Social Organization of Ancient Iranian Traditional Medical System

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Abstract:-The history of ancient Iranian traditional medical system goes back several thousand years. This system is a form of integrated medicine of the kind found throughout Asia, which is based on holistic approach and not limited to the treatment of illness, but is considered a way of life. The aim of this paper is exploring and reconstructing the history of this system. Ancient Iranian Traditional medical system was rational, enlightened, and empirical and in comparison with the other contemporary medical systems this tradition possessed fewer magical and superstitions aspects, but never free in theory or practice from religious considerations. The Iranian traditional medical system was differentiated into several fields of specialization, and this system has its own laws and rules. The profession of physician possessed high social status and was only available to the upper classes of Iranian society.

As article shows the scientific aspect of this tradition was dominant over other aspects. In this tradition great emphasis was placed on personal hygiene in individuals and cleanliness of one’s environment.

Key-Words: Ancient Iran, Traditional medical system, Holistic approach; Social organization

1 Introduction
In addition to important political, cultural and social events in Iran’s history, the country has benefited from a traditional medical system that goes back several thousand years. This system is a form of integrated medicine, which is based on the unity of the physical, psychological and
spiritual aspects of the individual. This approach is not limited to the treatment of illness, but is considered a way of life.

The ancient Iranian (pre-Islamic) medical system approaches the human being in a holistic manner that is apparent when illness requires treatment. The key to it is that the physical and the psychological/spiritual aspects of the patient are considered together, without separation—although one branch of this system is designed specifically for mental illness. In this way Iran’s medical system conforms to the holistic approach, where the human exists in an environmental spectrum in which health and disease are considered an outcome of a lack of equilibrium[1].

In its historical and cultural processes, this tradition possessed certain theories of the cause and treatment of disease that were linked to the beliefs, customs, and life style of ancient Iran. The tradition draws on two basic resources: the belief of the people, which has its roots in ancient Iranian history and society; and the plants, animals and minerals that are used to make medical drugs.

Diagnosis is made by considering the totality of the patient’s response to disease or health. The practitioner explored the relationship between cultural aspects such as nutrition, subsistence patterns, beliefs, traditions, and customs, and their role in disease and healing. The traditional medical system of Iran is therefore considered as an intrinsic part of ancient Iranian culture and civilization, and is now the subject of academic analysis and research. Data analysis in this research is carried out within an ecological, anthropological approach in order to reconstruct the system and map the sociocultural changes of ancient Iranian society.

Traditional Iranian medicine integrates the medical systems of various eastern civilizations. Its remedies show a combination of traditional medicines from Greece, India, Egypt and China with the experiences of Iranian physicians[2]. Conceptually, the system is underpinned by the teachings of Zoroaster, in particular, the collection of sacred texts known as the Avesta. The result is a synthesis of Chinese, Indian and Greek medicine blended with Babylonian, Assyrian, Egyptian and popular medicine.[3]

Iranian ancient cultural study can be divided into two general periods. The first is the Aryan period before the advent of the prophet Zoroaster. In this period, Iranian religion was the worship of natural forces seen as beneficial to human life, for example clean sky, sun, fire, and air. In contrast, natural phenomena that were harmful to human life, such as disease, darkness, drought, and dryness were considered as evil spirits, and where these were present, health depended on intervention by the beneficial forces. The people acknowledged the specific roles of these harmful forces to cause disease, and they performed particular ceremonies and sacrifices to avert the evil. Worshiping good forces gave satisfaction to the gods and achieved a good health for humankind.

The second period (Middle Iran) begins with the advent of Zoroaster in 700 BC According to the Zoroastrian world-view, the world is the domain of the struggle of good (AhuraMazda = God) against evil (Ahriman = Devil), so disease has its origin in the dominance of Ahriman over AhuraMazda.[4]

In the Avesta, the root of the word Bashezeh (medical) in Pahlavi, the language of this period, means ‘pathology’. Bashezeh is followed by various methods and different names, such as Ashoee (cleanliness and truth) Dato (coroner), Kareto (surgery), or Mantro (sacred word therapy) and Urroro (herbal remedy), which indicate the five branches of traditional Iranian medicine.[5]

In its beginnings, ancient Iranian medicine was accompanied by black magic and sorcery. The evidence suggests that in the Middle Iranian period the emphasis shifted to encompass both the patient’s physical and mental health at the time of illness. In Zoroastrian religious hymns there are many references to cleanliness, an important observance in daily life. Zoroastrianism maintained that a clean life requires truth, rationalism, happiness and health, and that a comfortable life needs environmental
cleanliness. The four natural elements basic to this life were fire, earth, water and air.[6] So personal hygiene was important, as well as cleanliness in one’s surroundings. Cleanliness and truth, both spiritually and materially, were emphasized in the prevention of disease.

The first Aryan physician was Thirita, though in some references he is introduced as an Indian physician. Actually this misconception arose from the time when both Indians and Iranians were considered as Aryans and a mixture of the Indo-European race.

In the Avesta it is declared that the Thirita is a most virtuous person, able to prevent diseases and avert death, and he can remove fever from the patient’s body. Ahura Mazda gave Thirita a knife for surgical work. And the sacred text says further that Thirita knew about the healing properties of plants and drugs.[7] In the Iranian system that grew out of this the physician possessed high social status.

This article attempts to describe the ancient Iranian traditional medical system as an integral part of this civilization. The ancient Iranian system arose in a sphere in which medical affairs synthesized with religious affairs, so neither can be studied separately. The system was divided into different fields of specialization, each of which had its own laws and rules, for patients and physician alike.

2 Ancient Iranian medical schools

After the advent of the Zoroastrian religion, some important medical schools arose in Iran which constituted the foundation of the ancient Iranian traditional medical system. One of the characteristic teachings of these schools was attention towards individual and group hygiene, together with cleanliness in one’s surroundings. The most important of these ancient medical schools are the Mazdayazna, Ekbatan, Achaemenid schools and the Gondeshapur Academy.

2.1 The theory of humors

One of the characteristics of ancient Iran medical system is the belief in the similarity of things in the macrocosm and the microcosm. As finite space, Vayu, as well as finite time, Zarvan, is embodied in the macrocosm, and man, the microcosm, is made in his image, the parts of man correspond in every respect to the parts of the universe. Thus, the seven constituents of the material world—which themselves correspond to the seven Bounteous immortals: fire, water, earth, metals, plants, animals and man—correspond to the marrow, blood, veins, sinews, bones, flesh, and hair of man. The four elements in the macrocosm correspond to the breath, blood, bile, and phlegm in man, and just as the world is controlled and kept in working order by the elements of fire and air, so is man’s body controlled and directed by his Farvashi, or external soul, working in close co-operation with his vital spirit. In the world this vital spirit, which maintains the macrocosm as a living unit, is Vayu, the atmospheric wind, in exactly the same way as breath keeps the human body alive. In man it is the soul (ravan) that guides the body and gives it consciousness; so too is the world guided by the world-soul, which is nothing less than the heavenly sphere.[8]

Although the entire material world derives from the heavenly sphere and constitutes its body, man alone is its image, each part of his body corresponding to an analogous part of the universe contained within the sphere. His skin corresponds to the sky, his flesh to the earth, his bones to the mountains, his veins to the rivers, his blood to water, his stomach to the sea, his hair to the plants, the subsistence of the body to the metals, his inborn reason to the human race itself because it alone gives rationality to the universe, and his acquired reason to cattle.

In the more normative religious account, the macrocosm (endless form) and microcosm are brought intimately together in that the one dwells within the other. But whereas the macrocosm was created without thought or movement, but was intangible and only developed these qualities later, Gayomart, the microcosm and first man, from the beginning thinks upon perfect Righteousness. This why mankind in the
macrocosm is compared to innate reason in the microcosm.

This tradition is formulated from generic physiological and cosmological concepts, which is based on humoral theories. The four humors in ancient Iran were breath, blood, bile and phlegm. These humors were alignments of opposing qualities: hot–cold, wet–dry, heavy–light, male–female, dark–bright, strong–weak, and so on. The equilibrium of these qualities maintained health, and their disequilibrium caused illness, whatever the number of humors. Equilibrium was regulated by an individual’s age, sex, and temperament in dynamic relationship to climate, season, food consumption, and other activities.[9]

In fact, traditional treatment rested on the similarity between macrocosmic and microcosmic philosophy, from which the theory of the four humors developed. According to this theory, various human temperaments show similarities to the four natural elements water, fire, earth, and air. Some researchers claim that human physiological behavior shows a similarity to these four elements and their properties. This is a basic principle of ancient Iranian medicine, which goes back to pre-Zoroastrian religion.

The humors theory that constituted the basis of later Hippocratic medicine in Greece was based on this ancient Iranian world-view that all things originate from these four elements. Since the human body is a mirror of nature, it also is made from four essential elements: bile, breath, phlegm, and blood. The relationship of these elements within the human body is similar to that of four elements of nature. Each of the humors, exactly like the four natural elements, possesses two natures. So blood is considered as warm and wet, phlegm is cold and wet, breath is warm and dry, and bile is cold and dry.

Since the four elements are compound in nature, and govern the survival and endurance of the human body, therefore equilibrium is also suitable compound of parts which ensures good health. This health status is lost when some disorder occurs in the humors. This systematic arrangement of the body is similar to that of nature, and is governed by the same law and is capable of vitalizing its lost system. But sometimes the body may lose its capacity to restore equilibrium, and ill health results. In such a situation nature can help the body to regain health; this is followed by the intervention of the physician and the prescribing of drugs. The goal is to establish the necessary equilibrium between the humors and their properties. In this way the theory of humors, which manifests in several later cultures, has its roots in ancient Iranian medical thought; Greeks scientists explained this theory in a more complete manner.[10]

2.2 Specialized branches of medicine in ancient Iran

Therapeutic methods in ancient Iran rested on the comparison of the different parts of the body with the natural elements and the humors. There were various theoretical viewpoints and various methods of therapy. These were systematized as five fields of specialization. These fields are differentiated according to the task and quality of work done by physicians. The most important branches are: 1. Urroro-Bushe (herbal therapy), 2. Kareto-Bushe (surgery therapy), 3. Mantro-Bushe (sacred word therapy), 4. Ashoe-Bushe (hygienic and truth therapy), and 5. Dato-Bushe (coroner therapy). The first three of these are described below:

2.3 Urroro-Bushe

Herbal medicine has a long history in Iranian society and is still in use. The ecology of Iran has allowed a great diversity of plants and trees, and this made suitable conditions for the growth of herbal medicine. According to ancient Iranian philosophy, the plant keeper angel is called Emertat (Everlasting) and the plant physician is Urroro-Bushe. The philosophy of herbal therapy claims that AhuraMazda created many plants to cure various diseases and keep people healthy.

Herbal healers in ancient Iran are classified in two groups: exorcists and conjurers, and physical healers. The latter was divided further: Dorostpads were preventive healers whose business was to remove the causes of disease. This group demanded a fee from patients; the
amount depended on the patient’s ability to pay. Another group was healers who treated the patients after the onset of disease; locally there were called Bashazak

Herbal remedies were prepared in three ways: as edible preparations, as ointments, and as a fumigation agent where the plant’s essence was extracted by boiling. The essence type was prescribed according to the kind of disease. The ancient Iranians believed that thirty days of each month belonged to thirty angels, and in response each angel possessed a curative plant, for example the violet was attributed to arrow (tear) angel, who was in charge of bronchial diseases.[11]

When plants were used as ointments, the patient’s body was washed with a preparation containing the essence of a plant; this was called Vetespobesh (complete therapy). In the fumigation method plants and gums such as frankincense were used as an antiseptic to clear breathing tubes and impart a healing fragrance to the surroundings. The stem of Haoma was used for fumigation. A mixture of Haoma essence and gold metal water was used as an external elixir, which is why this plant was considered sacred and worshipped as a goddess by Indo-Iranian people.[12]

2.4 Kareto-Bushe (surgery or knife therapy)

In the Avesta it is recommended that when a disease is not cured by herbal remedies, kareto therapy is suggested by the physician. To practice this method the kareto physician, as mentioned above, needed the experience of treating three non-Iranian (non-Ahuraian) patients on his records, then he was allowed to treat Ahuraian patients. According to some documents Thirita was the first physician to get permission to do such surgical work. Diseases subjected to surgery were broken bones. Surgical instruments were metals, knives, stones, and pieces of tree root. Moreover it is claimed the first caesarian section, which is the oldest surgery in human life, took place in Iran. Rust am, a mythical hero of Iran, was born by caesarian .Later on caesarian section found its way to Greece, and beyond; Julius Caesar was also born by this method, hence the name.[13]

2.5 Mantro-Bushe (sacred word therapy)

This remedy is used to treat patients suffering from mental illness. The physician cured his patient by uttering sacred mantras and the names of the saints. This therapy was applied to induce calmness in patients, which was seen as a predisposition for healing. The singing of prescribed religious hymns was also found to be useful in treating mental disease. Mantro therapy had a positive effect on the patient’s suppressed negative feelings, which in fact were often the cause of the disease. The calmness, or “spiritual sedation,” this treatment induced in the patients was reinforced by consoling words and sympathetic actions. By applying positive suggestions physicians attempted to remove any negative energy that might be afflicting the patient. These attempts used to return patients to health.

The processes of healing for this treatment is that patients first took a bath to gain the necessary personal cleanliness. Then the Mantro physician put plants such as frankincense and aloe wood into the fire, at the same time uttering sacred words; music was also played to preacher patients.[14]

2.6 The causes of disease

Medical knowledge, like all other disciplines, was in the beginning a part of philosophy and was based on the apparent problems in the world. Although in those days the physical causes of disease were not known, the close attention paid to material, spiritual, and environmental factors did have a positive impact on human health.

In the medical system of pre-Sassanid Iran, the specific causes of disease were seen as certain notions and superstitions. Diseases such as cholera and plague, for instance, was attributed to the anger of the gods. To appease these gods the people resorted to sacrifice. They believed that
physical diseases are sky disasters that descend to humans. But mental diseases were attributed to spirits, the various forms of devil, and ghost penetration into the body of patients through black magic and the evil eye. There were diseases whose origins were attributed to sins committed or to the patient insulting the sun. The ancient Iranian religion also emphasized blood impurity as a cause of disease, so physicians practiced blood-letting to purify the blood. In a different kind of causation, putrefied types of food was considered to be the origin of eye disease.[15] These pre-scientific ideas about disease causation survived until the Sassanid regime came to power.

In the Avesta the number of diseases mentioned is 99,999, but some other sources counted diseases in the tens of thousands. Gondeshapur Academy declared the number to be 4,333.[16] In the Sassanid period diseases were divided into physical and mental diseases, with further classification into various divisions. For example, physical diseases were classed as either common or deadly. People believed that good diseases are those that have apparent signs, while bad diseases are internal diseases that do not have such signs. Diseases like epilepsy and leprosy carried social stigma. Leprosy in particular was considered to be an ill-fated disease, and vitiligo (leukoderma) was attributed to bile overcoming the blood. Patients with these conditions were isolated from the rest of community during the course of their illness.[17]

### 2.7 Traditional medical laws

Every medical system possesses its own laws and regulations. This is the case for the medical system of ancient Iran. Medical nomenclature indicated much about society. Persons who were concerned with health and hygiene were called Drostbod (honest), and those who engaged in disease history and statistics were called Atrvan (keepers of medical records). Hygienic observance of fire, earth, and agricultural products was the duty of the rulers. Medical professions in ancient Iran were restricted to the higher social classes such as the magi and the aristocrats—social classes in ancient Iran ranged from aristocrats and magi to soldiers, peasants, and craftsman. Other conditions required for medical practice were the candidate’s interest, good memory, good moral character, and faithfulness.

Physicians were subject to rules about wearing clean clothes, possessing a swift horse to travel to nearby villages, providing drugs and medical equipment, and owning enough wealth. Medical law expected physicians not to work for money alone, but they were to perform their duty and remove pain and suffering from patients. The physician’s fee depended on the intensity of the disease, his reputation, and the social status, wealth, and property of the patients. Fees could be paid by a gift of animals such as cows, horses and cocks. But the Mantro physician’s fee was his patients praying for him. Another remarkable point was that the fee and treatment of women was less than that for men. According to medical law no physician was allowed to practice in his native place and the place he did his medical training, but instead he was suppose to be a peddler and move from one place to another. The equipment peddler physicians had to carry were the Haoma plant, a bow, drugs and a whip for the punishment of patients who did not observe hygienic and religious rules.[18]

The law placed special emphasis on Taking care and treatment of sick dogs is advised in the Avesta because the dog was considered a sacred animal. This duty assigned to dog owners.[19]

### 2.8 Preventive medicine

In ancient Iran at times of epidemics of diseases like plague, cholera, and smallpox, suffering patients were kept in isolation from the community for nine days and nights. This isolation process was called Bershnoom, during which time patients wore white garments and ate a diet supervised by the physician. The patients deprived from group eating (commensally) and were abandonment and at the same time fragrant plants like wild rue were burned to fumigate the surroundings and prevent the spread of the disease; certain rituals were also performed. During the Bershnoom the patient had to bathe three times each day and pray; observing this...
procedure led to the patient’s purification and was followed under the direction of the magus.

Another way of preventing the spread of disease was elimination of harmful insects and keeping in order the four natural elements, as mentioned earlier. This preventive process, locally called Ugdasergry, was advised by Ahura Mazda in the Avesta. This behavior resulted in environmental cleanliness and contained the spread of disease. Beside such physical preventive methods, purification of the soul also helped to contain disease.[20]

The role of sunlight in the cleansing of materials and environment in ancient Iranian philosophy is of the utmost importance. In Yashat (little Avesta), the holy book of ancient Iran, it is mentioned that the sun shines over the Iranian people, so their surroundings are clean. Ancient Iranian religion advises people not to carry dead bodies to the Tower of Silence (a circular building where Zoroastrians laid the body of their dead) at night because the lack of sun would help to spread the disease.

Another preventive custom was that people did not burn rubbish and waste material because they did not wish to pollute the environment. They would instead collect waste materials and dump them in a pit, with a small hole that gave access to the outside air to allow gases and smells to escape. One of the hygienic customs of ancient Iran, still practiced today, is Khanehtakani (housecleaning), at the end of each year (Nowrooz). In this custom a house and its all materials were washed and made clean. This was also considered a preventive to the spread of disease. The result of these attempts was preventive enterprises of diseases expansions.

3 Conclusion

The traditional medical systems of ancient Iran developed in a society where medical matters were seen as existing in the same sphere as religion, so that these two cannot be studied separately. The original Iranian (Aryan) religion was nature-worship, but later on Zoroastrianism had a vast impact on the philosophical and medical system that had prevailed hitherto.

According to the Zoroastrian world-view, the universe is the scene of a struggle between Ahura Mazda (God) and Ahriman (Devil), and disease is the result of efforts of Angeraminoo (the aggressive spirit) to overcome Ahura Mazda.

In comparison with the other contemporary medical systems, the ancient Iranian system possessed fewer magical and superstitions aspects. Of course, magical and superstitions elements of diseases in the causation and methods of treatments are observed, for example the attribution of some diseases to the evil eye or individual sin. But as this article shows, the scientific aspect of this tradition was dominant over other aspects. This scientific orientation nevertheless exists within a holistic and dynamic scheme peculiar to cultures of those times.

The Iranian medical system was differentiated into several fields of specialization, and this system has its own laws and rules. The profession of physician possessed high social status and was only available to the upper classes of Iranian society.

Great emphasis was placed on personal hygiene in individuals and cleanliness of one’s environment. Keeping clean and ‘orderly’ the natural elements fire, air, water and earth in one’s immediate environment was regarded as a way of preventing the spread of disease. The observance of religious rites and attitudes contributed to this. By cultivating the appropriate personal characteristics, by doing good and observing the laws and rites of purification, each person helped in the battle between good and evil. So each Zoroastrian observed three principles in his life: good words, good thoughts, and good deeds.

References: