

The Methods of Gaining Power of Healing among Traditional Healers in Lorestan

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Abstract -Folklore beliefs about healing and the methods of gaining power of healing for certain diseases in Lorestan¹ is the major concern in the present study. There are two major types of traditional healers who employ traditional methods of healing in Lorestan: A. The healers who obtain the healing ability through experience or training B. The healers who possess the power of healing

The present study will be focused on the second type of healers and it will further focus on various types of diseases and it will also introduce different methods of gaining power of healing.

The anthropological approach adopted for the study necessitated extensive and long time stay in the field. The results of the study indicate a complicated relationship between the origins of gaining power and the mythical beliefs of Persians and those of other neighboring civilizations.

Keywords: Power of healing; traditional healers; benefit of healing

I. INTRODUCTION

Lorestan is located in the south west of Iran, very close to the great Ilam civilization and on the road of Median civilization with an ancient background which indicates the presence of pre-Arian tribes in this region where it has welcome the Lors² as an ethnic tribe. The Lorestan province has a nomadic structure and the nomads still travel and move between cold and warm regions in winter and summer there. That is why one can still feel, smell and see the reminiscent of the ancient beliefs. Although the present community in Lorestan seems to be modernized like those living in other regions in Iran, one can still see an overwhelming tendency towards traditional methods of healing. This can be specially seen in rural areas where it has obviously changed to a kind of firm belief and common sense. Therefore, the nomads in Lorestan, based on their mythical belief in such traditional methods of healing, do respect and welcome the traditional

healers. During two years of fieldwork research, the researchers obtained detailed data concerning the methods of healing in Lorestan through the means of organized interviews and participant observation. The present article is based on a portion of the collected data.

There is no background for studies concerned with methods of gaining healing power in Lorestan, therefore the present study is only based on fieldwork findings, though there will be references to some related reports and studies in the analysis section.

II. THE GENERAL CLASSIFICATION OF HEALERS IN LORESTAN

The healers in Lorestan can be divided into two categories:

- A: Experienced or traditional healers
- B: healers with Bareh³

The experienced healers are those who have obtained the ability of healing through personal experience or by having been trained by other experienced healers. This group is not dealt with in this study.

The second category of healers who are the subject of this study refers to those who gain their healing power through various means. These healers never ask for something or get money for their treatment of the sick, although they might accept gifts offered to them by some willing patients who like to thank them by giving a gift. To these healers, healing is a sacred act which can not be carried out by every one and if the healer doesn't fully and absolutely believe in this ability of healing in his mind, curing the patients will be impossible. Furthermore, heredity has also no effects on the healing process of the patients. These healers also believe if the healing process starts without Niiyat⁴, the patient will never be cured. According to these healers, their power of healing is not effective in doing evil to others. In other words, the healer cannot carry out black magic.

¹ A province in the West of Iran

² An ethnic group very similar to Kurds

³ The term is used to refer to a person with special ability to cure certain diseases

⁴ Specifying one's holy intention in their heart for a certain purpose

In fact, whatever the healer does is a goodwill and humanitarian act, for removing the disease- making agent in addition to just pure treatment. Another characteristic of Lorestani healers is that they are able to cure only one disease and not any other diseases. As a matter of fact, in order to get treatment for a certain disease one can only visit a particular healer. However, if the healer possesses Bareh or the power of healing for certain other diseases under special conditions, he can cure more than one disease as well.

Within the circle of healers in Lorestan the concept of Bareh is a unique phenomenon which is rarely seen in other regions in Iran. For example, In Khark island⁵ the persons who have contact with Ahleh-Hava⁶ and Ahleh- Zamin⁷ are also called Bahrehdar⁸ or the man with healing power. These persons are thought to possess Karamat⁹ of the invisible world. They are thought to have the power of summoning these unseen creatures for solving some problems and ask them for help and solutions^[1]. As illustrated above, the terminologies used are the same linguistically but semantically they are deeply different. Bareh in Lorestan does not in any way relate to a sacred power though this superior power could itself be the source of Bareh. In Lorestan, Bareh is transmitted to some people in different ways which will be explained separately as follows.

III. THE METHODS OF GAINING BAREH

In Lorestan, the person possessing Bareh does not solely obtain this ability through contacts with unseen metaphysical forces. In fact, he obtains it through various ways which will be explained below on the basis of what was collected in the fieldwork.

A. Gaining the healing power by suffocating a pig

In this method of gaining Bareh, the healer suffocates a baby pig with one hand while, in the meantime, he calls the mountains, stones, water and other natural elements around him for testimony. In so doing, he intends to cure Batazbi¹⁰ disease. Afterwards, this person obtains the power to cure this disease, Batazbi, with the hand he used to suffocate the baby pig. Another point in this regard is that the act of suffocation must have been done with the left hand while the hand should be in horizontal position far away from the body.

In order to heal someone, the healer should specify a holy intention in his heart and he should further touch the place in pain. The disease in question has also certain specifications; the patient feels pain in the back and neck areas, a kind of muscle spasm which is usually perpetual and lasting. It may occur for different reasons such as lifting a heavy object or else it may be brought to the patient by jinni and fairies.

The method of treatment is as follows:

The patient pays a visit to the healer early in the morning or in the twilight. He /She describes the symptoms of the

disease to the healer and ask him to help him / her. The healer while specifying a holy intention in his heart will place his left hand on the painful areas. When the healer reaches the main spot of the painful area, his hand will feel as though it is numb.

The healers believe that through this process the pain would travel from the patient to them. Afterwards, the healer will press his hand on the earth in order to kill the pain so that the pain is transmitted to the earth. In this process of transmission, the body of the healer becomes a mediator for the transmission of the pain.

This kind of healing power cannot be transferred to another person or inherited to the healer's offspring while other types of Bareh might be inherited by the children of the healer with the power of healing or Bareh or it can be even transferred to them. Concerning the pig, it should be mentioned that in many societies and cultures in Iran, pigs are considered impure and polluted and they have their own taboos. Keeping pigs, eating or even touching them are forbidden for the majority of people save a small group like Lootis¹¹ and Baredarha¹².

This kind of prohibition can be seen in many religions and societies. Freezer in his book, Golden Boughs, has given a lot of examples for this type of prohibition.

In ancient Egypt, for example, the pigs' shepherds were not permitted to marry or even to contact other people. As another example if somebody accidentally touched a pig, they should have washed themselves in water to get purified. There they also sacrificed a pig for Osiris, the god, annually and on that day the prohibition of not eating pig's meat was temporarily lifted. This can only be explained if one could accept the hypothesis that pigs were sacred animals at that time since they could religiously be eaten^[2].

In Iran, in addition to religious prohibition for eating pig's meat, in public cultures pigs are also considered religiously impure. But the point, concretizing the healers is that they are not ordinary people. Their relation with the world is reproduced in a different context which enables them to transcend the ethnic and tribal taboos. The golden shamans in Siberia, for example, can the prohibition. "When I eat Sukdu¹³ or drink the pig's blood. The pig's blood can be drunk only by shamans and it's forbidden for ordinary people to drink it. It's even illegal to touch pigs. I am not the person who eats and drinks, it is Ayami who does them^[3]."

There is a direct correlation between eating pig's meat and magic: If a person eats pig's meat, magic does no hurt them^[4]. It is also mentioned in Zoroastrian texts that pigs are symbols of power and bodily force and they are related to Bahram¹⁴. It is mentioned in Yashtha¹⁵ that one of the ten shapes in which Bahram emerges is the shape or form of a pig. Varahram¹⁶ defends himself in the form of a pig with sharp teeth; a male pig with strong paws which kills with

⁵ An island in the Persian Gulf

⁶ Refers to those who are affected by the magic and mysterious winds and unseen forces who dominate human beings

⁷ The good and nice ghosts and unseen forces who help human beings

⁸ It is the same as Bareh

⁹ The miraculous and religious power some people are endowed with

¹⁰ It is a sort of muscle spasm or muscle-bound

¹¹ Local singers and musicians

¹² People with healing powers

¹³ An avowed or dedicated food

¹⁴ The god of power and victory in Persian mythology

¹⁵ Part of the Avesta, the Zoroastrian religious books

¹⁶ Another name for Bahram

one blow ; an angry pig which cannot be approached ; a pig with spotted face ; a strong pig with iron feet, nerves , tail and jaws^[5] .

Bahram is accredited among Zoroastrians to the extent that taking oath to king Bahram is very common today . Besides all these , Bahram is also the symbol of bodily power and manhood . In fact , this is a strong reason why all Batazbi healers are male today . No one has ever heard of a female healer . It is an exception since other Bareh healers are both male and female. It seems that the ceremony of suffocating the baby pig is to gain healing power through contacts with the source of empowerment and it is considered as a reproduction of Bahram's power or asking for help from him for healing . It is worth to mention that pig is a religiously impure animal in Lorestan where a small group of the community have contacts with pigs . In the meantime, they are also banished and boycotted by the majority .

As a matter of fact, it can be concluded that pigs have special characteristics . Eating pigs' meat or even touching them can transfer power to the human's body. By eating the meat of an animal or a human will the person not only acquire the bodily features but also they will attain the spiritual and ethical features of the animal or human in question^[6].

As a result, this is a probable thesis that the wild pig possesses a sort of power and ability which can be transferred to the healer if only he had previously suffocated a baby pig by his own hand . The question which is raised here is that why the pig should be suffocated rather than eaten or killed in other ways. This question can only be answered by understanding the cultural context of the Iranian society . Eating pig's meat is strongly prohibited and it is hated by the people in Lorestan . It is as such if a person happens to eat pig's meat , he/she will be boycotted and no one would get any food from them. This kind of boycott is today imposed on the Lootis who are known for eating pig's meat in Lorestan .

There are also other proofs which indicate that suffocating a pig is a ceremonial act which is more significant than eating pig's meat . In Zoroastrian, the first healers are spiritual and mythical figures who are personally significant. Four persons squeezed Houm¹⁷ and as an award for this act, Ahurmazda¹⁸ bestowed on them some great sons . These people attained the power of healing themselves and their children also inherited this power from their fathers as a result of doing such a ceremonial act . Iranian Houm or Hindi Soumeh is the god of healing and health . This herb originally produces power and cures and it becomes more effective if it is worshipped and made sacred^[7] . However, this god of sacrifice is a sacred god whose death produces power and healing since the Zoroaster squeezed the Houm; the god of Houm came to him therefore, it is believed whenever believers sacrifice an avowed thing, this god will be present as well . Therefore whenever Houm is sacrificed, the god of Houm is simultaneously becomes the

god , the Zoroastrian priest, and the sacrificed thing. In an ancient Sanskrit text , the death of this god is depicted as follows:

Soumeh is the god and by squeezing, it is broken. Therefore, as a result of the death of the godly priest in the ceremony of sacrificing, power and life are bestowed on believers. Although in religious ceremonies, squeezing the Houm is accompanied with smashing it , only the term squeezing is used all the time . As is seen, squeezing Houm is a sacred sacrifice . As such is pressing the throat of the baby pig which bestows such a power to the person , it gives him the healing power .

Asarat was the third human who prepared Houm for the material world . He asked God to give him a medicine with which he could resist against pain , diseases , decay and infection and death which are scattered among the people by Ahriman¹⁹ . In response to Asarat's request , the God sent down thousands of healing herbs which grew around the tree of Goukarnehin; the sea of Universe, That is why Asarat is known as a person who takes diseases, fever, and death away from the people^[8]. Accordingly squeezing Houm gives the healing power to the person who squeezes it. He can , therefore , cures all diseases and relieves pains and revolts against Ahriman. Fereyedoon , the healer, did the same as well . How then, can one relate the symbol of a god with Houm? Bahram is the god of physical power and fighting as is the Hindi Indira who is described as such . His most favorite drink is Soumeh, which gives him power and agility. Therefore, there is a direct relationship between Bahram and Houm. The healer also becomes the mediator between Bahram and Houm by squeezing the throat of the pig as the result of which he gains the special healing power .

Another significant point in this method of healing is that the healing power is in that hand with which the person had pressed the throat of the pig . This can also be explained by the concept of contagious magic or the law of touch which was used by Freezer in explaining the different types of magic.

B. The power of healing and captivating a fairy

In this kind of Bareh; the healer who is certainly a male person visits and gets acquainted with a fairy. He, then, sticks a pin into the fairy's body and by so doing he captivates it. The fairy becomes his legal wife through marriage. Nevertheless, no one except the captivator can see the fairy. Perhaps, others would hear her voice but they can never see her. For some unknown reasons, the man and the fairy get separated. Since the man has captivated the fairy by sticking a pin into her body, her freedom is also in his hand . This freedom is given to her if the fairy bestows Bareh for the treatment of the Bayeneh²⁰ disease. After this transaction is done, the man, his immediate children and his future offspring would be able to cure children suffering from the Bayeneh disease.

The nature of his disease is very complicated. If a bird called Bayeneh which is very similar to owl perches on the

¹⁷ A sacred herb

¹⁸ The God in Zoroasterian

¹⁹ The god of the evil

²⁰ A disease caused by the noises of a bird

wall of a house and starts singing, the baby in that house would get Bayeneh disease. The symptoms of the disease include dark blue skin, small nails, impatience and lots of crying. The baby's palm would also have a smell like pickles. In order to cure the baby, the healer lifts the baby and takes him/her with his hands, then he calls the name of God. After that he cuts the place between the shoulder-blades with a razor; next he puts some gun powder on the cut. This will scare the bird, and finally he will cut a piece of his own clothes and attaches it to the baby's clothes in order to make the bird scared and run away.

Mythical symbols abound throughout the aforementioned process. Marrying a fairy, Bareh for the treatment of Bayeneh and the method of curing the baby all need to be deciphered and explained. Marrying a fairy is very common among shamans. Shaman Gouldi clearly differentiates between the supporting spirit - Ayami - who appoints the shaman and the assisting spirits - Siyons - who are his servants and are offered to him by Ayami. According to Steinberg "Shaman Gouldi makes clear the relationship between the shaman and Ayami with complicated sexual feelings" [9].

Contacts with and marrying the supporting spirit bestows on the shaman the healing power. It is as such that among Lorestani healers, it is believed that there occurs an affective exchange between the healer and the fairy.

In a book called "Beliefs and knowing of the people in Lorestan and Ilam" it is maintained that just opposite to jinni, the fairies are pretty and they live in the mountains, in the wells or fountains, in rivers and in jungles. They sometimes help people solve their problems. And it has frequently been seen that a girl from the fairies has fallen in love with a boy from humans. The fairies are afraid of iron. If a needle is thrust into the human's clothes, the fairy will have nothing to do with the owner of the clothes. But if a pin is stuck into the clothes of a fairy, the fairy cannot disappear any longer and will stay with humans [10].

The marriage of the fairy and man reminds us of religious and sacred marriages. An example from Persian myths is the marriage of Garshasb and a fairy called Khanasinity in Kaboulestan. However, this marriage is not considered a good one at all. Since it is a trick played by the fairy to deceive Garshasb so that Garshasb disrespects the holy fire. However, who is Garshasb? In Persian mythology, he is the son of Sariseh or Asarat. He is the strongest man in Sam's family and he is the third person among all men who squeezes the Houm according to rituals and as an award for doing so he is bestowed two sons: one is Orakhshiyeh; the law maker and the other one is Garshasb Gisvar²¹. Asarat in Persian mythology is a healer who can cure different diseases. There is not sufficient information about Garshasb's ability and power to heal.

There exists an important point here to mention. Fairies are not positive entities in Persian myths, while in public culture; the fairies are positive concepts and are opposed to the demons. As is said in ancient texts, the fairy is very pretty and kind; its origin goes back to fire and cannot be

seen by the eyes. For its extraordinary beauty, it deceives men. The fairies as opposed to demons are often attractive and righteous. But it sometimes happens that, as mentioned in Zoroaster's book [11], the fairy is the female sex of a demon who is appointed by Ahriman. The fairies are soldiers in the Ahriman's army who attack the earth, plants, water and animals. Overall, in these texts, the fairies have an ambiguous essence and unclear manner and are of a vicious and bad nature. They sometimes appear as attractive and deceptive women who deceive men, since they are able to instantly change their appearances. According to ancient texts, Jamshid, Zahak and Soleiman²² ruled demons, fairies and the birds. In folklore tales, nearly all heroes have relationships with the queens of fairies and finally after overcoming difficult obstacles and killing dragons they would reach their beloved fairies.

In Persian literature, especially in Shahnameh²³, fairies are symbols of kindness, perfection, and beauty. They sometimes look like angels" [12].

In Lorestan, people consider the fairies as blessing, helpful and generous beings. They are not vicious beings at all, "fairies" are blessing creatures whose enemy is the wolf" [13]. The relationship of the fairies with gaining healing power can be categorized in this positive respect not in the vicious category. Therefore, marriage and integration of a human with a metaphysical creature give the healer a metaphysical power. Concerning the Bayeneh disease, the bird just needs to perch on the wall of the owner's house who has a young baby and starts singing. Due to the method of treatment, it can be argued that the spirit of the bird goes into the body of the baby through singing and vexes him. In order to scan the Bayeneh, it is necessary for the healer to lift the baby and hover it between the ground and sky and cutting the place between his shoulders with a razor. The question raises here is that why does not the healer place the child on the ground to comfortably examine it for treatment?

The healers do seem to exactly reproduce the same condition as though they are holding the Bayeneh in their hands not the child. In fact, it is the bird whose place is in the sky. It does not reside on the ground. By lifting the baby and holding it away from the ground, the healer reproduces the condition of the bird in the sky, holding the baby with one hand and cutting the back of the bird where it is possibly flying. In so doing the bird is not able to fly and is finally unable to escape. It can't fly toward the baby's house any longer or penetrate into the baby's body and makes him sick.

C. *Gaining healing power and the ability of giving birth to twins*

The person possessing Bareh claims that his mother or grandmother has given birth to twins after whom all their children and the twins themselves and their mother have gained the power of healing diseases such as jaundice. What is specific about giving birth to twins that enables the mother, her upcoming children who grow in the same womb to cure

²¹ With curly hair

²² Mythical figures in Shahnameh

²³ An epic written by Ferdousi in 700AC

diseases or even enables the coming generations to cure diseases?

In the past, giving birth to twins was not a common issue and the number of twins was rather less than that of the present day. Therefore, a woman who could give birth to twins was thought to be under special protection. The relationship between twins and the power of healing and overcoming the mortality can emphatically be seen in the myths of other places in the world. In Greek myths, the twins basically possess the power of healing as well.

Phoebes Apollo and Airtimes (Diana) are twins (a brother and a sister) who are born as the result of a marriage between Zeus and Letoyaltuna). Apollo is a healer. He is the first god who taught men the art of curing diseases (Hamilton 1376, 36). Apollo's son ; Skolapious , also possessed the power of healing . He could employ different ways of curing , every patient who came to him, whether they had cuts on their bodies or if they suffered from a disease , he would relieve them from the pain and suffering^[14]. His power of healing increased to an extent that he was known as the god of healing and was respected a lot on the earth . But he tried to deceive the god of death as a result of which Zeus got angry with him and took him out from the realm of immortal beings. Skolapaous had obtained such a sanctity and respect , no one on the earth could equal him , even hundreds of years after his death, the sick people , the blind and the disabled visited his temple and worshipped him and offered sacrifices , and slept there for a while. Then they would visit that skillful physician in their dreams and he would tell them how they would be cured^[15].

This kind of supernatural and unusual giving birth to twins which breaches the existing dominant order of giving birth to only one baby possesses a positive meaningful message . Although in Persian myths , the symbols of twins are not clearly seen like the ones in other societies, the first ancestors of humans were probably twins . Mashiyeh and Mashiyaneh which were born from Kiyoomars's genitals as a result of his death on earth , were thought to be a twisted plant. When dying Kiyoomars produced and left a seed for forty years. The seed remained on the earth. After the end of the forty years, the stalk of a Ribus (rhubarb) , fifteen leaves and Mahli and Mahliyaneh started to grow from the ground. They grew to the point that they reached to the ears. One twisted with the other, they were both up and similar. Between them, there stood Farrah; the god , in that way all three were up so that it was not clear which was male and which was female and which was Farrah Harmazd who was accompanying them it is that Farrah with which the humans were created^[16]. However, the above-mentored example does not necessarily convey any sort of relationship between healing and that first twins . Due to the fact that the samples of miraculous twins in Iranian myths are rather rare , one can suppose that the current belief in metaphysical power of giving birth to twins can be indicative of pre-Zoroastrian culture or even related to Mesopotamian myths .

D. The power of healing and getting diseases

This kind of healing resembles the principle of affinity in one's mind . The pregnant woman gets a diseases which will

require Barih to cure . For instance, jaundice or scorpion's bite etc . Therefore, his germ after being born will have the power of healing that diseases only . As his/ her mother could have escaped the diseases , he / she would also be able to cure that special disease . His saliva will specially have a certain healing power.

IV. CONCLUSION

Traditional healers in Lorestan believe that their ability in healing is due to metaphysical or supernatural powers which have encompassed them . This power is thoroughly magical and cannot be explained through causal relationship .

What really makes the Lorestani healers and their methods of healing called Barih so different is that they and their methods of healing are unique. The complexity of the constituent elements of the methods of obtaining Barih and the presence of non- Persian myths in it might indicate the antiquity of these beliefs in the region, hence necessitating more field studies in this regard.

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