

The role of medical anthropology in understanding the representations of health and disease

دور الأنثروبولوجيا الطبية في فهم تمثيلات الصحة والمرض

PhD. Massika MERRADI *¹,

¹ Facilitated Algerian Encyclopaedia Laboratory, University of Batna-1- (Algeria),

merradimassika@gmail.com

Received: 31/03/2023

Accepted: 10/11/2025

Published: 12/12/2025

Abstract:

Health and disease are phenomena that have received great attention from doctors and wise men since ancient times in an effort to preserve the first and address the second. These phenomena have not remained with doctors but have moved to anthropologists to try to understand the various structures that form around these phenomena in societies through customs, traditions, beliefs, religion, and rituals.

Our paper aims to shed light on the role of medical anthropology in understanding representations of health and disease. We defined some concepts related to the subject, then touched on the genesis and evolution of medical anthropology, health, and disease through social customs, popular beliefs, religion and rituals, and cultural values.

Keywords: Medical anthropology; Health; Disease; Folk medicine; Society.

* Massika MERRADI

1. INTRODUCTION

Health and disease are important issues that have recently received considerable attention from medical anthropologists, which have a strong relationship with the values and cultural patterns prevailing in a given society, varying from one culture to another or from one geographical region to another depending on the prevailing thinking and social construction of that region or society. Interest in these subjects increased at the beginning of the twentieth century, and anthropologists valued the medical and health field and linked it to cultural values, popular practices, and customs, including religion and rituals, which illustrate the aspects of health and disease in different cultures.

According to studies by anthropologists such as Rivers (medicine, magic, religion) Health and Disease, there is a correlation between cultural patterns, knowledge, and popular beliefs and health and disease that has a multifaceted effect on each of the world's different peoples, especially in rural areas where these effects are more evident than in urban areas. Patients may prefer popular treatments for their condition and not go to a doctor even if the conditions for health treatment are met.

In this intervention, we will discuss the role of medical anthropology in understanding the representations of health and disease. s health and disease issues and all the problems that result from them in society. Then, to try to understand the representations of health and disease in society and their relationship with different cultures, which are a fundamental reason for differing concepts according to the culture of one of the world's peoples. It raises the following question: What is the role of medical anthropology in understanding representations of health and disease?

2. Define concepts

2.1 Medical anthropology

Medical anthropology is defined as: « *The way or manner in which people in different*

social and cultural groups explain the causes of disease, the types of healing, the treatment patterns in which they believe, and who the therapists will turn to. It is also concerned with examining how these beliefs and practices relate to biological changes in human beings in the case of health and disease ».

We can generally say that we « *Study cultural beliefs and social practices associated with the source, understanding, and management of health and disease. It addresses not only topics specific to understanding the vernacular or popular causes of the disease but also the most globally widespread formal health-care systems such as self-medicine, people's therapists, schmanis, generators, midwives, and alternative medicine practitioners, as well as medical professionals based on Western science, as well as topics related to different cultural perspectives on health and disease. as well as shared beliefs, images, and practices associated with human body recognition* ». (Ben Arous, 2014-2015, p27-28).

It can be defined as « *A comparative study of culture and its impact on disease and care* ». Awareness of the role and impact on health and disease issues, such as the origin and development of the disease, its spatial or geographical spread, the means and methods on which societies rely to confront it, the appropriate ways of disseminating modern medicine in traditional societies, and how to improve and develop it. (Zerga, 2018, p133).

2.2 Folk medicine

Definition: « *The set of beliefs and knowledge practiced by members of society that are inherited from generation to generation. This knowledge comes from the framework of popular culture, and any member of society can practice these therapeutic methods; that is, it is general medicine. It can also resort to the experienced in this treatment* ». (Hussein, 2018, p160).

Folk medicine is « *An ancient phenomenon rooted in the depths of human history, a field where religious and cultural reference overlaps, which has enhanced its continuity and*

circulation by different social segments that differ in terms of their level of education, class, occupational status, and other variables. These variables may affect the social representations of the nature of the disease in terms of its concept, causes, and implications, and thus the therapeutic path adopted by the patient or his family in how to prevent or treat». (Chine, 2014-2015, p08).

Perhaps the importance of studying folk medicine is that it « *helps to understand one aspect of the prevailing cultural aspects of society, which is the aspect of disease and methods of popular treatment, and that this concept is linked to other social and cultural harmony such as ecology, magic, religion, and social control, which helps to better understand the nature of the social structure of the society in question* ». (Hussein, 2018, p160).

Its importance is also that it « *Is an integral part of mainstream culture and cannot be seen as sporadic and scattered models of inexplicable and inexplicable behaviors but rather must be viewed, in the words of Revers, as a set of elements that constitute a self-contained social order worth studying and researching as any other social system or cultural format* ». (Chine, 2014-2015, p09).

2.3 Health

Perkinz defined it as « *The state of balance between the functions of the body. This balance results from the adaptation of the body to the harmful factors to which it is constantly exposed. He also emphasized that the adaptation of the body to harmful factors is an ongoing positive process by different body forces to maintain the state of balance (health)* ».

The scientist Winslow defined health as « *The science and art of disease prevention, prolongation of life, and promotion of health and adequacy, through structured community efforts to: improve environmental health, combat infectious diseases, teach individuals*

personal health, organize medical and nursing services to work on early diagnosis and preventive treatment of diseases, develop social and living life, and finally add mental health services».

The scientist Newman also developed another definition of health « *It is a state of relative balance of the body's functions, and this state of balance results from the adaptation of the body to the harmful factors to which it is exposed* ». (Ben Arous, 2014-2015, p228-229).

The World Health Organization (WHO) defined it as « *A state of physical, mental, and social perfection, not merely the absence of disease and vulnerability. Health is a positive concept that focuses on social and personal resources as well as the physical abilities of the human being. A healthy lifestyle provides a means for an individual to live an integrated life* ».

Recently, researchers have defined health as « *The body's ability to adapt to new threats and risks that it can face, based on the fact that modern science has significantly increased human awareness of diseases and how they have occurred over the past decades* ». (Hacini et Meddah, 2021, p410).

We note that the concept of health is centered around an individual's ability to perform his or her multiple functions and thus to face all the obstacles or problems that threaten this ability, whether they come from within the individual himself or herself, i.e., through internal processes that take place within him or her as a living object, or from his or her contact with one or more of the environments that surround him or her (the natural environment or the social environment). (Ben Arous, 2014-2015, p230).

2.3 Disease

There are those who define the disease as « *The situation where there is an imbalance, either organically or mentally or socially, of the individual, which would impede the ability of the individual to meet the first needs for proper functioning* ». In the case of the disease,

there is an imbalance in one of the factors of physical, mental, and psychological health that leads to disorders showing some symptoms of the disease, and the disease is an evolving process from the beginning of the cause until the onset of complications.

This development may be acute and rapid, or it may be slow and chronic, and the disease may also be general, affecting more than one organ, or localised, limited to the injury of one organ or part of the patient's organ. The disease is thus reducing an individual's natural ability to fulfil his or her obligations towards family and community and increasing psychological problems such as stress, fear, and anxiety. (Ben Arous, 2014-2015, p234-235).

3. Popular concept of health and disease

The concept of health and disease has recently received considerable attention in rural and urban areas. Some societies have three main reasons for the disease: « *Envy (evil eye), work (magic), and air (incomes of air currents in the body), and there are those who add a fourth reason that is important in the occurrence of the disease in rural people, namely, poor nutrition, poverty, thought (preoccupation), and divine devotion* ». Thus, folk medicine subjects overlap with magical beliefs in a situation that warrants behaviour and interpretation. (Al-Makaoui, 1991, p58).

The popular concept of health and disease also determines the type of health service to which human beings resort, the gravity or simplicity of the disease and how to treat it, and the extent to which others accept the condition as a disease. If there is itching, diarrhoea, or a high temperature, the family uses home therapeutic prescriptions without going to the doctor. According to popular belief, cold air causes a lot of pain in the heart, joints, kidneys, and bladder, so the air must be fully reserved, and for those pains to go away, can drink a glass of mint or boiling cumin without resorting to the official health service. (Al-Makaoui, 1991, p60).

Most societies view the body as a sacred thing that no one can touch, divided into

members, and each member has its main role: the heart is the seat of tenderness, love, and courage; the liver is associated with patriarchal emotions and motherhood; and the mind is the seat of intelligence, memory, and thinking. Each of these members is the subject of popular beliefs in different societies and has numerous representations. For example, if the left eyelid moves, it is said that it will meet an absent human being. If the right hand moves and scratches the cheeks, there will be grief for the family, and if we tell the right hand, we will spend some money.

According to the popular view, health is a state of balance between the physical, social, and mental aspects of the individual, according to Loyala. George Beau considers that health is the result of a balance between two opposing forces in the body in the form of energy and its distribution, which can cause disturbances in the body's organs due to the multiplication or decrease in them. Other societies, according to Loyal, know health by going to work and eating, whereas disease is a break from it and being away from God; it does not cause all diseases, but it has the power to make the individual sick, and it was once regarded as the punishment or indignation of God for his disobedient worshippers. (Rebai, 2016-2017, p21-22).

4. Emergence of medical anthropology

Medical anthropology was particularly prosperous after the Second World War for its contribution to the study of medical problems. There are studies on the description of mythical concepts, beliefs associated with health and disease, and practises in simple societies. This study has been a key focus of anthropological studies, including those by Evans Pritchard (1937), Rivers (1924), Clemoch, and Cowdell [the latter's study highlighted the importance of anthropology in the medical field and was a turning point where anthropologists and many social scientists engaged in health programmes, medical research, medical education, and other medical fields]. The remarkable development of anthropology

was from 1962–1982. (Zerga, 2018, p145).

Medical anthropology has emerged as one of the most important areas of life for theoretical and applied research in anthropological studies, attracting a number of topics related to life and death such as the study of health and disease across time and place, ranging from the realities and the creation of a particular disease to the building of the human body and its diseases to comparisons of diverse medical systems within cultures to alienating experiences. (Ben Arous, 2013, p70-71).

Anthropologists who studied sociocultural objectives noted that beliefs and practises related to health and disease in all societies are a major feature of the culture of these societies and are often associated with beliefs related to the source and cause of a large series of bad incidents that represent all personal misfortunes and conflicts between individuals. Natural disasters and other misfortunes are sometimes blamed on forces beyond nature, divine punishment, or hatred of witches and witchers.

The values and customs associated with the disease are also part of a broader culture and cannot, in fact, be studied in isolation from this culture. Nor can it be understood how people interact with patients, death, or other forms of misfortune without understanding the pattern of culture in which they grew up or the culture they acquired in the sense that it is the lens through which they realise and interpret the world. (Ben Arous, 2014-2015, p27-28).

Medical anthropology is based on studying the impact of culture on health and disease through:

- The contribution of culture to the industry of health, the individual's disease, and ways of preventing and treating diseases
- Culture determines the way the disease spreads and how to limit its spread.
- Culture strengthens individuals' convictions of the usefulness of modern medicine, thereby controlling the individual's response and the degree of interaction with modern medical

methods.

-Culture promotes the concept of disease and responds to it. What is considered satisfactory in one social culture may not be the same for another.

Given the breadth of topics in medical anthropology, which had been dispersed according to interests, the so-called "folk medicine, popular anatomy, folk biology, epidemiology, and public health" emerged. (Rahab, 2014, p176-177).

One of the most important characteristics of medical anthropology is:

-Affirms that health itself is a very political subject.

-Criticises the colonial legacy of anthropology and the trends of conventional medical anthropology to serve as an aid to biomedicine.

-Balance the interest in impartial social science with awareness of the emergence of social history and the political nature of scientific knowledge.

-Recognises the vital importance of class, race, and gender equality in determining and distributing health, disease, working conditions, and living and health care.

-Preventing the artificial emotions of small communities and local communities from their broad political and economic surroundings. (Ben Arous, 2013, p72-73).

5. Health and disease in medical anthropology

5.1 Social habits, health and disease

Anthropologists gather that customs « *Are behaviours or behaviours prepared by the social group that are correct and medically necessary because of their conformity with the existing cultural heritage* ». Social and individual customs are an area of great importance in which medical anthropology can contribute to the solution of many health problems.

Medical anthropological studies emphasise that social habits are linked to health and disease, and their role is to determine the quality of the treatment procedures and the quality of the health service to which the patient resorts -formal or informal- and sometimes social

habits may be against the idea of modern medical treatment or recourse because they link the disease to temporary conditions or see it as not dangerous. (Al-Makaoui, 1991, p42).

Popular habits may determine how the disease is advertised, interpreted, and treated. For example, if the disease is common and familiar, it can be predicted, and the patient presents himself to the doctor only if he wants to benefit from health services. But the more the disease varies, the harder it is to predict the case whenever the individual habits come out to social habits and resort to health services.

These habits determine the pattern of treatment and timing for resorting to health services, as well as habits related to the health of mothers and children in terms of nutrition, pregnancy, and lactation. The study of social habits in understanding health and disease representations emphasises the dominance of the idea of the need to obtain medication when visiting a doctor and the importance of positive or negative suggestions that the doctor communicates through his treatment of patients. (Rabhi et Houhou, 2017, p441).

Habits in their relations with health and disease have the function of determining the therapeutic methods to be followed, whether traditional therapeutic methods or formal health services. Through customs and traditions, an individual can determine the quality of the disease, see it temporarily disappear, and thus abandon formal treatment.

The customs and traditions of daily life vary from the countryside to the city according to the cultural context of each environment. And, by some habits, we find many individuals vulnerable to a lot of diseases, For example, children bathe in unhealthy water and ponds, which undoubtedly cause them a range of diseases, and some workers engage in work without using protective clothing and tools. Women also wash clothes and spend time in streams where humans and animals may emerge, and the seriousness of the disease varies according to the habit that causes it. (Rahab, 2014, 178-179).

5.2 Beliefs, health and disease

Popular beliefs are defined as « *A set of perceptions and intellectual thoughts that believe in their own health, which are unquestionable to those who believe them, as a legacy of children's devolution from fathers and grandparents, who continue to live their lives, and which, in popular conscience, still constitute an important amount of their culture towards that living life* ». (Sid Ahmed, 2014, p388).

Within their communities beliefs are a powerful *jus cogens* authority that influences people's lives in various aspects of life, especially with regard to health and disease. Beliefs clearly affect people's representations of health and disease, as well as their diagnosis of the disease, their explanation of its causes, and their choice of appropriate treatment methods. Some beliefs attribute the disease to the evil eye, others to the influence of gin, and others to magic.

There are still many simple societies in Africa, dominated by many traditional beliefs associated with religion and witchcraft, and the resulting behavioural patterns that appear in the form of rituals and customs in order to control cosmic phenomena and events, To also control disease, such rituals and practises have become part of these communities' cultural systems and are an important part of the way society deals with the risks and diseases it faces. (Hussein, 2019, p119).

Many anthropology researchers have conducted field studies to find out the relationship between popular beliefs, health, and disease, including the study of V. Maclean on a Nigerian body about magic medicine. The results of field research have shown that social beliefs have a significant impact on understanding the symptoms of the disease and explaining its causes, thus resorting to the official or people's health service.

If treatment or recovery fails, the beliefs are similar to the group's or the deplorable one to which the failure is attached. This is a major function performed by the belief in our cultural and social lives in terms of health, which is undoubtedly of great importance. We

may explain the failure of the treatment as the result of disobedience or the severance of the link between the wombs. (Rahab, 2014, p180).

Among them is the concept of disease and its representations and interpretations, which vary from one culture to another and within one culture from one rural group to another urban group to another nomadic group. As a result of a range of considerations, including popular beliefs about human existence, different creatures and their relationship to the universe and humans, natural and supernatural forces such as genes, wind, rivers, plants, and animals And man's vision of life, death, health, and disease, the beliefs that prevail in society, clearly influence the building of the behaviours of individuals in one culture regarding the explanation of the causes of disease and its occurrence and how to access treatment. (Al-Makaoui, 1991, p46).

5.3 Religion, rituals, health and disease

Ethnographic evidence shows the close relationship between religion and health and disease since ancient times. Human beings were aware of the relationship between religion and health, and the Greeks embodied their view of health through their religious practises, They visited shrines, for example, those of Olympia and Delphi, which symbolised their spiritual, social, and physiological existence.

Even in our Arab and Islamic environment at a point in our history, people believed that bringing health and expelling disease would be accomplished by approaching parents, establishing visiting rituals for their sacrifices, offering offerings to them, asking for healing for their patients, or for those who were desperate to have children and spouses to marry. (Rahab, 2014, p180).

Belief in parents and recourse to shrines remain important religious sources. In most parts of the world -to explain the causes of the disease and provide therapeutic solutions. The patient sometimes falls short of the guardian or because of his objection to his mandate.

The belief also provides an explanation for human incidents, such as the 1963 earthquake in Skopje, Yugoslavia. (Al-Makaoui, 1991, p53-54).

As for rituals, each society has its own culture and rituals related to health and disease, and human beings often perform these rituals to preserve the health aspects of the individual's life and group, such as isolating the patient in some cultures so as not to spread the infection or establishing a special place for the mentally ill to heal. Some rituals also contribute to providing healthy and clean environments that reduce the incidence of the disease. (Rahab, 2014, p181).

In fact, religion plays an essential role in health care and access to health services, including providing orders and nuclei that stimulate hygiene, spiritual and physical purity, acceleration of healing, and the belief that every disease has medication, sanitation by thinking, and management, including the prevention of physical, psychological, and neurological diseases. (Rabhi et Houhou, 2017, p441).

5.4 Cultural values, health and disease

Cultural values are defined as « A set of perceptions that define what is desirable, which are fundamental realities of great importance in social construction. Values are an abstract and general principle of behaviour towards which members of the group feel a strong emotional connection and provide them with a level of judgement on special actions and objectives ». (Al-Makaoui, 1991, p55).

Culture is interested in studying the relationship between culture, health, disease, prevention, and treatment and thus highlights other aspects of this relationship, namely the importance of culture in identifying, interpreting, and treating patterns of disease. The nature of interaction with formal health services is one reason why anthropologists are interested in studying the relationship between cultural values and health practises, They study the rituals of birth, sickness, and death; they believe in the preventive function of rituals; The impact of

values on health and the cultural importance of food habits and health outcomes resulting from cultural change are studied, and these studies seek to shape the relationship between social construction and culture and provide them to doctors to inform them of the efficient performance of the health service. (Al-Makaoui, 1991, p39).

Prevailing cultural values in society affect individuals' health. For example, the prohibition of eating certain foods that cause undernutrition, such as those urging the prohibition of eating beef in India, results in a lack of protein and causes anaemia. Cultural values dominate health and disease in terms of their impact on food choice, type, and treatment requirements for the traditional environment, determining the method of complaining about the disease, and the method of responding to treatment, such as preventing women from going to the doctor in some societies because he is a man who should not be exposed to it, and preference for treatment in a doctor without considering each other's experience and skill. (Rabhi et Houhou, 2017, p442-443).

6. CONCLUSION

Anthropological studies and research show that there is a difference between cultures and societies that leads to different representations of health and disease, both in rural and urban areas. Individuals interpret health and disease according to the cultural pattern with which they grew up in that region or society, and thus different approaches and therapeutic methods are adopted, whether popular or modern.

Health and disease have different representations according to the customs and traditions prevalent in each society and according to popular beliefs that have an important impact on understanding these issues, as well as their relationship with religion, rituals, and cultural practises that have a bearing on understanding the symptoms of the disease, trying to explain its causes, and seeking appropriate remedial methods.

Through the foregoing, medical anthropology has been shown to play a role in

understanding the representations of health and disease by identifying the cultural pattern of popular beliefs, customs, traditions, religion, and ritualistic practises, the social construction of each society, the determination of the causes of disease, and treatment to preserve individuals' public health.

Suggestions :

- Give attention to the social and human sciences for the continued effectiveness of studies and research on health and disease as the most prevalent issues in modern times in terms of scientific research.
- Encouraging field research in the field of anthropology as one of the most important branches to study the format
- Cultures of societies and understanding of the representations of health and disease and their different cultures in different regions of the world.

7. Bibliography List :

1. Books :

-**Al-Makaoui, A.** (1991). *Medical Anthropology: Theoretical Studies and Field Research*, Dar al-Nasr, Cairo.

2. Theses:

-**Ben Arous, H.** *Alternative Medicine in Algerian Society Between Folk Medicine and Modern Medicine: A Field Study in Algiers*, Doctoral Thesis, Department of Sociology and Demography, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Algeria2 -Abu Al Qasim Saad Allah-, Algeria, 2014-2015.

-**Chine, S.** *Social Perceptions of Popular Medicine: A Field Study in Ziban Region*, Doctoral Thesis, Department of Social Sciences, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mohamed Khider University (Biskra), Algeria, 2014-2015.

-**Rebai, M.** *The role of characteristics and characteristics of personality (simplicity*

and introversion) and coordinated values in patients' adoption of natural folk treatments (eating herbs and accompanying methods), Doctoral Thesis, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Algiria2 -Abu Al Qasim Saad Allah-, Algeria, 2016-2017.

3. Journal article :

-**Zerga, D.** (2018), *Health and Disease Anthropology*, Meton Journal, Tahar Moulay University of Saida (Algeria), Vol. 11, Issue 03.

-**Hussein, M.G.** (2018). *Health and Disease in Ugandan Society: A Field Anthropological Vision*, Anthropology Journal, Faailoon For research in Anthropology and human and social sciences (Algeria), Vol. 04, Issue 02.

-**Hacini, Z., Meddah, L.** (2021). *The Ingredients of Hospital Medical Tourism in Algeria*, Strategy and Development Journal, Abdelhamid Ibn Badis University of Mostaganem (Algeria), Vol. 11, Issue 04.

-**Ben Arous, H.** (2013). *Medical Anthropology and its Role in Health and Disease*, Social Studies Journal, Elbassira Center for Research, Consulting and Learning Services, Algiers (Algeria), Vol. 05, Issue 03.

-**Rahab, M.** (2014). *Health and Disease and Their Relationship with the Cultural Structure of Society: Close from the Perspective of Medical Anthropology*, Researcher in Humanities and Social Sciences Journal, Kasdi Merbah University of Ouargla (Algeria), Vol. 06, Issue 15.

-**Rabhi, I., Houhou, A.** (2017). *The effectiveness of medical anthropology in understanding health and disease-such as popular models*, Social Change Journal, Mohamed Khider University of Biskra (Algeria), Vol. 02, Issue 04.

-**Sid Ahmed, A.Kh.** (2014). *Impact of Popular Beliefs in the Socialisation of Children: The Eastern Governorate Model*, Meton journal, Tahar Moulay University of Saida

(Algeria), Vol. 07, Issue 01.

-Hussein, M.G. (2019). *Culture and its Health Implications in Uganda: A Field Study in Medical Anthropology*, Meton Journal, Tahar Moulay University of Saida (Algeria), Vol. 12, Issue 02.