

Chapter 7

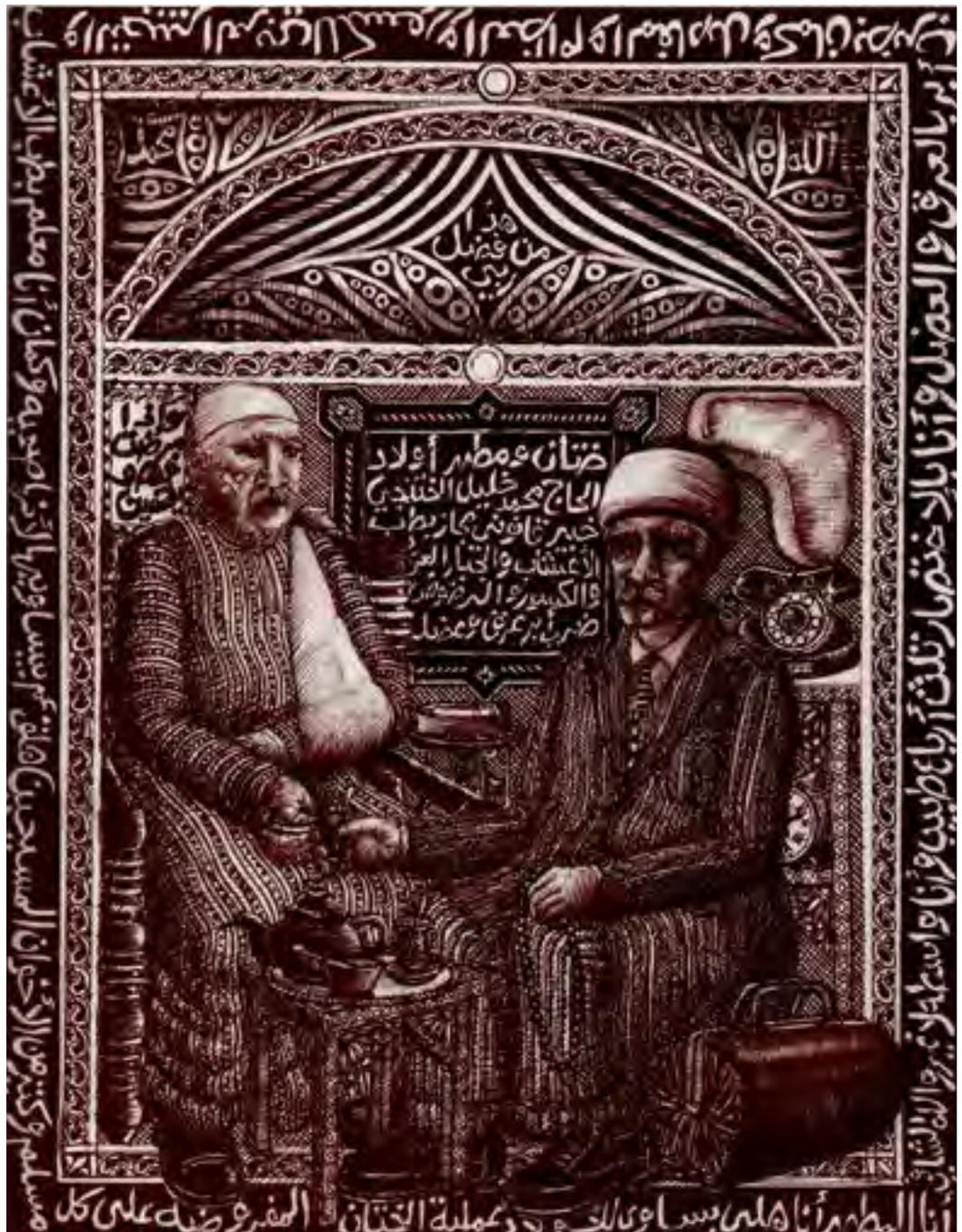
**Traditional Medicine in Syria:  
Knowledge, Beliefs & Experiences**

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Since ancient times, Syrians have practised traditional medicine just as many eastern and western civilizations have, where common natural ingredients—such as tea and opium in the east and tobacco, coffee and wine in the west—were used in traditional methods for healing ailments and diseases. Traditional therapies used in Syria include plant- and animal-based therapies, leech therapy, cupping, cauterization and others.

Today, traditional medicine is practised by all Syrian communities, where traditions and beliefs vary among different governorates and areas. There are literally hundreds of traditional healing methods still practiced in Syria today. These include: traditional exorcisms through



An illustration of a traditional circumcision practitioner, from *Old Stores and Merchants* by Syrian artist Khaldoun Shishakli, courtesy of Dar Al Bashaer

Quran readings, Ruqias and the use of Zamzam water (taken from the Zamzam Well in the holy city of Mecca), fasting, homeopathy, hypnosis and image therapy, acupuncture, biofeedback, and nutrition therapy.

Within some Syrian communities, certain types of plants are thought to have the word Allah in Arabic written inside of them. Such an example are black mission figs that are used in healing while *Commiphora* is considered sacramental among ancient Christian communities—it is believed that the Virgin Mary used this plant to wash the clothes of Jesus Christ. Another type of plant called the moonflower illuminates at night and is considered supernatural in traditional Syrian belief. In addition aloe is usually hung on doors and believed to bring long life and health to a household.

Traditional medicine in Syria was fundamentally based on experimentation. It is deeply rooted in Islamic and pre-Islamic cultures, where major components are related to Islamic doctrines and teachings from the Quran and Hadith (a collection of traditions containing sayings of the Prophet).

Sunnah is the verbally transmitted record of the teachings, deeds, and silent permissions (or disapprovals) of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. Sheikh Alhafiz Abi Naeem Ahmad bin Abdulla bin Ahmad bin Isaac Al Asfhani wrote in the prophetic medicine encyclopaedia on Sunnah: Sunnah is the teachings of Prophet Mohammad. It is the second source of doctrine in Islam, and it contains vast benefits for the Islamic Ummah. There are plenty of prophetic Hadiths representing conversations and saying on the topic of medicine and how to prevent and treat illness. Naturally, healing is an integral component of a prophet's mission and Islam has given great attention to medicine, and its contributions include Ruqia, nutritional therapy, and herbalism.

In Islamic-based traditional medicine, the concept of mind and body balance relates to nature's four elements:

- **Fire** the hot and dry element
- **Air** the hot and wet element
- **Water** the cold and wet element
- **Earth** the cold and dry element

Humans, according to traditional medicine teachings, have the most balanced compilation of these elements, as opposed to plants and other animals who have certain compilations that make them mostly cold, dry, wet, or something else. There are also four types of bodily secretions according to traditional medicine, and they have the following properties:

- **Blood** wet and hot
- **Body Fluid** cold and wet
- **Bile** hot and dry
- **Black Secretions** dry and cold.

In addition to the concept of “equilibrium”, traditional medicine in Syria is also based on the theory of abundance—the concept of positive energy passed along through people through positive values such as honesty, integrity, beneficence, and a spirit of giving. Abundance is also believed to apply to plants and other living organisms and is sometimes used in healing, where spiritually gifted individuals pass it on via prayer,

invocation and through saliva, where the point of illness is sucked on by a healer. This is sometimes accompanied by herbal therapy.

Plant-based traditional therapies rely on available indigenous herbs with proven medical benefits for the physical, behavioural and mental well-being of communities. Today there are hundreds of unprocessed medications free of synthetic or chemical substances that are based on traditional practices, where the therapeutic benefits of these materials, in most of cases, were realised by mere chance and coincidence.

Dr Jihad Ibrahim Shahrour, Head of the Nephrology and Paralysis Department at the Open Academy for Alternative Medicine, on traditional medicine in Syria says:

The Syrian natural environment is one of the richest in the world in terms of therapeutic herbs. Several rare medicinal plants that do not exist in other parts of the world are indigenous to the Syrian habitat. It would be an extremely challenging task to audit all therapeutic plants available in Syria. (Mohammad, 2015)

This makes the cost of traditional therapy in Syria one of the lowest in the world due to the widespread availability of such plants.

On the difference between alternative medicine and traditional medicine, Dr Shahrour says:

There are no fundamental differences between the two. Alternative medicine is usually goes hand in hand with traditional medicine, as it mainly consists of nutritional therapy, acupuncture, and herbal therapy as well. (Mohammad, 2015)

Herbal therapy is an ancient practice, especially in Houran, which is rich in natural herbs and plants, from which community elders knew how to extract and use for healing. Honey is used as a cough suppressant and decongestant. It is usually mixed with egg yolk and taken on an empty stomach. Grilled onions are also used to heal flu and garlic for the treatment of the patchy hair loss resulting from alopecia areata, where smashed garlic is mixed with gunpowder to make a therapeutic black ointment and is applied on the lesion after creating a cut with a sterilized blade. Olive oil on an empty stomach is believed to prevent anaemia while cauterization is said to be 'the final treatment'. Cauterizing is a traditional therapy for dog bites, accompanied by a paste made of garlic, salt and honey.

Houran communities in Southern Syria have practised traditional medicine for centuries. They have depended on various therapies to substitute expensive modern medications, or medications that aren't available for purchase in the country (Sincich, 2002). A prominent therapy used is garden cress—a herb used to relieve chest congestion, and also used as an anaesthetic, cough suppressant, pain killer, and to treat laryngitis and emphysema. It also has anti-inflammatory effects when boiled with water and drunk with honey twice a day. Khalid Oaida, a traditional medicine practitioner from Houran says:

Traditional Medicine has a large number of followers. It is defined as the sum of preventive and therapeutic traditional skills followed in the society that do not conform to modern medicine. Traditional medicine is based on the accumulated beliefs and expertise shared by cultures and regions, including rituals practised by people, involving herbal therapy, medicinal plants, and aromatic oils. (Ali, 2015)

Cupping therapy is a widely spread and time-honoured traditional medicine practice in Syria. Studies show that it was practised in different civilizations such as the Chinese, Babylonians, Pharaohs, and Greeks. These civilizations used metal cups, oxen horns, and bamboo sticks for cupping, where de-pressurizing happened by means of sucking. After some time, glass cups became the tool of choice for cupping, and de-pressurizing was brought on by burning a cotton ball or piece of wool inside the cup. (Babili, 2007)

Historical indicators show that cupping was prevalent in Syria since the Assyrian era. The practice later expanded under the Islamic empire, where cupping became a main therapeutic practice next to cauterizing and herbalism. Cupping was passed onto the Europeans during the Arab reign of Andalusia, where Muslim doctors were an internationally respected point of reference in medical science.

Ibrahim Yazbik, who benefits from cupping therapy says:

Cupping therapy has helped me combat headaches, reduce blood pressure, and get rid of joint pain. It is proven in the Sunnah teachings of Islam and in the pillars of prophetic medicine. As a religious belief, cupping therapy gives us spiritual and mental balance, and I personally prefer it to chemical medicine. At least it has no side effects or complications. (Khalid, 2013)

A Syrian team of fifteen doctors from the Faculty of Medicine in Damascus University conducted a study on cupping therapy between 2000 and 2003, on a sample of over 300 people. The study was based on studying blood samples of subjects before and after therapy. It concluded

**Local herbs and spices used  
in traditional medicine**





Apothecary store in the Bzourieh souk in Old Damascus

that cupping therapy helped in reducing blood pressure, controlling blood sugar, raising the numbers of red blood cells, and enhancing white blood cells and platelets.

The study attracted the attention of delegations from the UK, Japan, and Sweden, who visited Damascus to explore the Syrian findings on this topic.

However, not all traditional medicine practices yielded positive results. An example of this is the theory of abundance, which was transmitted through prayer and invocation. Other traditional healing methods had the potential to cause further health implications. For example in cases where traditional medicine was preferred over modern medicine, people tended to neglect serious health issues which required deeper medical intervention, and by this, delaying a visit to their doctor and risking their health.

Researcher, Dr Mohamed Amer Alskheikh Youssef, President of the Oncology League, warns:

Contrary to some beliefs, cupping therapy has no value in treating or controlling cancer. It is also ineffective in the prevention of cancer, as the disease forms in multiple stages, and its prevention requires following scientifically proven approaches." He added: "I would not recommend cupping therapy, especially for diagnosed patients, as it can introduce severe viruses to the body of a patient already suffering impaired immunity, which can be life-threatening. (Khalid, 2013)

Cupping in Syria is mostly practiced during the cooler winter months, due to the high risk of patients suffering from burns and blisters if performed during the hotter months due to the excessive heat.

Combining traditional therapies with modern medications may also cause unhealthy interactions inside the body, potentially leading to unforeseen complications. Traditional healers do not undergo the same kind of rigorous academic examinations and trial procedures as other medical practitioners, not to mention that most traditional healers do not hold any official qualifications or registrations. Traditional Medicine is not subject to close government monitoring and control, thereby increasing the risks of error.

Traditional medicine is deeply rooted in human civilization. Arab practitioners were pioneers in this field, as they were (and still are) in modern medicine. Traditional Medicine practitioners in Syria are bound by the ethical commitment of confidentiality towards their patients according to article 565 of the Syrian Penal Code. Recently, medical experts have called for the regulation of Traditional Medicine in Syria, as well as to regulate and register all apothecary stores as medical centres. This has stirred some controversy due to the limitations it could potentially place on the cultural expressions of communities, where long-practiced traditions could become subjected to unwelcomed monitoring and tracking by medical authorities.

\*The Syria Trust for Development works to document old cultural traditions and encourage the exchange of experiences from the field, as well as promote the cultural literacy of younger generations so they continue to live and contribute to the legacy they have inherited across millennia. As a UNESCO accredited organisation, the Trust has documented 100 intangible cultural heritage elements in Syria and continues to play an instrumental role in building a more comprehensive legal framework for the safeguarding of Syria's profound cultural heritage.

## RÉSUMÉ

La médecine traditionnelle en Syrie s'est basée sur l'expérimentation. Elle est profondément enracinée dans les cultures islamiques et pré-islamiques, dont les composants sont majoritairement reliés aux doctrines islamiques et aux enseignements du Coran. La consommation de certains fruits et plantes qui ont une signification spirituelle, comme les figues *Black Mission* et la *Commiphora*, est censée être très bénéfique pour les patients. La spiritualité et les théories de l'énergie positive sont répandues parmi les communautés religieuses anciennes, tandis que le *cupping* (ventousothérapie) et les thérapies à base de plantes sont des méthodes de traitement utilisées dans les foyers ainsi que dans les bains publics de nos jours encore. Le *cupping* est pratiqué pendant l'hiver pour atténuer les tensions musculaires, les maux de dos, les douleurs abdominales et traiter l'indigestion et la fatigue.

Les thérapies traditionnelles à partir de plantes dépendent des herbes indigènes ayant des vertus médicales qui ont fait leurs preuves dans le domaine du bien-être physique, comportemental et mental des communautés, du fait de l'environnement naturel de la Syrie qui est l'un des plus riches au monde en termes d'herbes thérapeutiques. Les tribus bédouines dans les plaines de Houran du sud de la Syrie utilisent cette thérapie à base d'herbes en suivant une tradition ancienne qui se transmet au cours des générations et qui est pratiquée quotidiennement pour prévenir les maux et les maladies. Les ingrédients utilisés comprennent par exemple un mélange d'ail avec du thé *gunpowder* pour le traitement de la perte de cheveux, ou encore du miel et du jaune d'oeuf pour supprimer la toux.

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