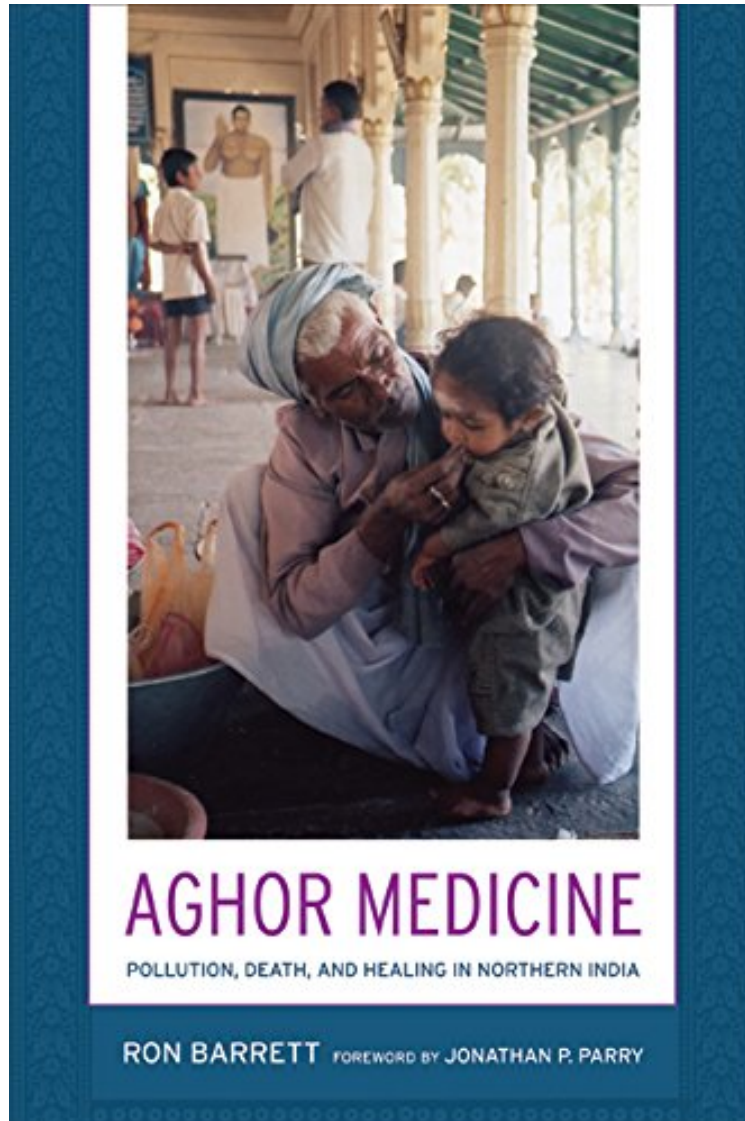


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## Aghor Medicine: Pollution, Death, and Healing in Northern India

*Ronald L. Barrett*

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**Ronald L. Barrett : Aghor Medicine: Pollution, Death, and Healing in Northern India** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Aghor Medicine: Pollution, Death, and Healing in Northern India:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. A fascinating encounter with a little known, and less studied, traditionBy William CoursonFor centuries, the Aghori have been counted among the most radically unconventional, eccentric and orthodoxy-upsetting ascetics in India: living naked on the cremation ground, meditating whilst seated on

rotting corpses, engaging in cannibalism and coprophagy, consuming intoxicants out of human skulls and "blessing" those who would approach them by a slap in the face - cultivating an affinity for noxiousness in all its myriad forms in the name of a commitment to the realization of non-duality, to the realization that all is, indeed, one. In recent years, the Aghori have shifted their practices from the embrace of ritually polluted substances, events and past-times to the healing of socially stigmatized diseases, such as (in the present instance) vitiligo and leprosy, two afflictions believed by many Indians to be among the vilest curses that could beset a human being. In the process, they have become a wealthy, large, mainstream, and quite socially acceptable and politically connected organization. The Aghori lineage of which Dr. Barrett writes, the Kina Ram tradition, whose center of gravity is located in Varanasi, asserts that Aghori are like the river Ganga, accepting the purest streams from its sources in the Himalayas as well as the sewage and offal of the cities. These Aghori consider the founder of their lineage, Baba Kina Ram, to be the embodiment of Lord Shiva on Earth; his dhuni (campfire) a cremation pyre; and the Ashram he established, the mahas shmarshana, the great charnel ground. Like the teeming city of Varanasi that surrounds it, the ashram and its namesake play the role of cosmic sink wherein takes place the removal of pollution and the effects of sin from the many pilgrims and patients they receive. Amongst the residents of and pilgrims to Varanasi, Shakti takes the form of Ganga Ma, the river who is the mother of countless millions. Lord Shiva takes the form of cremation ascetic. Both are as infinite as their capacity to absorb the sins of the universe without themselves becoming soiled. These dynamics hold true for Aghor as well. The author writes: "The use of cremation wood in Aghor dhunis is symbolic of this connection between death and digestion, with not only the Aghori but also their patients ingesting the products of ritual sacrifice--offerings of food and even the ash from the wood. Along these lines, Prem spoke of imbibing ash as a blessing: 'It is like this. . . . We apply [the ash]; that is for the peace of our heart; for our own mental peace, and that which has burned itself. From that, I feel something different in myself. For instance, we are very cruel. With that dhuni . . . because that is burning outside, that is a different process. One is burning inside. They [these two fires] have the same relation.' Such acts of ritual ingestion represent a kind of 'tantric homeopathy,' purification and healing by confronting the source of the pollution.' Ronald Barrett is Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropological Sciences at Stanford University. He is also an initiated disciple of the Aghor spiritual lineage. In writing this book, he has walked a fine line and has successfully traversed it: managing to write from both an etic as well as an emic standpoint, he at once avoids the perils of the hagiography of the devotee and the sterility of the mere chronicler. This lucidly written, very well-organized book explores the dynamics of Aghor healing, a unique concatenation of conventional Western medicine, Ayurveda and the folkways of the Aghori and their followers. Ron Barrett examines a range of Aghor therapies and clarifies many misconceptions about this little-studied group and its highly unorthodox, powerful ideas about health and disease, healing and dying. I enthusiastically recommend "Aghor Medicine: Pollution, Death, and Healing in Northern India" to anyone with interests in the realms of India and its healing traditions. 1 of 7 people found the following review helpful. The book is BORING. By Margaret The book is very hard to get through. the author changes "voices" often and use of Indian terms with no explanation makes reading this even harder. It had to read it for school and still never got through it

For centuries, the Aghori have been known as the most radical ascetics in India: living naked on the cremation grounds, meditating on corpses, engaging in cannibalism and coprophagy, and consuming intoxicants out of human skulls. In recent years, however, they have shifted their practices from the embrace of ritually polluted substances to the healing of stigmatized diseases. In the process, they have become a large, socially mainstream, and politically powerful organization. Based on extensive fieldwork, this lucidly written book explores the dynamics of pollution, death, and healing in Aghor medicine. Ron Barrett examines a range of Aghor therapies from ritual bathing to modified Ayurveda and biomedicines and clarifies many misconceptions about this little-studied group and its highly unorthodox, powerful ideas about illness and healing.

Fascinating in its exploration. . . . Adeptly introduces the reader to this system of healing and would be a worthwhile read for anyone interested in multicultural medicine.