The history of magic medicine in ancient Iran

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ABSTRACT: Ancient Iran medical science, like astrology, has had an ethnic origin but with some effects from Babylonian science and civilization. Kassi, Med, and Parsi peoples of Iran have been influenced by the Mesopotamia culture through the magic the magic class. The medical methods were based on two schools; one is the way of worship and the other is medication. The former was sorcery school and the latter was scientific school. For the first, the believed that people became sick from doing a sin and they had to resort to gods to make the evils far; therefore, the ancient medicine was considered to be a magical-religious phenomenon. The magicians were the physicians who were in religious dress. They were assumed to make the evils far from the sick people through worship, and magical practices. Then, they identified the basis of disease through sorcery and horoscopy; they gave anti-evil drugs to the patients or accompanied the patient by talisman. Iranian magicians played an important role in the history of religion and knowledge, government and mysticism of east and west people. Magicians were a native clan in Iran, neither Aryan nor Semi, who were considered to be the priest and forecaster of Med nation.

Keywords: medicine, ancient Iran, magicians, medication school, worship school.

INTRODUCTION

Magician clan was one of the six clans constituting Aryan nation of Med. They undertook the duty of doing religious rites. Five other Med clans, Bousian, Partakenian, Erizantian, Estrokhatian, and Boudian followed the magicians. (Diakonov, 2001)

Magician king was feature among the magician clan which remained in their clan inherently. The priests were of particular importance in Med court while they were sometimes involved in political and governing affairs using their influence on the king. (Razi, 2005).

In 2000 B.C., there was a change in the history of Iran and a cult of priests emerged that knew many secrets, learned horoscopy and predicted the future from motifs and slaughtered animals, fire and gems. They foresaw the events from spring streams and plant forms. (Golsorkhi, 1998)

Etymology of magician

The word magic meant the association of singers who were called whisperers based on the social norms of that age. They undertook the duty of removing evil and attracting the good by reciting the verses. The specific verses of these rituals were read in most parties by the magicians. The magical whispers and practices of the magicians and other priests of ancient nations were based on their nature and customs. As it is stated in anthropology and sociology, the origin of all rituals in the world is spell and witchery and this is not an illusion while it is two thousand years the term magi has been used in this meaning. (Fry, 2001)

The ancient Greek and Roman used the term magi to refer to this cult, taken from their tradition (Damavandi, 2005). The magicians were religious teachers and priests.

The magic medicine

Science including medicine has originated in Middle and Near East and goes back to the ancient Mesopotamian period (Beginning with Sumer 3000BC). There are found many cuneiform tablets from cities as ancient as Uruk (2500 BC), mentioning medical practice survival from the library of Asshurbanipal at Nineveh (668BC) Assyria. One of the oldest and the largest collections is known as "Treatise of Medical Diagnosis and Prognoses." consisting of 40 tablets. The diagnostic treatise is organized in head to toe order with separate
subsections covering convulsive disorders, gynecology and pediatrics. To the non-specialist they sound like magic and sorcery. However, the descriptions of diseases demonstrate accurate observation skills. Virtually all expected diseases exist, they are described and cover neurology, fevers, worms and flukes, venereal disease and skin lesions. The medical texts are essentially rational, and some of the treatments, are essentially the same as modern treatments for the same condition.

There are proposed two fundamental approaches to magicians in Iran which are interrelated. The first is about the naming origin and literal explanation of magicians and the other is about the history of their sorcery. Briefly, the term magi meant song and secret and the place where the purity and clarification was made by cow urine while the religious songs were recited. In this regard, the term magi was used for singer groups who tried to implement specific rituals by reciting verses and spell the evils. He also attempted to determine if the disease was the result of some error or sin on the part of the patient. He prescribed charms and spells that were designed to drive out the spirit causing the disease. Their practice was the same as that of physicians. In the ancient world, the main cause of disease was devil and they assigned different diseases to devils; therefore, medicine was assumed to be the same as sorcery. Brandenburg wrote a book named sorcery and medicine in Ancient Iran which discusses different approaches to medicine in Zoroastrian texts and Firdausi’s Shahnameh. It must be said that in the later section of Avesta, Vandidad, the magic medicine is divided into three parts. The surgeon who recovers the people with knife, (Since the laws only mention liability in connection with “the use of a knife,” it can be assumed that doctors were not liable for any non-surgical mistakes or failed attempts to cure an ailment.) herbalist who uses herbs to heal the people and worshiper who uses verses to heal the people. (Azkaie, 1999) In Ferdowsi’s Shahnameh, Jamshid, the Pishdadi king of Iran, was the founder of medical science in Iran.

But Pahlavi Vandidad (Fargard 20, Phrase 1) states that Pishdadi Houshang was the first person to inhibit the disease and death and removed the fever and wound from people’s body. (Azkaie, 1999). Generally, world view approaches in the ancient world were the answers to the life problems. This means that questions like why human being and death emerged in the world and why the human being cannot be eternal led to the formation of creation story which influenced the people’s thoughts. The divinity or the demon caused the diseases. Therefore, the physician or healer had to worship and prescribed herbals and minerals to make the efficacy of treatment more. (Bahar, 2001) People’s envy was the cause of disease taken from devil’s action. The magic existed in Achaemenes court and in the start of Darius’s kingdom, they had superior position. At one point Darius orders a representative to return to Egypt in order to restore the department of the ruined house of life dealing with medicine; “While his majesty was in Elam he ordered me to return to Egypt. I gave them every useful thing and all their instruments indicated by the writings, as they had been before. His majesty did this because he knew the virtue of this art to make every sick man recover”. The subsequent Seleucid and Parthian dynasties followed the same trends with more Greek influence science and art due to massive presence of Greeks in the area. Totally, the magic or physician—sorcerer were influential in all ages of ancient Iran.

**The physician-sorcerer and the role of worship in treatment**

In the story of Rostam’s birth in Shahnameh, Roodabeh who is pregnant with Rostam becomes fainted and Zaal fires the Simorgh’s feather to get help from it. Simorgh appears and instructs him to do some actions with the help of a magi.

The worship and prayers and the hidden force, in them were considered to be effective in the treatment of the diseases. Some part of the treatment was based on psychic aspects in which inducing some expressions by a high ranked person reading mantra encouraged the patients to remove the disease from his body. The Aryans believed that there was a force in these expressions which attracted the god’s attention and enabled human being to overcome the pains. The sacred expression or mantra was a forcible tool which was used against the disease. (Rezaie, 2002) This could be combined with the herbal prescription. Many of the ancient plasters (a mixture of medicinal ingredients applied to a wound often held on by a bandage) seem to have had some helpful benefits. For instance, some of the more complicated plasters called for the heating of plant resin or animal fat with alkali. This particular mixture when heated yields soap which would have helped to ward off bacterial infection. The two practitioners worked together and at times could function in both capacities.

The more instrumental physician was the person who healed the patients by sacred expression. The rank and status of physicians were as follows.

The one who heals by physicality.

The one who heals by law.

The one who heals by knife.

The one who heals by herbs.
The one who heals by sacred expression. (the greatest rank)

CONCLUSION

The magi lived with a hidden science and could discover active forces in the nature which were unknown for others. The origin of medicine, such as that of other practices in the ancient world was religious-magic and the magis were the physicians who had religious rank and tried to remove the disease from people’s body. In fact, the magicians as religious leader sought to prevent the demon from dominating the human’s soul. In the process they uncovered a host of medicinal compounds, verbal spells and herbals and improved distillation and sublimation techniques to get soul rid of demon. Different techniques they used brought about peace of mind for patients in combatting the diseases which had devil origin. In the case of internal diseases or difficult cases the therapist determined which god or demon was causing the illness and attempted to determine if the disease was the result of some error or sin on the part of the patient. They prescribed charms and spells that were designed to drive out the spirit causing the disease.

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