

MUSLIM TRADITIONAL MEDICAL HERITAGE:

BY

DR. ALIYU MUHAMMAD BUNZA
USMAN DANFODIYO UNIVERSITY,
SOKOTO.

Introduction

May people today do not know the significant contribution made by Islam and the Muslims to the development of contemporary science and technology. This paper is concerned with some aspects of Islamic scientific activity with special reference to Medicine. In view of this, the paper will first focus its attention on the definition of Medicine and science before any attempt is made to trace Islamic contribution to the field. Medicine is defined as:

(art and science of the)

prevention and cure of disease, especially drugs, diet, etc.....

But sometimes including surgery also.¹

Thus any substance used in prevention or cure is called medicine. In addition, traditional charms, magical power and spiritual incantations are also regarded as part of medicine. Anything medical is thus "relating to the art of healing, relating to the art of the physicians, distinguished from surgery"² Science on the other hand is defined as:

"Knowledge ascertained by observation and experiment, critically tested.

systematised and brought under general principles."³

Therefore, a medical practice is an application of science and art by trained and skilled individuals to correct abnormal human physiology. Colonial medical intellectuals classified medicine into two, traditional and modern medicine: to compare the two definitions (Sofowara, 1982) defined traditional medicine as:

"The total combination of knowledge and practice whether explicable or not, used in diagnosing, preventing or eliminating a physical, mental or social diseases and which may rely exhaustively on past experience and observation handed down from generation to generation".

Some scholarly confusion developed over the years in the use and misuse of terms describing the practitioners of traditional medicine and the various specialists of the arts. Some of the names proposed are: traditional healers traditional medical practitioners, healers, people's doctors, traditional doctors, witch doctors, diviners, seers, spiritualists therapists, etc. For example, in China, they are called barefoot doctors, in Cuba curanderos, and in Arab World they are called attiba (singular tabib) even a conventional doctor is called Tabib. Whatever the word used to describe them, we can say that both traditional and the so-called modern medicine are aiming at a common goal. A medicine, can only be a medicine when it can cure or prevent a physical, psychological, or other forms of illnesses.

ARAB FOLK MEDICINE:

Pre-Islamic medicine was described as folk-medicine, strongly influenced by magical elements. Islam fights against magic and its practice and also gives no room for folk beliefs which are seriously dangerous to Muslim's faith. Before the light of Islam, pre-Islamic Arabs were convinced of the spiritual powers of folk-medicine. Indeed, power climatic conditions contributed a lot to the spread of diseases in the Arabian peninsula. According to (Ullman, 1978).

*"The Scarcity of water and poor quality of the water, the constant undernourishment and monopoly of the diet by the battalion of flies and parasites were factors which together with numerous endemic illnesses were responsible for high infant mortality and low life expectancy."*⁵

It is observed that, most common diseases on the Arabian peninsula were, malaria, tuberculosis, trachoune, dysentery, leprosy, Small pox, parasitic infection and some illnesses caused by malnutrition, like scurry and rickets. It is in the nature of man that, whenever he finds himself sick, the idea of medicine comes to his mind. Due to the large number of diseases prevalent among the pre-Islamic Arabs, they were left with no choice but to rely on the knowledge obtained from their folklore in treating their ailments. These folk-medicines are directly related to the available diseases of the Arab's locality. Below are some of the known folk medicine of pre-Islamic Arabs.

1. A boy who gets pustules on his lips goes round the tent of the tribe with a sieve on his head crying, pustules' 'pustules', al-hala, al-hala. He gets fruits, bites of breads, and meat thrown into his sieve. When it is full, he empties it out in front of dogs. Then the pustules would vanished.
2. If one is afraid of being mad, he is befouled by hanging menstrual cloth and dead men's bones around him.
3. Women whose babies all died, is to trample the neck of the corpse of a battleman killed by blood feud, if she does so, her next baby will live.
4. Rabies could be healed if the man drunk the blood of a king or a prince. Other people considered the blood of a beheaded criminal as remedy.
5. If the hair of a woman is burnt and applied to a bleeding part, it will stop bleeding completely.
6. If a Scorpion is squashed and laid on a wound it would help considerably.
7. If one is bitten by a Snake, he must hold women's jewellery in his hands and rattle it all night.

It is not possible to mentioned all types of folk-medicines used by the pre-Islamic Arabs in this brief paper. However, some of the folk-medicines include, magic spells, incantations, cupping and many others. Some of these medicines may proves active, while others may not. As a folklorist, the present writer cannot scientifically

prove or reject the efficacy of these medicines. Islamically, many of these medicines were not approved of.

ISLAMIC MEDICAL HERITAGE:

As regards the pre-Islamic Arabs, one could not blame a society in which there was neither a prophet nor a book of guidance. Thus, Islam is not only a spiritual revolution but also a scientific one. Muslims were the first to develop one of the most brilliant civilizations in the history of humanity. Medical personnel are highly honoured in the prophetic traditions and the medical science is even ranked the second most rewarding knowledge in Islam. Muslims were encouraged through the teaching of the Qur'an and Sunnah to use all necessary available resources in developing and knowledge which will benefit not only themselves but the entire Muslim world. According to (Graziani 1980):

"Islamic tradition from the beginning was in favour of medicine practice, religious aspirations did play an important role in reshaping the outcome, as they emphasized the importance of bodily cleanliness and necessity of seeking medication for every disease."

Graziani, though a Christian Oriented Scholar holds a positive view of the Islamic stand and contribution to medical care in contrast, one of the Western Scholars (Ullmann, 1978) is saying:

"The appearance of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) did nothing to change medical conditions. In the Koran in which otherwise so many questions about human living are discussed and ruled drawn up, neither the doctor nor medicine are anywhere mentioned."

Ullmann's biased and unsubstantiated statement has encouraged the present writer to study the Holy Qur'an and prophet's Mohammed's (SAW) traditions dealing with medicine in order to refute his allegation. In the holy Qur'an the nature of the Earth, the creation of heavens and earth, zoology, astronomy and many other elements of science have been mentioned more than a hundred times, the verses dealing with these issues are dealing with science in general. As regards medical science. According to Ustaz (Aminuddeen Abubakar, 1991)

"The Muslims contributed a lot to the field of medicine when the Europeans were fast asleep, and could neither reason nor could they understand anything scientific. At the time the European religious masters were fighting anything having to do with science, while the Muslim populace were mastering."

The Prophet's traditions in respect of medical practice may be divided into two. In the first instance, the Prophet urged the entire Muslim world to seek knowledge and he mentioned ailments and their treatment in several of his sayings. Some of these sayings are as follows:

"There is a remedy for every malady and when the remedy is applied to the disease it is cured with the permission of Allah, the Exact and glorious."

Another saying runs thus -

*"For every disease there is a medicine."*⁹

Another similar tradition is:

*"Allah did not cause a disease without providing a cure for it."*⁹

These traditions and many like them prove the Islamic contribution to the development of medicine and medical knowledge. Referring to the above traditions one Islamic scholar wrote:

*"It is satisfying to observe that the entire progress of hospitals was largely based on the principles laid down by the Prophet (SAW). While the decisive easily be traced in their all-round development."*¹⁰

Muslims were urged to use all possible Islamic methods and research in finding treatment for the sick although at the same time it is known to the Muslims that treatment itself is not effective and that it is Allah who makes it efficacious in curing disease and ailments. To any good Muslim, Allah is the great healer. A **hadith** is reported from the Prophet (SAW) in which he said:

"Prophet Ibrahim (A.S) asked Allah (SWT) who cures?"

"It is me" God answered.

"What is the business of the doctor?" Asked Ibrahim.

*"He is the person on whose hand I put cure."*¹¹

A doctor is to bear in mind that Allah puts only the knowledge of cure into his hand, while the original knowledge of sickness and its treatment belong to Allah alone. Muslims were also advised to take good care of their personal hygiene and environmental cleanliness. They are warned to shun wine, smoking, and the dirty works of devil so that their action shall not contribute to their own death as Qur'an says:-

"And make not your hands contribute to your destruction" (Ch. 2, v. 195)

In another verse Allah says:

"And kill not yourself, surely Allah is merciful to you." (Ch., v. 20)

It can now be seen clearly from the above quotations that the statement made by Ullman that neither **Qur'an** nor the Prophet mentioned anything about medicine is clearly baseless. Now, let us look at a few of the Prophets traditions in the field of medicine which were scientifically proved right by contemporary scientists.

PROPHET THE DOCTOR:

It is reported that, the Prophet is the first doctor to establish a hospital to cure all diseases except **as-sam**. A'isha (R.A) asked Prophet (SAW) "what is as-sam?" He said, "death".¹²

Based on this saying, an Egyptian doctor in the USA started curing the so-called incurable disease 'AIDS' with some black seed **habbat as-saudaii**.

Furthermore, the Qur'an speaks about menses and refers to it as a disease and directed Muslims to keep away from women during their menses. Recently a European lady doctor embarked on research about women menses and presented her findings at an International Seminar of doctors in Riyadh Saudi-Arabia. Her research concluded that, the menses is a disease. To her surprise some Muslim doctors quoted chapter 2 verse 222 of the Holy **Qur'an** to her which described menses as a disease about 1400 years ago. Imam Muslim reported a **hadith** which is saying:

*"Fever is from the heat of hell, so put it out (cool it) with Water."*¹³

This **hadith** runs counter to the belief of the pre-Islamic Arabs who associated fever with animals only. In addition, our modern medical scientists are daily giving advice to patients with fever to take bath with cool water, so as to cool their bodies. In the same book, a **hadith** of iodine invention is narrated. The **hadith** is saying:

*"When the helmet broke on the head of the Prophet and his face became covered with blood and his incisor tooth broke. Ali used to bring water in his shield which Fatimah was washing the blood off his face. When Fatima saw that the bleeding increases because of the water, She took a mart (of palm leaves) and burnt it, and stuck it on the wound of Allah's Apostle where-upon the bleeding stopped."*¹⁴

Despite this, Western physicians (Christians) have been doing their best to associate the discovery of iodine with French Chemist called Bernard Courteous in 1811. He was said to have invented iodine through the ash of the seaweed. However, even some fair minded Christians physicians themselves have admitted that Fatimah was the first person to discover this medicine.

Another tradition was reported by Imam Muslim from Abu Sa'id which is saying:

*"A man came to Prophet and said, 'my brother has got loose motion'. The Prophet said, 'let him drink honey.'" "The man again came and said: I made him drink honey but that made him worse. (He repeated this three times according to some traditions). The Prophet said, "Allah has said the truth and the abdomen of your brother has told a lie". On the third time the honey was given to the patient, he recovered."*¹⁵

Several traditions were reported from the Prophet on the significance of chewing sticks. A Muslim is expected to use a chewing stick at least five time a day (i.e. during each ablution for his obligatory prayers). A Christian physicians specialist in medical plants, discovered the benefits of chewing sticks to our dental care. His investigation reads:

*"These chewing sticks in addition to providing mechanical stimulation of the gums, also destroy microbes present in the mouth, a feature which is absent in the common tooth pastes on the market....."*¹⁶

One could confidently suggest that the advantage of chewing sticks over conversational tooth paste and brush explain why Muslims have stronger teeth than the so-called civilized developed nations. A Muslim's mouth is only allowed to smell when he is fasting, after which he is strongly advised to observe good dental care. Comparing our previous hadith and the current investigation, one must venture to rank Prophet as the first dentist of the scientific world.

DEVELOPMENT OF SCIENCE:

The Muslims' contributions in the medical science is great. Realising its importance, physicians were raised to a very high level. Muslims were the first to develop modern civilization as manifested in the sciences and hospital development. According to (Graziani, 1980)

"During the Abbasid period of (250-1258) the Arabs and the Muslims in the middle East, North Africa and Arabian peninsula developed one of the most brilliant civilizations in the history of humanity".

Muslims Caliphs and Scholars in line with teachings of the Prophet (SAW) encouraged Muslims of all generations to seek knowledge of Islamic sciences. The philosopher Abu Nasr Muhammad al-Farabi (d. 339/950) was the first to classify science in his book Isha al-ulum, this book was highly praised by Abul-Qasim Sa'id (d.463/1070) who says of it:

*"It is a notable book on the classification and defining of the science and their subject matter. It is not only the first of its kind of arrangement, but of the most organised."*¹⁷

Alfarabi's work is divided into five sections each dealing with a different aspect of medical science. He is the first to introduce methodology through which a physician can achieve success and perfection. Among the famous Islamic scientists was Ibn Sina (980-1037), Ibn Hazm of Cordova (994-1064), Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (1149-1209), Muhammad b. Ibrahim b. Sa'id al-Ansari (d. 749/1348), Tash Kuri Zadah (d. 968/1561) and Abu Ja'afar Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim Ibn Abi Khalid Ibn. al-Jazzar (died 10009) just to mention a few of them.

In the second half of these 11th century (1072AD), Abu Al-ala Sa'id Ibn al-Hassan wrote a book on medical dentology and educational aspiration, Tashwiq-al-Tibbi. In it he stated that a physician should be honest, righteous, religious, intelligent, and ingenious. He should be friendly and understanding to the poor as well as to the weak and treat them before the rich.

DEVELOPMENT OF HOSPITALS:

According to the historian Al-Mazazi (1364-1442) the first known hospital in the Muslim world was constructed in the Umayyad period under the Caliph al-Walid who ruled from (705-715). Hospitals in the real sense of the world were established in Baghdad under Harun al-Rashid and directed by Ibn. Musawayh. Muslim Caliphs bestowed high honour on competent physicians to head, plan and contract hospitals and other health institutions.

During the Buwahid period (945-1055), hospitals were encouraged by rulers. The king of the Buwayhid dynasty built the famous Aduki hospital in Baghdad on the

West bank of the river Tigris. The hospital was well furnished and staffed with 24 physicians. Islamic hospitals might be considered under four categories, according to Hamarnich.

In most of the Islamic empires and states, during the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates, three types of medical centres were established.

1. **Al-Bimaristanant** (medical institution) state sponsored. In these types of clinics **halls** were sectionalised according to sex and illness. Toilets and bathrooms were also separated (i.e. male & female).
2. Medical centres financed by religious organisations such as Antioch and Mayyafarigin.
3. Military hospital, mostly established in tents at camp and temporary site, of the military barracks.

The most original of all Muslim physicians in Abubakar Muhammad b. Zakariyya al-Razi (865-925-932) known by medieval latinists as Rhazes. He pioneered medical chemistry and psychothera. He developed the use of set on surgery treated bladder and kidney stones, at present about 130 monographs of medicine are to his credit. He was the first chief physician at the great hospital of Baghdad. In an attempt to choose a good site for the hospital, he hung pieces of meat on trees, in different locations, and he chopped the place where the meat decayed the lowest as the site of the hospital.

During the period of Caliph al-Muqtadi (908-932), he issued an order prohibiting any physician to practice medicine in Baghdad unless he was examine by Sinan Ibn Thabit of Harran (826-900). As a result of this legal decision, about 860 physicians took the test according to al-Qifti, and more then 700 scaled through.

CONCLUSION:

In deed Islam is a religion of yesterday today and tomorrow, Muslims were encouraged to seek for medical knowledge and make good used of it, for the benefit of the future generations. It is a fact that most of our contemporary scientific discoveries are based on the scientific work developed by Muslim scholars and philosophers.¹⁸ Thus, one must be convinced beyond shadow of doubt that, without this effort of the previous Muslim generations it is impossible for the contemporary medical Scholars to event anything new in the field of medicine.

NOTES

1. This definition is from Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, Fourth Edition, p. 774.
2. Ibid, p. 4159.
3. Chambers Dictionary, 1983, p. 1159.
4. Manfred Ullman, Islamic survey. Islamic medicine Edingburgh University Press, 1978. p. 1.

5. Ibid. p. 2.
6. Abdul-Hamid Siddi, Sahih Muslim, (English Translation) p. 1199.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Surty, M.I.H.I. Muslims' contribution to development of hospital; in Degel Journal of Faculty of Arts and Islamic Studies, U.D.U.S. Vol. 1 1981-1982, p. 40.
10. Abdul-Hamid, Op. cit. p. 1199.
11. Abdul-Ha,mid, Op. cit. p. 416.
12. Abdul-Ha,mid, Op. cit. p. 416
13. Abdul-Ha,mid, Op. cit. p. 413.
14. Anayomi Sofowara, Medicinal plants and Traditional Medicine in Africa, Spectrum books, 1982, p. 62.
15. Joseph S. Graziani, Arabic Medicine in the 11th Century as represented in the work of Ibn Jazlah, 1980 p. viii,
16. Aliyu M. Bunza, (1990) Magani Cikin Musulunci, p. 19.