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NATIVE MEDICINE AND WAYS OF TREATMENT IN THE NORTHERN SUDAN*

By Ahmed Abdel Halim D.K.S.M.

INTRODUCTORY :

THE aim of this article, which is based upon personal experience as an eyewitness or upon first-hand information, is to throw some light on the native customs, beliefs and methods of treatment which were and are still carried out in most parts of the Sudan.

These methods if traced back, will be found mostly to be offshoots from methods used by ancient Egyptians and the Arabs who had invaded the Sudan.

Most of the medicines used are from plants and include roots, stems and fruits, very few minerals and still fewer objects from the animal world.

My description is an epitome of those forms of treatment and drugs prevalent among natives of Arab blood and whose minds are uninfluenced by the innovations of the modern medical world.

In the southern provinces of the Upper Nile and Equatoria and among the Nuba, medicine mostly lies in the hands of *kujurs*, who place themselves or who are placed by their people next to God ; and medicine in that part of the Sudan is based merely on superstitions about roots and other odd things.

For the sake of convenience I divide this article into three branches :

- (1) Medicine.
- (2) Midwifery and Gynaecology.
- (3) Surgery.

(1) MEDICINE :

This branch flourishes among *fikis* (native *hakims*—or *basirs*). The

*The interested reader is referred to the following three notes all of which are to be found in the third report (1908) of the Wellcome Research Laboratories.

NATIVE MEDICAL AND SURGICAL METHODS OF THE DERVISHES—by Hassan Effendi Zaki, with notes by R. von Slatin Pasha.

NATIVE MEDICAL AND SURGICAL METHODS IN KASSALA—by L. Bousfield.

NATIVE MEDICAL AND SURGICAL METHODS IN KORDOFAN—by R. G. Anderson.

A copy of the above report is obtainable from the Civil Secretary's Library—Ed.

ruptures beyond putting leaves of the dom palm (*hangūg*) to either side of the wound and tying their ends together. Sepsis is not understood. Many fatalities, both of child and mother, occur during and after labour, though modern methods, spreading through the Omdurman Midwifery School, are gradually improving the situation. There is a superstitious belief in a certain imported plant *kaff miriam* (*Vitex agnus castus*) the "chaste tree." They soak this in a glass of water and if it spreads widely there is good hope that birth will be normal; but if it remains as it was then there is little or no hope. Its juice is used as a lubricant to the abdomen and the rest of the body during pregnancy, and is often used in difficult labour.

(2) ABORTIONS:

No treatment is known and many deaths occur as the result of bleeding and infection. The cause of abortion is superstitiously believed to be due to the cry of an owl by night when heard by the pregnant woman, or else to the *um el subyan* or *garīna* (a kind of "double" or familiar wraith). Treatment is by amulets and incantations, and they also give a decoction of *sheeh* and *haza* through the mouth, as these drugs are believed to stop bleeding. When children die during the first week, the *garīna* is also suspected. I once saw a curious form of treatment: a small piece was cut from the child's ear and given in a piece of bread to the mother to swallow. The child, if ailing, must be carried by an old woman who begs in the streets in the name of the child, and the money collected pays for a shirt, which the child wears.

(3) There are several ways of causing abortion:—

(a) The woman takes some *mulukhia* seeds (Jews mallow) with water.

(b) She applies as a tampon the milk of the 'ushar tree (*Calotropis Procera*).

(4) STERILITY:

When there are no children at all the woman is told to wear a foreign coin, sometimes together with fishbones and *sunt* pods; or

she makes a few superficial incisions over the leg and pays a visit to a woman who has recently given birth to a child. This custom is very widely spread. When a woman becomes sterile after bearing one child her condition is considered as due to *kabsa*, which means that she was visited during labour by a sterile woman wearing a foreign coin or fishbones. To negative this she must adopt the ordinary procedure for a sterile woman. If all these efforts fail then a *fiki* must be consulted. A useful prescription taken by all sterile women is the following; a mixture of *hamarēb*, *harḡal*, *helba* and dates is boiled and about two *rotls* of water added. This mixture is put in a jar and the woman drinks from it for about two weeks, starting from the end of her monthly period. To cause sterility a woman is told to swallow the seeds of *Ricinus Communis*; the usual dose is three to five seeds but the woman takes a number of seeds equal to the years she wants fertilization stopped.

VARIOUS:

(1) SCORPION BITE.

The site is cut and somebody sucks the area of the sting. Some prefer the *haḡāma* (wet cupping) and others a certain root called *'irg el 'agrab* (*Aristolochia Bracteata*), charred and rubbed over the bite. Scrapings from Rhino's horn (if obtainable) is given in milk or water followed by drinking hot strong tea.

(2) SNAKE BITE.

This is always considered as fatal. Superstitious remedies are sometimes tried, of which the following is an example: The patient is told to wear round his wrist a bundle of red silk threads, with a fish bone and a green or blue stone (this collection is called *ḡartig* and is like that put on by brides and bride-grooms, or used in cases of circumcision and women in labour); people then try, by doing something to amuse him, to prevent the patient falling asleep. Sometimes they have a *dilūka* and girls dance in front of him. Falling asleep will cause the patient's blindness or even death. At the same time the site is cauterized by a special *'irg-el-dabib*. In both scorpion and snake bites a tourniquet is often applied.

WHITLOWS and abscesses under the nail are treated by putting the finger into the shell of a roasted onion or into the gall bladder of a sheep.

BOILS are treated by applying a piece of hot onion or by a paste of *helba* and water.

DISEASES OF THE EYE.

(1) Conjunctivitis. They apply black antimony, either alone or with white barley sugar, to the lids. Pure honey is dropped into the eyes.

(2) Corneal Ulcers. *Rashad* seeds are put into the eye, or scrapings from the back of a pan used for making *kisra* are used as a powder to the eye, or powdered *habbat el 'en* (*Casia Absus*) is put in.

(3) Swelling of lids and Blephritis. They get a type of very soft red stone (*maghar*) which is dug from the ground and easily dissolves in water. This is applied over both lids. This stone is only found in Omdurman as far as I can discover.

(4) Cataracts are only operated on by Fellata and the operation is called *tashlig*.

The above descriptions are the result of experience in Kordofan, Omdurman and on the river, and though there naturally are local variations, the majority of the specifics mentioned are widely practised over the northern Sudan.

A NOTE ON THE MIGRATION OF THE MESSIRIA TRIBE INTO SOUTH WEST KORDOFAN.

By K.D.D. Henderson.

A. BAGGARA COUNTRY.

THE Baggari is an Arab who has been forced by circumstances to live in a country which will support the cow but not the camel. He treats his bull just as he treated his camel, and so differs from other cattle owning peoples in Africa.

The physical conditions upon which his existence depends are, briefly, a dry district for grazing and cultivation in the rainy season connected by a series of waterholes with a river system where grass and water are available during the summer months.

These conditions obtain between the ninth and the thirteenth parallel from 20° to 30° east. The Baggara developed their peculiar mode of life in the western part of this area north of the Shari River,¹ and parties of them moved eastward until they carried it into the rather different surroundings of the Nuba Mountains.

The centre of dispersal through this eastern area was the district of El Muglad, the headquarters today of the Red Messiria, or Homr.

The Muglad is an island of well drained porous soil lying north of the Wadi El Ghalla and surrounded on three sides by the tributary Khor El Hagiz. It is the key to Dar Homr. In it occurred the struggle between Arab and Shatt and between the rival sections of the Messiria, and the loss of it drove the Zurg into years of precarious existence along the fringe of the camel country until they finally acquired for themselves an inadequate "dar" between the Wadi Shelengo and the western edge of the Nuba Mountains.

It consists in a series of broad pans with pools and clumps of

(1) The Seleim seem to have developed independently east of the Nuba hills, but the other Baggara on the White Nile (Gimma, Dar Muharib and Shenkhab) came from the west by a northern route which they have forgotten and to which I have as yet been able to find no clue in the western histories or traditions. They do not dress or talk like the western Baggara.