Many of the Siddhas propitiate Shakti or the creative potency of the primordial essence while Shiva is elevated to a (“no-place”) position of absolute abstraction, as he is worshipped as veda vēl or “vast space.” The goddess alone is envisioned in her manifestations hidden both within the shifting tides of external forms as well as abiding within the body itself. Here she can be coaxed and subdued, manipulated and directed. As the serpent power Kundalini, flowing through the subtle body, she can propel the consciousness of the Siddhar into union with the Absolute. Though the orthodox Saiva Siddhantins may content himself with the worship of Shiva in the temple through the rituals of the priest, the Siddha placates the goddess to intercede on his behalf and expand the consciousness of the Siddha beyond all limitation, where he may become Shiva himself. Notions, such as this, being fundamental to the Tamil Siddha, may have struck the Shaivite orthodoxy as heretical. But one should not overlook caste conflict and more terrestrial political dynamics.

Many of the Tamil Siddha compositions whether defining philosophical viewpoints, yogic practices, or presenting alchemical recipes for herbal tinctures and base metal amalgams are riddled with tantric imagery, references to Kundalini, and clues to control the dangerous feminine power through breath manipulation or the recitation of the Goddess’s secret names. Because of the enigmatic nature of the Siddha imagery, and their philosophy often being structured in direct defiance of human logic, few scholars have ventured to address the Tamil Siddhas and then only as mere curiosities. But it seems that the stylistic inconsistencies of the Siddha authors may also have steered scholars away from these works. There are vibrant jewels shining in the rough but even the more popular siddha works are riddled with endless repetition, nonsense words that clumsily maintain the rhyme scheme, and jarring incongruities in the narrative portions of the texts.

One of the most basic characteristics of Tamil composition, and one that is also relevant to Siddha poetry, is the tendency to layer the work so that each word or image builds upon the last. Because each component image is presented so as to be viewed autonomously and in relationship both sequentially and to the totality of the verse, the images of the poem may appear to some as being slightly disjointed and contradictory. Though this seems to undermine the aesthetic quality and over-complicate the simple act of enjoying poetry, the Tamil Siddha compositions pattern this imagery to expound the subtle complexity of their shifting viewpoint or to map out the terrain of the inner landscape which is dominated by the dormant serpent energy.

While much of the recent explosion of interest in the Siddhas centres around modern invented traditions offering tenuous ties to the older established Siddha orders, many of these groups did not come into their own until the 12th century. And though the image of a unified succession of Tamil Siddha sages is particularly tenuous, Tirumular is pervasively revered in the diverse literary world of the Tamil Siddhas. The Saiva Siddhantins had included him as one of the 63 canonised saints or nayanmars, and his work, the Tirumantiram was posthumously represented by them as fully defining the Tamil Saiva tradition of the time. This text
became the 10th book of the Saiva Siddhanta canon, the Tirumurai. Though it was the one work outlining the philosophy of the Siddhantins, the sect has always had a difficult time fully integrating the many passages which discuss the worship of the Goddess and the Kundalini Yoga practices so characteristic of Tantrism. On the other hand, the Siddhas have viewed these same passages as the most critical in formulating their esoteric doctrines on the arousal of the serpent energy.

As we can see in verse 730, the Siddhantins were confronted with the tantric orientation of their philosopher Tirumular, when he relates that it is the human body itself that is the temple of the Goddess Shakti...

In Shakti’s temple if you control the left and the right you can hear a lute in the centre of your face. And Shiva will come out dancing sweetly. I swear upon Sada Nandi we have spoken the truth.

Here Tirumular discusses the basis of Kundalini Yoga whereby the breath, carrying one of the vital airs known as prana, flows into the solar and lunar currents which run from the right and left nostrils down to the base of the spine and are there brought into union. The point of this union is at the root chakra Muladhara, the first of six chakras or nerve plexuses through which the Kundalini energy will flow. This energy is moved by the union of these solar and lunar streams of vital breath that have entered the central current at Muladhara and will ascend upwards through the six chakras, each corresponding to a higher and more expansive state of consciousness. The individual awareness is sublimated into divine union at the crown of the head. It is a kind of inner journey towards the infinitude of the Divine, but begins only after the two streams flow into the central current as we learn from verse 801 of the Tirumantiram...

Left hand
Right hand
Both hands...
Change!
He who eats with the hand of worship need not be depleted.
The conscious ones capable of abandoning sleep need not die...

The term used to denote the ‘hand of worship’ is Tutikkai. Tuti is a verb meaning “to worship,” kai is the noun meaning “hand”. Together, as Tutikkai, the expression also means the “elephant’s trunk.” This interpretation is equally viable in that Ganesha, the elephant-headed god of gateways and new beginnings, is said to reside in the body at the base of the spine, at the root chakra Muladhara where the two currents flow together and enter central current Shashumna. Shashumna is sometimes envisioned as the trunk of Ganesha raised aloft and holding the full-blown lotus of enlightenment, Sahasrara, at the crown of the head. What is eaten is amrita, conceived of as both the nectar of spiritual ecstasy and the elixir of immortality.

Tantra appears in its more seminal form around the 4th century, but its real beginnings seem to reach back much earlier.6 Elements of tantric thought had already pervaded the south by the time of Tirumular, as they had seeped into yogic theory and practice at some antecedent time and even impacted temple ritual and the budding bhakti cults. Tantra was more deeply rooted in a fluid set of symbolic constructs than a static enunciation of doctrine. It represents a profound refinement of the symbol systems of Hindu-Buddhist South Asia. It’s emphasis on the experiential aspects of the individual’s religious experience collided with the Shaivite orthodoxy like the Gnostic heresy did with the early Christian Church as it sought to establish an internal self-policing system of sanctioning only those subjective experiences that towed the orthodox line.

In an effort to demonstrate that the macrocosm is reflected within the microcosm, Tantra began to emphasise that the universe, in all its totality, is contained within the body of the individual. It superimposed universal symbols over the human body to help demonstrate this relationship. The spine, along which the shashumna or central channel ran, became the cosmic axis. All the Gods that oversaw the mechanism that is this universe were hidden in the lotus centres of the body’s chakras, like blossoms flowering on the vine of the spine. But it was the portly god Ganesha, who guarded the gate to the inner world. He became a patron of Kundalini yoga in the South and was invoked by the female Siddha mendicant Auvaiyar, in this excerpt from her 14th century work Vinayagar Agaval. Here she relates how the elephant-headed god has reconciled the dualistic nature of the universe as the various manifestations of Shiva were...
taught to be part of her inner savouring. He has concentrated my mind, clarified my intellect, and said, "Light and Darkness share a common place." He presses me down into the grace giving ecstasy. In my ear he renders limitless bliss. He has revealed Sada Shiva within the sound. He has revealed the Shiva Lingam within the mind. And he has revealed that... The smaller than the smallest, The larger that the largest, stands within... like ripe sugarcane.

In about 1661, as Aurangzeb set about to expand his kingdom throughout the subcontinent and free the land of heretics, he was at the same time extending his protection to an obscure Hindu monastery in the Punjab. At the time in question Anand Nath, the abbot of the monastery and a Natha Siddha alchemist, was providing "the greatest Mogal persecutor of Hinduism in history" a regular supply of treated mercury which promised to confer longevity. Simultaneously in the deep south the Tamil Siddha alchemist Bhogar, who had supposedly migrated from China along with his guru Kalangi Nathar, was purportedly establishing a shrine to the God Murugan on the top of Palani Hill. It was here that he is thought to have composed his 7000 verses on Kundalini Yoga, alchemy, and Siddha medicine. By medieval times Indian alchemy had come into vogue much like tantra had done almost a millennium earlier. And though the Indian alchemists also sought to develop the chemical processes of transforming base metals into gold as in Europe and the Middle East, they often emphasised the pursuit of bodily perfection and the preparation of the elixir of immortality as the Chinese alchemists had sought. They often viewed their experience of the inner processes of Kundalini Yoga as mirroring the chemical process of the alchemical work.

Nearly a thousand years after Tirumular, Bhogar is still wrestling with the serpent energy, even in the midst of his alchemical operations. Though now, the Kundalini is personified as the consort of Ganesha, the Goddess Vallabai... for the appropriate chakra. If the basis of Muladhara is perfected... You can go anywhere, wandering freely throughout the three worlds. The dull-hued body will mellow and shine. All impurities will be removed and the six chakras will become visible to the eye. The gold-coloured alchemy will heed your every word. In the Sleepless Sleep all subtlety can be perceived. Look and see.

In a particularly odd verse of Bhogar, we find him describing a visionary experience involving the ingestion of an unidentified substance and the wearing of mercurial amalgams.

80 Bhogar's Leap Into the Universe
As the Principle of Intelligence itself I leapt into the cosmos. Shiva clearly elucidated the nature of this universe. For the sake of all beings there is a path that becomes a vehicle for the five senses. The universe that appeared before me was arranged in layers. Grandfather (Tirumular) said, "Enter the tenth one." I took what was given me and put it in my mouth. And a bunch of mercurial amalgams I tied onto my wrist. Off I went. Entering the universe of fire and light.

Consciousness was seen to ride the vehicle of breath into union with the absolute in the Sahasrara Chakra at the top of the head. The Siddha could, through the intercession of the Goddess, placated by manipulation of the breath, expand consciousness to the point where it becomes what is called the Maha Citta or "Great Awareness" which is the God Shiva himself. Here is one of the closing verses of Bhogar's discussion of Kundalini Yoga...

94 Invite the breath, the outer space, to come within your house. If you are unwavering, placing it there as though you were putting oil in a lamp,... They shall meet. Breath and God becoming one. Like wind becoming breath there is no individual intelligence. The Great Awareness becomes Siva. He and breath merge into one.
It is this light becoming breath that redeems the soul.
Surely this is the truth of Siva Yoga!

In the last century the poet-saint Ramaligar had much to do with bridging the Siddha-Saiva gap and making the Siddhas more palatable to the mainstream Tamil religious world. Ramaligar was born in 1823 near Chidambaram, arguably the greatest of all Saivite temples. Naturally, the heretical nature of his teaching and the growing number of his disciples caused the protest of temple officials and a variety of Saiva Siddhanta institutions throughout the region. Eventually they were forced to call upon Arumuga Navalar from Jaffna to put an end to Ramalingar. As a Tamil scholar and Saivite authority, the orthodox religious leaders throughout the area, were confident that he could expose the fallacy of Ramalingar's teaching and defrock the heretical saint. Arumuga quickly set about organizing public meetings to provide a platform on which to abuse Ramalingar and a horde of pamphlets were circulated issuing public warnings about this dangerous little man. Eventually though, Arumuga was forced to take legal action and filed a suit against the saint. The gentle Ramalingar was dragged into court, but eloquently speaking in his own defense, easily won the case.

The nature of Ramalingar's heresy is found to be all the more insidious when we learn that he also cherished and called his own the devotional hymns of Saiva Siddhanta saints other than Tirumular. One of these, sometimes hailed as the 64th nayanmar, was Manikkavasagar, who had a profound influence on Ramalingar and Siddha devotionalism in general. Manikkavasagar's name means "He who's utterances are rubies" and in the 9th century he beautifully wrote this mini creation myth in flowing verse...

Becoming sky and earth,
Wind and light...
Becoming flesh and spirit,
All that truly is
and all that which is not
Becoming the Lord...
He makes those who say,"I" and "mine"
Dance in the show.
Becoming sky,
and standing there...
How can I praise Him?

In this poem Ramalingar praises Manikkavasagar and weaves his verse with a complex echoing of sound as he speaks again and again of the sweetness of his mystic absorption experienced when hearing the poetry of the saint. This fervent merging, savoured by the ecstatic Ramalingar is described with the adverbial participle kalantha, from the verb root kala meaning "to flow together", "to make as one", as it also denotes a sexual union.

One with sky Manikkavasagar,
your words...
One with me when I sing
Nectar of sugarcane
One with honey
One with milk
and one with the sweetness
of the fertile fruit
One with my flesh
One with my soul
Insatiable
is that sweetness!

Although Ramalingar's hymns were penned in praise of the God Siva, they were often addressed to a feminine audience with unqualified personal designations such as 'Amma' or 'Akka', 'Mother' or 'Sister'. Perhaps indicating that the hymn was meant for an internal, intimate and distinctly feminine force that could propel the invocation along the proper channels of the inner cosmos, towards Siva's secret abode.

The fact that his songs began to be sung in the schools, villages and even the temples of 19th century Chennai, began to outrage the orthodox Saiva Siddhantins in the area. He, as with many outspoken Tamil Siddhas, was somewhat iconoclastic, not adequately deferential to temple or Brahminical tradition. He did not perpetuate the traditional modes of linga worship. Forgoing the objectified image by capturing the subjective gaze itself, he perpetrated the greatest of heresies by blatantly revealing the true face of God veiled within volumes of tantric lore. At the shrine he established at Vadalur, behind the curtain that housed the holy of holies, he established a single flame's light to illuminate a mirror that would reflect the image of the worshipper as the secret face of god and final mystery of the Tamil Siddhas.
Notes

1. This introduction to the Tamil Siddhas was written nearly ten years ago and reflects many of the misconceptions surrounding the siddhas that were popular at the time. Also its circulation on the internet surely added to over simplifying the subject with faults that are entirely my own. I’ve tried to briefly rectify the overly erroneous statements that I had made and have attempted to elaborate on some of the more reductionistic portions of this work.

2. Most of the Tamil Siddha works popular today were written only in the last two centuries. A significant percentage of works purported to be “rediscovered” are modern forgeries.


4. Ibid.: 3. See the Tiruvilaiyadal sections 13, 42 & 45.

5. As Manonmani, Valai, Vallabai, Parai, Parapparai, etc.

6. Some see the Brhadanyaka Upanisad as containing enough of the key elements of tantric cosmology to represent the earliest strain of a definitive Tantric tradition complete with the hitta functioning as a proto-shashumna nadi, anticipating the more elaborate Kundalini system to come.


8. Bhogar’s 7000 tells of his repeated visits to China but does not provide even a single cultural detail that demonstrates he has any first hand knowledge of the region, it’s customs, etc. Now in popular secondary sources on the Tamil Siddhas the China origin of Bhogar is strongly refuted with the characteristic nationalistic fervour of the present day.

9. Bhogar makes no mention of Palani in his 7000 and has always been associated in the Tamil Siddha literature with Sathuragiri mountain. Further, the Palanittalapuranam (the Mythic History of Palani) makes no mention of its supposed founder (though it does make passing reference to Gorakhnath).

10. Presumably he is referring to one of his gulikas, a pill often made of tumbled mercury in solid form.

11. Another notable entry into the modern literary sphere comes when freedom-fighting poet, Subramaniya Bharathi, called himself a “cittar,” invoking a religious-revolutionary persona that was intrinsically “Tamil.”

References


FOLK MEDICINAL WISDOM OF CHITTOOR DISTRICT, ANDHRA PRADESH

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Some of the folk medicinal treasures found in Chittoor district in Andhra Pradesh are given here:

Tagubothulaku Natu Mandu (Psidium gujava) - Myrtaceae (Medicine for alcohol addicts)

Leaf juice is secretly added with alcohol and given to the person who is addicted to alcohol. The person starts vomiting and feels irritation. If the therapy is repeated two or three times, the person develops a sort of aversion towards alcohol. If given to patients suffering from chronic body pain and arthritis. The oil is given both internally and applied on the affected parts also. This therapy is called as mandhu noone and the Gesthamalli village is famous for it.

Medicine for Emukalu virigithe - Bone fracture

Every village in the Chittoor district has one medicine man who knows the treatment for dislocated and broken bones. The two centres in the district, one at Puttur and another at Kalluru, have become famous because of the devoted families. The people in these centres are service oriented and they do not accept money for their service.

Jatamansi - (Nardostachys jatamansi) - Valerianaceae

(Gundello nemmu - Pneumonia)

Decoction of the root powder is given two or three times a day and it is continued until the fever subsides. Wheat powder mixed in Calotropis leaf juice is applied on the chest to prevent pleurisy.

Saraswathi aku (Centella asiatica) - Apiaceae

(Teliviki - Brain Tonic)

Dried plant is powdered along with Piper nigrum seeds in 10:1 ratio and a mixture of 2 to 3...