

## REVIEW

# History of Traditional Medicine Practices in Sudan

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### Abstract

In this review study, it is aimed to summarize the information cited about the history of Sudanese traditional medicine practices. The information cited about the history of Sudanese traditional medicine practices was summarized. Sudanese traditional medicine practices are well-established and ancient since the civilization of Kush and Meroe, through the Islamic kingdoms in Sennar, Kordofan and Darfur, up to the period of Turkish and English-Egyptian colonization, and the development of traditional medicine until it reached what it is now in Sudan from the spread of folk healers. The traditional medicine healers are those who practice medicine by genetics, experience, knowledge, and subjective experience. In this chapter, the most important traditional healing practices such as Alfaki, Alkaiy, All Basir, etc. have been highlighted throughout history.

**Keywords:** Alfaki, Alkaiy, All Basir, History, Traditional Medicine, Zar

### INTRODUCTION

Traditional medicine was known to human civilizations before BC, and it is a medicine that is passed on to generations of its practitioners who have had great experience. Its practitioners relied on herbs, plants, and some spiritual methods. This type of medicine has contributed a great deal to improving human health, especially the provision of primary care services at the community level. This medicine still retains its popularity all over the world.<sup>1</sup> Traditional medicine is defined by the World Health Organization as: The set of medical practices, approaches, knowledge, and beliefs that includes the use of medicines, spiritual healing methods, manual techniques, and exercises based on plants, animals, and minerals, which are individually or collectively applied for the treatment, diagnosis, prevention, or maintenance of disease on health.<sup>2</sup> Today, traditional medicine is often called complementary and alternative medicine in many countries. The Attar he is the seller of popular medicines, and he is called (the herbalist) or (the Attar), that is, the pharmacist in our contemporary sense, who sells medicines and drugs in the market. Sudan knew perfumery through the perfumes, herbs and spices that came to it, and it made its way to Sudan through the port of Suakin,

which received ships from all over the world, and it began as a well-known trade since 1800 AD.<sup>3</sup> The most famous perfumers known as Al-Taiman, who are brothers: Hamza and Othman, have two adjacent shops in Omdurman market. They are famous for selling bakhur al-taiman (the twin's incense) (Figure 1), which was collected from several aromatic and medicinal herbs by them.



**Figure 1.** bakhur al-taiman (the twin's incense) (Asia Sudan for Sudanese and Gulf products,

<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100069230589467>)

## THE HISTORY OF TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

The first thing mankind knew of medicine was using natural plants and herbs, which man searched for and explored after experiencing his pain and healing methods. The history of the study of herbs in written records goes back 5,000 years to the ancient Sumerians who described successful medicinal uses of plants.<sup>4,5</sup> The ancient Chinese civilization knew medicine in the year 2500 BC and wrote many rare medical manuscripts. Historians mention that the ancient Egyptian man used various types of herbs in medicine and folk medicine, and this goes back to the year 1000 BC. M. Manuscripts of Indian folk medicine was found among the ancient Greeks.<sup>6</sup>

### 1. Sudanese traditional medicine

Traditional folk medicine in Sudan is one of the richest types of folk medicine in the world. It is part of the many ancient Sudanese cultures that date back to the civilizations that were established on the Nile centuries before the birth of Christ, such as the Kushite civilization, the civilization of Kerma, Meroe, Al-Maqra and Alwa. In Sudan, as in other African countries, modern medicine entered with the entry of the colonizer from 1898-1956. And from the reality of the geographical population map of health services, we find that millions are resorting to folk medicine to treat their physical, psychological, and mental ailments. This is due to the inability of modern medical services to reach them, and there is the strongest reason for their belief in the folk healers who were associated with their religious beliefs and sanctities.<sup>7</sup>

Traditional medicine is a complete science that includes Sudanese medicinal herbs and spirituality, which usually includes clairvoyants, midwives, and herbalists.<sup>8</sup> Diagnosis is made through spiritual means, then treatment is prescribed which usually consists of herbal remedies which not only have healing powers, but also symbolic and spiritual significance.<sup>9</sup> The Sudanese traditional healer believes that illness does not occur by chance, but through a spiritual or social imbalance.

Paleopathology, a science that appeared in the period between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which represents the period of interest of archaeologists in ancient diseases, that paleopathology is concerned with the study of diseases that affect the skeletons and through which science can identify diseases.<sup>10</sup> And that among the diseases that are considered common between the

ancient Sudan and the modern period, including the Islamic and the current ones, are the diseases of “tuberculosis, anemia, cancer, fractures in the bones, influenza, and malaria. The diseases of fevers, smallpox and cholera spread during the Islamic civilization period. The ancients used folk medicine and local materials for treatment, such as boiling oil, some herbs, minerals, mahreeb (*Potentilla reptans*), ardeb (*Tamarindus indica*), beeswax, and sanamaca (*Cassia angustifolia*).<sup>11</sup>

It became clear that the health conditions in the ancient Sudan were very poor, as diseases spread due to environmental and health conditions, which led to a high death rate among the third decade groups in the period of the ancient Kerma civilization and the Kingdom of Kush.

Traditional Sudanese medicine used through the history for different types of surgery for medical, aesthetic, and social purposes. Most of them were simple practices. The ancient Sudanese sewed the stomachs buried in warts with horsehair, after covering the intestines with squash plants without its skin, so that the wound healed without becoming inflamed, and they marked and scarred women and men. They prevented the disease and practiced cupping and ironing, circumcised boys and girls, repaired fractures and treated bleeding wounds. It is worth noting that all the surgical operations were bleeding due to the ignorance of the popular practitioners in the basics of anatomy and the locations of the arteries and veins, and because they were not familiar with the simplest rules of hygiene and sterilization.<sup>7</sup>

### 2. Specialties of traditional medicine

The multiplicity of diseases and their differences created the need for specialization so that the specialist excels in the service he provides. Many examples of Sudanese specialized in traditional medicine e.g.

#### 2.1. Al-Faki or AL- Sheikh

He is usually the imam of the mosque, and the religious scholar who has a special religious culture in the countryside. The Sheikh Al-Faqih who teaches the boys the Qur'an and jurisprudence in the maseed. He uses a wood board (loah) which is a stick with a flat surface, on which the verses of the Noble Qur'an are written for memorization (Figure 2). He uses Al-Dawiya, which is a bottle containing ink made of glue, carbon (carbon powder) and water, used for writing on the board. Verses of healing on a wooden board, washed with water and drunk by the patient, its locally known as Mihaya (erasure of holy verse).<sup>12</sup> In treatment, the Sheikh uses traditional methods,

namely, determination, mihaya, Amulets (hijab), and there is beating, chains, and dieting, which is like coercive treatment in psychiatry, and with an ample space and enough Sheikh's assistants, and the various group and individual activities in the master, all help. A lot in the implementation of rehabilitation and work therapy programs.



**Figure 2.** Wood board (loah).  
Source: <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/2909>

As for the hijab, (Figure 3) which are: papers or leather or other things that are attached to the patient, in which are written Quran verses or supplications that are attached to the patient against weapons, or against the jinn.<sup>13</sup>

### 2.2. Al-kaiy (Cauterization)

Cauterization (al-kaiy in Arabic) includes using a heated metal instrument (nail or metal rod) for skin application. It is a method commonly used in Arab folk medicine, where the treating healer (Al-Kwai) heat a piece of metal and put it on the place of pain or on a place determined by the healer, given that this place in the human body controls the source his sense of pain. Arabic traditional cauterization was known and practiced before the rise of Islam. Prophet

Mohammed (peace be upon him) did not like to be cauterized as he said, "Healing is in three things: cupping, a drink of honey and cauterization (branding with fire) but I forbid my followers to use cauterization"<sup>14</sup>.



**Figure 3.** Amulets (The hijab). Source: Al Safi, A. (2007). *Traditional Sudanese Medicine*. Azza publishing house, Khartoum, Sudan.

Although this type of treatment often comes after using other methods of treatment because of the pain it causes for the patient, and there is a well-known popular proverb about cauterization: (the last cautery treatment).

Cautery healers believe that the heat generated by cauterization helps increase the flow of vital energy in the body, dispel cold and strengthen the immune system, and can stimulate blood circulation to alleviate health problems, from chronic pain to digestive issues.

The Sudanese use cautery to treat abdominal pain, headache, stomach, back pain, and other internal diseases. They treat themselves, horses, camels, and all other animals, and believe that it is the most



effective medicine for joint ailments, psychological and nervous diseases.<sup>14, 15</sup>

### **2.3. Traditional bone setters or All Basir**

Traditional bone setters Al Basir is the one who forces fractures, makes medicine for the broken organ, and has knowledge and experience in the bones. The most famous of Al-Basra (All Basir) in Sudan are Al-Basira Zainab Butt Betty, which she inherited from her father, Mustafa Ahmed Betty, and Al-Baseera Betul. The most famous men of insight or vision are Wad Mukhtar, Sheikh Al-Ataya, Awlad Ajeeb, Tayman Rabk, Sheikh Abu Duqan, and Wad Azraq. In Africa traditional bone fracture healers work on splinting bone fractures, by placing simple bandages from any available cloth over the fracture site, then fixing the member with wooden splints made of tree branches known in Sudan as (the tab), as well as working to return the jaw, separation, and retraction.<sup>16</sup>

### **2.4. The circumciser (Altahar)**

The circumciser is one who circumcises boys by traditional methods, and circumcision is a practice practiced by the followers of the monotheistic religions. In some countries, circumcision is practiced by the barber who cuts hair for decoration, because circumcision is a seasonal profession, so the barber practices it in the old barbershop, or when the guardians of the boys request it. In many African societies, male circumcision is carried out for cultural reasons, particularly as an initiation ritual and a rite of passage into manhood. The procedure herein referred to as traditional male circumcision is usually performed in a non-clinical setting by a traditional provider with no formal medical training.<sup>17</sup>

### **2.5. Cupping (Al-hijama)**

Cupping is locally known as Al-hijama in Sudan, it is pressing a glass cup or similar instrument, e.g., hollowed horn, tightly against the skin to draw blood to the surface. The procedure either ends at this stage, or is then called dry cupping, or it becomes wet cupping when the drawn blood is incised and let out.<sup>7</sup> Cupping healer or hajam (local name), is a traditional healer who use cup to treat some diseases. Cupping is an old practice in Sudan inherited from generation to generation.<sup>15</sup> The one who practices cupping represented by extracting corrupt blood from the body. Cupping is a method for removing bad or excess blood in the human body and suctioning it by using a tool to suction the blood and collect it in certain places of the body, such as the back of the head, the ankles, the stomach of the leg, the thigh, under the chin, the back of the foot, or the lower chest.<sup>18</sup> The instrument used in cupping is a glass cup

or the horn of an animal, which cuts the place where the blood was trapped and collected and left to bleed until the collected blood is drained.

The process of suctioning the blood may take about ten minutes, after which the therapist treats the wound by thickening the ashes on it. This method of treatment is derived from the Prophet's medicine, where it was narrated from the Messenger, may God's prayers and peace be upon him and his family, what confirms the feasibility of cupping therapy.<sup>19</sup>

### **2.6. Traditional surgeon (Al-Jarrah)**

Traditional surgeon he is a person who specializes in treating wounds with medicines and herbal compounds, and it is called (albukha), which is a group of herbs or one herb that is crushed and turned into a fine powder, some oils or warm water are added to it, placed in the place of the wound, and wrapped with a piece of cloth. Treat various types of light or deep wounds.<sup>7</sup>

### **2.7. Traditional folk psychiatry**

The disease is as old as man and before modern medicine was treated with folk medicine. The literature of folk medicine indicates that it is an authentic human heritage that relied on the approach of innate observation and trial and error as an entry point to crystallize and embody the phenomenon.<sup>7</sup> The literature of folk medicine is also full of values and concepts derived from belief in patterns of spiritual and psychological treatment, and herbal and natural treatment, and this played a role in establishing its rules and gaining its distinctive position.<sup>20</sup> The treatment in this field comes through responding to the therapist and trusting the medicine with a deep belief in it.

Zar is a group of rituals based on the belief that if a group of spirits of ancestors, masters, and elders conjure up spirit possession or reincarnate their sick souls and respond to their requests, the sick will recover from their disease. The phenomenon of reincarnation of the souls of ancestors and healing through them is a phenomenon rooted in African tribes and has been found in many parts of the Sudan with different names: Al-Rih Alahmar, Al-Zuhr, Al-Dastur, Al-Kjur. The Zar phenomenon is present in many countries neighboring Sudan, African, Arab, and Asian countries.<sup>21</sup>

### **Zar rite**

Zar has many rituals performed by a sheikh or Sheikha Zar. The sheikh is the main figure in performing the rituals, and he has assistants like the female sitter, who is the deputy sheikh, and she must keep the fires of incense burning all the time, monitor and control the participants in the zar ceremony, and

flog anyone who violates the rules. And the Najeeba (Clever) mission is to serve the audience.<sup>22</sup> There is the Jrayah (Runner) which is responsible for distributing invitations and messages. The grandmother of the Brazier her task is cooking. The girls of the kit must play musical instruments and keep them clean. The bride or the visitor also has an assistant called the minister.

### 1-Open the box rite

It is a diagnostic ritual. The box is the incense box that represents the sheikh's authority. There are four white, red, black, and multi-colored boxes. Each thread has its own incense. In the Sheikh's first interview with the patient, the Sheikh asks the patient about the symptoms and problems she suffers from, and then releases incense. If there is a response such as crying, convulsions, or a tremor, the patient is diagnosed as possessed, the diagnostic rituals are followed, such as the inspection in which short tones are played, the response of the patient is in mostly for the same type of incense characteristic of the type of thread.<sup>23</sup>

### 2- Henna rite

The hands and feet of the sick person are covered with henna, as well as the feet of the slaughtered animal and the drum machine. Henna is associated in Sudanese culture with joy and is practiced in circumcision and marriage. And an adornment for a married woman who does not leave her except in cases of mourning, besides henna is applied to the

hands and feet of male and female children as part of the ritual circumcision.<sup>24</sup>

Sudanese Zar is found as a therapeutic ritual associated with spiritual beliefs that lasted for centuries and is still ongoing, and in which a process of dialogue and cultural overlap took place, with which this region has been known throughout history and that there are no geographical barriers between it and its neighbors of Arab, African, and European peoples. It was found that the Zar helps a lot in the treatment of mental illness because it is an integrated social psychodrama.<sup>25</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Traditional medicine in Sudan has a legacy and a long history in treating ailments, maintaining health, resisting diseases, and physical and psychological rehabilitation. The multiplicity of diseases and their differences created the need for specialization so that the specialist excels in the service he provides. In Sudan Alfaki, Alkaiy, and All Basir are considered good examples of Sudanese specialized in traditional medicine.

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