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Alternative medicine in the city of Bir El Ater through oral tradition

الطب البديل في مدينة بئر العاتر من خلال الرواية الشفوية

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Abstract:

This study explores traditional and alternative medicine in the city of Bir El Ater, relying primarily on oral narratives as a source of information, highlights the widespread use of natural remedies within the local community, especially in cases where modern medicine fails to treat chronic diseases, It presents various traditional healing methods still practiced today, such as herbal treatments, honey and black seed therapy, cupping, cauterization, bloodletting, bone setting, and massage.

The paper also documents notable local practitioners and details the techniques, tools, and health benefits of these treatments as transmitted through generations, Furthermore, it traces the historical roots of herbal medicine in Arab culture since the early Islamic period, Ultimately, the study emphasizes that traditional medicine in Bir El Ater remains a living cultural heritage, reflecting the deep connection between humans, nature, and ancestral knowledge.

Keywords:

Alternative medicine, Traditional medicine, Bir El Ater, Oral narratives, Medicinal herbs, Cupping therapy, Bloodletting.

• الملخص:

يتناول هذا البحث موضوع الطب البديل في مدينة بئر العاتر، مستندا إلى الرواية الشفوية كمصدر أساسي للتوثيق، يوضح انتشار هذا النوع من العلاج في المجتمع المحلي، خصوصا في ظل عجز الطب الحديث أحيانا عن معالجة بعض الأمراض المزمنة، ويُبرز العمل بالأساليب التقليدية التي ما زالت متجذّرة في الممارسة اليومية للسكان، مثل التداوي بالأعشاب، والعلاج بالعسل والحبة السوداء، والحجامة، والكي، والفصد، وجبر العظام، والمسد (التدليك).

كما يعرض البحث نماذج محلية من الممارسين المشهورين في المدينة، ويصف بدقة طرق العلاج وأدواتها وشروطها وموانعها، مع بيان فائدتها الصحية حسب ما تناقله الناس جيلا بعد جيل، ويخصص جزءا لشرح دور النباتات الطبية في العلاج الشعبي، مبيّنا الجذور التاريخية لاستعمالها عند العرب منذ العصور الإسلامية الأولى، ويختتم بإبراز استمرار الطب التقليدي في بئر العاتر رغم التطور العلمي، بوصفه إرثا ثقافيا يعكس علاقة الإنسان بالبيئة والموروث الشعبي.

كلمات مفتاحية: الطب البديل، الطب التقليدي، بئر العاتر، الرواية الشفوية، الأعشاب الطبية، الحجامة.

• Introduction

At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, a powerful and sweeping wave swept across the entire world, calling for a return to the food and medicine provided by nature itself. Herbal medicine stands at the forefront of these aspirations and demands, both locally and globally, due to its healing properties, which have been recognized for thousands of years.

Algerian society was no exception, as it turned to alternative medicine through the use of herbs and a strong resurgence of cupping, bone setting, and the treatment of night sweats, among other practices. We have observed an increase in the number of shops selling herbs for medicinal purposes, as well as the emergence of practitioners who specialize in treatment using mixtures of various herbs prepared according to the diagnosis of the illness and in balanced proportions.

The city of Bir El Ater has followed this trend, and many figures who practiced traditional medicine have emerged there; their reputations still resonate in the minds of the city's residents to this day, foremost among them "Omar bin Muhammad Abidi al-Suleimani," Alternative medicine continues to be practiced to this day, with both men and women engaging in it. Among the most famous practitioners today, to name just a few, are "Ammar Khatou," known as Al-Khad, and "Jamila Hweishi."

1What Is Alternative Medicine:

The use of alternative medicine, traditional medicine, or what is sometimes referred to as prophetic medicine is increasing among the general public—both men and women—especially as people age, as well as among those suffering from chronic diseases. This is due to the inability of modern medicine to treat many chronic conditions, such as diabetes and certain other diseases. Hence, it is necessary to address the concept of alternative medicine.

Alternative medicine can be defined as any therapeutic method that does not use drugs or manufactured chemical medications to treat diseases. The term "alternative medicine" is a modern designation applied to the methods mentioned above, which are currently used in developed Western countries; however, it has been known since ancient times in most societies, including Arab society. Herbal remedies, cupping, cauterization, and moxibustion—are all methods that fall under the umbrella of what is known as alternative medicine[1].

2Alternative Medicine Treatments:

Traditional folk remedies have been passed down from parents and grandparents to their children without any study of the content and composition of the prescribed formulas or their impact on human health. Despite the widespread prevalence of alternative medicine among the populations of countries worldwide—whether developed or developing—and its extensive use across various social strata and groups, there is little evidence or proof of the effectiveness of many forms of this medicine, and they have not been thoroughly studied to determine whether they carry unexpected negative consequences or serious side effects. There are hundreds of alternative medicine treatment

[1] - Duha bint Mahmoud Naily—Alternative Medicine—King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology—Saudi Arabia—2007—p. 15.

methods; we will mention the most common ones used in Arab societies in general and in Algeria in particular:

- Herbal medicine.

- Treatment with honey and black seed.

- Cupping therapy.

- Moxibustion.

- Bone setting.

- Massage and acupressure.

2.1 Manual Spinal Adjustment:

The practitioner massages the spine to restore normal nerve function and relieve pain[2]‹. In the Bir al-Ater method, the therapist has the patient lie on their stomach and brings a wooden board locally known as a "qaima," Two brothers stand on either side of it after placing it horizontally across the back. Small stones are placed on top and gently broken with a small hammer. This process is repeated several times, after which the patient is healed[3]‹. The practitioner does not charge a fixed fee; rather, the patient is free to give whatever they wish, as this form of treatment is traditionally provided free of charge in exchange for a prayer asking for a reward.

2. 2Massage:

Massage can help relieve back pain. Studies show that the benefits of massage include increased alertness, reduced depression and anxiety, an increase in the number of natural killer cells within the immune system, lower levels of stress and anxiety hormones, and improved sleep[4] . This method is practiced in a simple way in the city of Bir al-Ater, where a woman who has given birth to twins performs the procedure. The patient comes to her early in the morning, and she massages the dislocated area with water or olive oil and realigns the muscle. The treatment lasts for three consecutive days[5] , and the practitioner does not charge a specific fee for her services.

As for infants, to help expel phlegm, the healer brings olive oil and thoroughly massages the front of the infant's neck. She then gives the infant a small amount of oil and gently inserts her index finger into the infant's throat to help expel the phlegm. At the same time, a few drops of onion juice are dripped into the infant's nose to help expel the mucus through sneezing. This process is repeated several times until the mucus is completely cleared. It is performed in the morning for three consecutive days, ensuring the infant's stomach is empty—that is, before feeding[6] .

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[2] - Debra Flogum Bruce; Harris McElroy—The Unofficial Guide to Alternative Medicine—Vol. 1—Jarir Bookstore—2001—p. 25.

[3]- Muhammad bin al-Sadiq Ali - In-person interview - December 15, 2022.

[4] - Debra Flogum Bruce; Harris McElroy—op. cit.—p. 25.

[5]- Bayah Ayada—In-person interview on December 10, 2022.

[6]- Eida Bada – Personal interview on December 14, 2022.

As for treating what is known as “back pain”—a condition affecting the back caused by falling, carrying excessive weight, or improper movement—the patient lies on their stomach, and the therapist begins massaging the calf muscle up and down while using water to facilitate friction. This is a painful process but very effective, according to those we interviewed who were completely cured. The procedure lasts no more than ten minutes and is performed three times in a row[7] .

2.3 Manual Spinal Adjustment:

With this method, practitioners focus on treating spinal bones believed to have shifted from their normal positions and lost their natural movement due to stress, injuries, or other causes. The doctor performs an adjustment of the bones or applies appropriate force in a precisely calculated direction to a joint that is restricted in movement or does not move properly. If doctors correct misalignments of the spinal bones through manual therapy, this form of treatment or adjustment is said to help restore the bones to a position or movement closer to their natural state, thereby aiding in pain relief and healing. This treatment is not performed in cases of bone fractures, infections, cancer, severe joint inflammation, or any other medical condition that contraindicates its use, particularly cervical injuries or problems[8] .

2.4 Bodywork:

Also known as manual therapy, this is a general term describing the manual techniques of massage, touch, and movement used to adjust the alignment of the spine, muscles, and joints to stimulate the flow of energy. It encompasses more than 80 different types and is considered a common form of alternative medicine. Although the therapist focuses their efforts on various muscles or trigger points in the body[9] , the ultimate goal is to affect the body as a whole. This method is used in Bir al-Ater for young children, especially infants, where the infant is placed on the masseuse’s legs and his body is rubbed with olive oil to begin the massage of all parts of the body while giving him a small amount of oil to swallow. Afterward, he is wrapped in a cloth or two and left to relax and sleep[10] .

Among its benefits are helping patients increase mucus expulsion, relaxing the back, shoulder, neck, and chest muscles to improve breathing efficiency, relieving headaches, jaw joint pain, sports injuries, alleviating symptoms of muscle spasms, and common chronic lower back pain[11].

2.5 Phlebotomy:

According to *Lisan al-Arab*, phlebotomy refers to the incision of a vein; to perform phlebotomy is to make an incision, and the result is a laceration or a cut. Phlebotomy of a camel involves incising its vein to draw blood for consumption. In *The Golden Treatise* by Dr. Muhammad Ali al-Bar, it is stated: “It is the draining of blood from the large veins,” and

[7]- Muhammad bin al-Sadiq Ali - Same source as above.
[8]- Debra Flogum Bruce; Harris McElroy—op. cit.—pp. 96, 97.
[9] - Ibid., p. 108.
[10]- Fatima Ayada, known as Eida—personal interview on December 15, 2022.
[11]- Debra Flogum Bruce; Harris McElroy—op. cit.—p. 106.

phlebotomy is used in specific medical conditions such as: polycythemia, and in cases of severe heart failure[12] . In the city of Bir al-Ater, it is called "al-tashlat" and is performed using a razor blade[13] .

2.5.1 Veins to be lanced:

Many of these include veins in the head, veins in the hands, veins in the legs, and veins in the arteries; the examiner tests the candidate's knowledge of these veins and the surrounding muscles and arteries. As for the common veins lanced in Bir al-Ater, these are the veins of the head located at the level of the forehead or at the level of the ears, to extract stagnant blood or relieve pressure; some muscles are also lanced.

2.5.2 Veins of the Head and Legs:

These include the vein on the forehead, which runs between the eyebrows; its lancing relieves heavy eyes and chronic headaches[14] . Another is the vein above the temple; its lancing relieves migraines and scalp sores. This method is widely used in folk medicine after applying a cloth to the area and using a scalpel to make an incision on the forehead or below the ears[15]

As for the veins of the legs, there are four of them, including the sciatic vein (the "sciatica"), which is lanced on the lateral side of the heel; if it is hidden, the branch between the little toe and the ring toe of the foot is lanced. The benefit of this is great, especially for gout and varicose veins[16] . This method is widely practiced in traditional medicine in the city of Bir El Ater (Tebessa), where the patient's affected leg is lanced and the blood is allowed to flow for a specific period; the procedure is performed in the morning. Sheikh Ammar Khatou, known as Ammar Al-Khad, is renowned for treating these conditions[17].

2.5.3 Conditions and Contraindications for Bloodletting:

There are several, including:

- A young child should not undergo bloodletting.

- An elderly person should not be treated.

- The blade must be sharp, and the practitioner must be knowledgeable about the locations of the veins.

- If the vein is thin, it should be treated lengthwise; if it is thick, it should be treated crosswise.

- If the treatment is for a vein on the head, forehead, or behind the ear, the neck must be wrapped with a cloth and the area massaged.

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[12]- Ibid., p. 104.
[13]- Author.
[14] -Debra Flogum Bruce; Harris McElroy—op. cit.—p. 110.
[15]- Lazhar Ayada – In-person interview on December 14, 2022.
[16]- Debra Flogum Bruce; Harris McElroy—op. cit.—p. 111.
[17] -Ammar Khatou—Personal interview on December 14, 2022.

- When performing a bloodletting on the knee, the bandage should be tightened around the thigh, and the patient should lie on their back with their legs raised.

- The sciatic vein should be lanced at the hip joint (thigh) and lanced lengthwise.

- The bowels must be cleansed before the bloodletting (the patient must be fasting).

- The bloodletting must be performed early in the morning[18] .

2.5.4 Foods and Medicinal Herbs to Consume After Bloodletting:

After the bloodletting procedure, due to the loss of significant amounts of blood, certain foods should be consumed, including:

- Lemon: One of the most powerful detoxifiers, it helps sterilize and cleanse wounds and promotes rapid healing.

- Honey: Taken as both food and medicine.

- Amber: Take three drops of it, diluted with olive oil or black seed oil, in a cup of hot milk, sweetened with honey, after bloodletting to strengthen the organs and nerves.

3. The Use of Medicinal Plants Among the Arabs:

The use of herbal medicines for treatment and healing among the Arabs began during the Umayyad Caliphate under Al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf al-Thaqafi, who had a personal physician named “Theodoks” (Theodoks), who wrote a book on the preparation of medicines from medicinal plants and their uses. Khalid ibn Yazid ibn Muawiya was passionate about medicine and herbal remedies, so he asked many scholars residing in Egypt to translate books written in Greek and Coptic into Arabic[19] .

Enthusiasts of medicinal herbs and folk remedies around the world have made strenuous efforts to uncover the truth and reveal the secrets of this type of treatment. Of course, there must be compelling reasons behind all this, and they are numerous; among them are the following:

- Many medical conditions make it difficult to use chemical drugs due to fears of worsening the patient’s condition and causing side effects.

- The need to make the most comprehensive use possible of medical resources, namely medicinal herbs and plants.

- The widespread use of medicinal herbs in both developed and developing countries alike.

- The existence of pioneering studies in many countries aimed at uncovering the secrets of using aromatic substances and medicinal plants to guide practitioners of traditional medicine using a scientific approach **[20]** .

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[18]- Debra Flogum Bruce; Harris McElroy—op. cit.—p. 112.

[19]- Abu al-Fida Muhammad Ezzat Muhammad Arif—The Secrets of Cupping and Bloodletting Therapy—Dar al-Fadila—Cairo, Egypt—2003—p. 8.

[20]- Faisal bin Muhammad Al-Iraqi—Herbs: A Cure for Every Illness—Vol. 1—(Dam.N)—(Dr.B.N)—(Dr.T.N)—pp. 13–16.

4. Examples of Traditional (Folk) Healing Methods in Bir El-Ater:

The city of Bir El Ater has preserved traditional healing methods passed down from parents to children. Despite advances in medicine and technology, these folk remedies remain widely practiced among the city's residents. Herbal shops have also proliferated here, as in other Algerian cities. We will attempt to highlight a few of these methods, as they are too numerous to list.

*Honey: - Applied topically to wounds and burns.

- Used as an eye ointment before bed.

- Used for chest ailments by mixing it with water or other substances and taken on an empty stomach in the morning.

- A remedy for hoarseness by adding water and salt and gargling with it.

- Treats the flu by taking a dose before bed.

- It is dripped into the affected ear after dissolving it in water [21] .

* Garlic: - It is used to treat colds, coughs, and the flu. Chopped garlic cloves are simmered with olive oil and eggs over low heat and served while still warm.

- Alopecia: Scrape the affected area with a sterilized blade until blood appears, then massage the area with crushed garlic that releases its juice. Repeat the process several times until new hair grows [22] .

- Instilled into the ear.

- Used to lower blood pressure by eating one or two fresh cloves .[23]

* Onions: Used for tumors after heating; apply to the swollen area several times until healed, as well as for bruises and contusions.

- Boils: Chop the onion, heat it in olive oil, apply as an ointment, bandage the area, and change the dressing daily while cleaning until the pus drains.

- Swollen fingers: Apply a poultice of heated onion to the affected fingers or toes before bed, then remove and wash.

- Ear and eye conditions: Instill onion juice morning and evening while cleaning the affected area.

- Colds, flu, and coughs: By eating or applying a poultice.

- Blood pressure: Eat fresh [24] .

* Chamomile (Anise): Locally known as "Larbian," it grows abundantly in the countryside of Bir El-Ater and is used for several ailments, including:

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[21]- This is what everyone I spoke with agreed on regarding the importance and benefits of raw honey.
[22]- The researcher.
[23]- A common practice in the city of Bir al-Ater involving the use of garlic for medicinal purposes.
[24]- People in the area avoid using it on Fridays.

- Relieving stomach pain by steeping it in water.

- Used for colic and diarrhea in children.

- Used for colds and respiratory tract infections.

* Dates (pitted): Mixed with ground juniper berries and olive oil after pitting, heated over low heat, and served to postpartum women every morning following the noble verse from Surah Maryam: "And shake the trunk of the palm tree toward you; it will drop upon you ripe dates."

* Figs: Soaked in olive oil for a specific period of time, they are taken in the morning on an empty stomach to treat chronic constipation in the elderly, as well as to treat laryngitis and bronchitis [25].

* Henna: A paste made from powdered henna leaves is applied topically to disinfect wounds and sores on the hands and feet. Other herbs, such as karshun (a local name), may be added to it. The paste is secured with linen bandages before bedtime and removed in the morning with warm water. It is also applied as a powder to the anus of young children to treat inflammation caused by diarrhea. Henna is also applied to women's hair to treat weak hair and dandruff.

* Colocynth: Locally known as al-hadj, it is abundant in the Bir al-Ater desert, which is called al-salb. It is beneficial for treating joint pain after heating it and applying it to the affected area, as well as for treating constipation and hemorrhoids by ingesting part of the seed.

* Fenugreek: It is used by applying it to boils after grinding, as it draws out pus. It treats diarrhea by swallowing it with water in pill form.

* Pomegranate peel: The pomegranate peel is dried and usually pounded in a mortar, then sifted and swallowed with a little water to treat stomach ailments.

* Al-Jibira: A mixture of various herbs (wormwood, dandelion, henna, capar, etc.) combined with chopped onion, mixed with rose water, and applied to the head; it absorbs body heat and relieves fever and headaches [26].

• Conclusion:

From the foregoing, it is clear that alternative medicine in the city of Bir al-Ater constitutes an integral part of the folk heritage that the inhabitants have preserved across generations, as a collective experience that has accumulated extensive knowledge about natural remedies and traditional healing methods. Oral tradition has proven to be a rich source that documents these practices and helps us understand the close relationship between humans, their environment, and nature.

The fact that these therapeutic methods have persisted to this day, despite the significant advancements in modern medicine, reflects the local community's confidence in the effectiveness of traditional medicine and in its humanistic and cultural value. Alternative medicine is not merely

[25]- Jamila Hawishi—Phone call on December 14, 2022—In addition to in-person interviews with several residents of Bir al-Ater who share these concerns.

[26]- Hafsiya Ayada – In-person interview on December 14, 2022.

a therapeutic tool; it is also a mirror reflecting a system of values and social relationships, and an expression of a cultural identity deeply rooted in the collective consciousness.

Therefore, documenting these practices and preserving them from extinction is a scientific and cultural necessity that will contribute to enriching anthropological and medical studies and open new horizons for the integration of traditional and modern medicine, thereby ensuring that this health heritage is harnessed to serve humanity and society.

Recommendations:

1- Establish national research centers dedicated to studying traditional medicine and medicinal plants in Algeria and the Arab world from scientific, pharmaceutical, and historical perspectives.

2- Coordinate efforts between universities and the Ministry of Health to develop a legal framework regulating the practice of traditional medicine and preventing commercial exploitation or the indiscriminate use of remedies.

3- Integrate folk knowledge into university curricula specializing in pharmacy, anthropology, and medical history to raise awareness of the national health heritage.

4- Collect and classify local medicinal plants according to precise scientific standards, while compiling a national encyclopedia of Algerian and Arab medicinal plants.

5- Encouraging laboratory-based scientific research to demonstrate the efficacy of active compounds in traditionally used herbs and linking them to modern medical applications.

6- Organizing training courses for herbalists and traditional healers to enhance their skills and educate them about the risks of misusing certain herbs.

7- Work to document oral medical heritage before it disappears, through field interviews with traditional healers and elders in various regions.

8- Raise community awareness of the need to consult doctors before using any traditional remedy, to avoid complications or dangerous drug interactions.

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