

## Review of Common Superstition-based Therapies in Qajar Era, Iran

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### Abstract

In Arabic culture, every strange word arose from a world except human world or human sciences and experiences is called superstition. Some superstitious beliefs are specific to a community or a particular culture and some of them are specific to a particular gender or even a particular person. In Iran from ancient times to the Qajar era, especially before the utilization of Daroulfonon Institute and a gradual transition from traditional to modern medicine, the role of superstition in medicine and healthcare practices was dimmed. Due to lack of graduated physicians in the community, lack of health care facilities, and poor health care system many of ordinary people were resorted to magic and extravagant energies and non-scientific styles to cure illnesses. The current research was conducted on Iran's Qajar era as the target community of the study, and accordingly practical field study was not applicable; hence, the current library research attempted to use first hand resources from Qajar era. The study aimed at investigating the superstitions prevailing in the community to treat diseases in Qajar period, providing an underlying study for the current researchers studying superstition-based therapy in the present-day society, and comparing superstition between the present-day community and Qajar era comprehensively.

## INTRODUCTION

### Common Superstitions in the Community

From different perspectives, the common superstitions among people can be investigated:

A- Dervish and Fortune-tellers: During Qajar period, in addition to the few numbers of physicians, the cost of medication and treatment was high [1]. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for the prosperity of casting spells, dervishes, and soothsayers in that era. Dervishes were also very famous and popular among casting spells. During Qajar period, medication and treatments were more mingled with superstitions, so that some herbalists prescribed drugs using spells and divination from holy books [2]. Layard stated: "The dervishes and soothsayers had special influence and respect among the people, and people believed in them as if they have a power to miracle and are honoured and blessed." [3] "Among mass population of Iran, believing in the effect of spell and charm is placed instead of smart care in prevention and treatment, and it was more abundant." [4]. In his itinerary, Feodor Kurov wrote: "Iranians never use medications without consulting with a fortune-teller, and if the fortune-teller sneezes only

once, the unlucky medicine is overruled, but if sneezes twice, the case would be different and the medicine is consumed with salutations and regards." [5].

Razi Kani (1881) wrote in his book: "The grace of physicians and wise ... said that the fall of this blessing has been considered by Allah for the sake of working out and returning the creation from their misconducts and directing them to Allah Almighty [6]. A thesis on alien (unknown) sciences was written in 1980s and started with " Good in the middle evil" and writes a section entitled with casting spells [7]. Olivier, while speaking of the prosperity of dervishi business, points out to a dervish in Tajrish, North of Tehran that a massive crowd of women were referring to him to buy spells and meditations [8]. He stated: "The severity of the Iranian people's acceptance of spells and divination has led to a decline in activity of doctors. Most people prefer to go to fortune-tellers and soothsayers instead of physicians." [9]. Sometimes people used to go to the soothsayers to cure their illnesses. Soothsayers also cast a spell on a piece of paper and order to hold it in her palm, fold it like a bean and swallow or wash it in water and feed the water

to patient [10]. Wales said the people went to the soothsayer to treat their diseases. After leaving the first soothsayer, they referred to another one; if they had same views, they act upon their prescription [11]. Ms. Yoshida Masahura, narrated about the Nasser era in Iran: "The soothsayers... gave magic and healing water or a pack of spells and lucky charms to people" [12]. "Whenever the astrologer said that on this day and hour taking the drug is not right, the patients would not take any medicine because of their judgment and advice [13]. Pollack said: "If it was necessary to visit a doctor and he prescribed a medicine, after a while, by the use of rosary or the Quran divination, they decide to take the medication or not and decide if it was good or bad to take the drugs. In many cases, the overwhelming majority of patients were fully treated and recovered by the traditional beliefs and suggestions that they were induced and regained their health" [14]. In 1853 Mirza Aqa Khan Nouri, the Vice Chancellor of Nasir al-Din Shah, suffered from a severe pain due to consumption of opium, and doctors came from the city to visit and treat him. Drs. Pollack and Koloke, the proprietary doctors of the Shah, visited him. Iranian physicians, after a lot of consultations, diagnosed the disease as ardour and advised cupping (hijama) to treat him. But, Drs. Pollack and Koloke proscribed another treatment. The Chancellor, who could not make decision, referred to divination and thus chose cupping [9]. James Murray, in the story of Haji Babai Isfahani, wrote about the spells quoting from a dervish, who was Haji Baba's fellow traveller: "Putting the rabbit tail under the child's pillow is hypnotic... the eye and the bone of a wolf, if cast it to the child's arm, make the child brave. If wear oil taken out of wolf is applied on woman's dress, her husband will stop loving her. Venus of wolf is the cure of infertility for women. Hoopoe's nail straps and tongue, and bat's eyes straps are hypnotic and other parts... [the monkey] makes some seasonings, which we sell in high price to the king's wives... monkey's liver is elixir too. The monkey's nose skin is an antidote to all of poisons and one who is devouring his ashes ... [in] imitation, agility, and cunning goes after him" [15].

B- Superstitions and the environment: Superstitions definitely depended on the environment. Akhundzadeh said: "As it is now a Parisian boy, has 1 in 1000 of the superstitions of Iranian people, and the people of Tehran, has 1 in a hundred superstitions of the Bakhtiari or people in Baluchistan", because some light of knowledge has been shed in these locations and have discovered some of unknowns knowledges. As in the time of cholera in Tehran, people believed it is emerged from waste and they began to sweep the streets and clean the bathrooms like a vacuum place. But, in Kerman and Baluchistan they cooked Qol-ho-aholah pottage (a kind of superstition votive) for the mother of cholera and donated lamps oil to a ingratiate mesquite trees [16]. Among the Jews of Kurdistan, Shiraz, and possibly so many other places of Iran, there is a strong believe for

the healing power of spells, because they believe that diseases are as a result of contact with the puck, so the disease can be healed by prays written or made by Rabbi [1]; for example, women from Tehran believed in the power of the prays and the spells of the Jew Mullah named Pinas, but one out of 10 women from Yokel Villager believed in him, and even not one in a hundred of nomad women believed in those spells and prays [17]. In Orumiyeh, in Catholic Church is located in the Mart Mariam distinct; local women (whether Muslims or Christians) came to light candles to get the Virgin Mary's blessing to become pregnant. Similarly, the Pearl Cannon in Tehran located in Toop-khaneh Square, which allegedly by a given magical powers could give birth to the women who touched its bracelet crater [1]. One of the beliefs of people in Dar-Al-Khalafah (the government house) during the Qajar period was that the spells written by some dervishes and soothsayers for their sick ones can recover their boredom. This charm, which was written in words and prescribed in small papers, was swallowed by the patient to help the healing of his illness [18]. In caravan by gunfire and making noises, they tried to keep the disease away, and the inhabitants of Shiraz also acted in such a way to prevent the disease [1]. In Astrabad, regarding the 100-year-old orange tree, people thought if anyone stand beneath of the branches of this tree after dusk he would be spelled and cursed. Astrabad people point to a retarded person among the crowd, and say with a sharp flicker that it is the result of standing beneath such a tree at night [9].

C-Superstition and Women: The most of the dervishes and soothsayers popularity was due to the fact that women were referring to them. "Women in this period [19] were illiterate. The way to solve their problems was to use magic and soothsayers. In fact, women, by this, could rescue themselves from the psychological anxieties" [20]. Pollack said: "Like the rest of the world, women in this country are more likely to believe in superstitions, especially on matters related to love and fertility, as well as the illness and deaths of their children and etc." [14]. The referring of people, especially women, to the house of the Jewish mullahs to get spell in Qajar period was so widespread that made the government to look for of a solution, and according to a decree, the reference of Muslim women to Jewish homes was banned [21].

One of the most important reasons of women to visit dervishes and soothsayers was for the treatment of infertility. Hardavan also reports from Pearl Cannon: "In Nowrooz, women used to refer to Pearl Cannon that was the trophy of war and brought in to Tehran after the war with Portuguese in Southern Iran. Women believed that this arsenal could fulfil their needs and in order to treat their children or become pregnant, they visited it" [22]. Flora said: "In cases of infertility, women came to witches; the witch filled a copper jar with water and make a small fire, then asked the woman to come nearby and covered both the woman and himself with a blanket;

suddenly the smoke filled up the environment. Then, the flows of Arabic magical words started that meant he is calling for demons. After that the woman looked at the cup of water that was boiling with unimaginable magical spells of the witch. While the woman was the witness of such events, the witch rubbed a needle, or other similar sharp things together and the woman truly believed that the demons are present. After that, the witch wrote some commands and prescription, and told her that she will dream in near future. She will dream that a man comes to her and gives her a red apple, which is a sign of the birth for a child. For double confidence, the witch told her that she would find a sign of birth in her face or a part of her body. The woman returned home. She expected in that year the next year, and the following years to be pregnant, and of course it would never happen [1]. There were also superstitions about Hamedan's stone-lion. Women for giving birth to a male child used to sit on it and slide [23]. Some women tried to treat their infertility in such a way, so they did things like going to mortuary in a night and giving some money and some leeks, sleeping on the mortuary's spot for cleansing the dead body, taking some water from the four corners of the bathroom, and pouring it inside the eggshell or pouring that on their head, or taking a Jewish woman to the bathroom, wearing the dresses upside down, and ... which many of them were nothing, but superstition and mumbo jumbo; they refer to the soothsayers so that they would write some magic and spell based on different books, tales, or prayers for their fertilization [14]. Pottinger also reported that women in the region of Makran repeatedly asked her for infertility spells [24]. In Mashhad, there were some broken tiles and carved old tiger standing on a rock. Always there were a group of women around this tiger and a woman in the centre with open legs, the woman on the tiger was represented by spells and various sorts of magic, such as cutting twine with forty knots and stuff like this and after that the ritual will end. Near Kerman, there were some springs gushing from the rocks with the help of Imam Ali (PBUH). In mountain's downhill words "Ya Ali (Ali Help me)" were carved and from beneath of the words, water drip slowly seeps out. Throughout the day, women climbed to that point to collect the holy water flow that came slowly in drops from the branches of a small tree grown with this water, they hanged their own burners. Thus, this vow guaranteed the enjoyment of motherhood. On the other hand, sick women went for pilgrimage to the hills where old barricades were located on them; they took bread, meat, sugar, and fruit with themselves and put them on a small flowerbed. They believed that if their gifts are eaten in their way back, the Queen of Faith bestowed on them and they will heal" [1]. Colonel Pitt, who was a British console in Nasser period in Mashhad said: "In Mashhad superstition was rife. I usually saw a place filled with so fanciful thoughts among the people, especially among women. I quoted one of the practices, which I repeatedly saw by myself. Near the gate of Sarab, there

was a stone-lion, which a bit of it was broken. Sometime when I was passing near that stone-lion, I saw a number of women around it; it was surrounded by some women while a woman sat on the middle of it. They said that the lion was made by a sculpture about 150 years ago, and then he was buried beneath it in the heart of the soil. In fact, this stone-lion was his grave stone. However, this lion is still on the side of the road and women who do not have baby or have other wishes come from different places to visit the lion to meet their wishes. Apparently the lion worked and made their wishes come true. It can be found by the number of women who came to visit it. Woman sat on the lion while reading some spells and shaking her body, and then the ritual came to the end. I saw a stone-lion like this in the cemetery of Bazarak in Herat, but I don't know that do people believe in that as they do in Mashhad, treat it, and demand it for healing or fulfilment, and I do not think that it is happen elsewhere like this [25]. Some of superstitious thoughts advising to drink drainage water to prevent labor pain or cure chest or esophagus pain [26]. There was also other superstitious such as passing a woman under an elephant's belly to treat infertility, which sometimes was accompanied by ridiculous scenes [15]. A piece of diamond that hanged from a chain around neck... fulfilled a woman's dream to give birth to a baby and become a mother [27]. "The most important point was that the cause of spell... was to refine morality and reform the soul in order to find similarities between oneself and the almighty and heaven." [28]. It was also believed that there was a creature called "Al" that came to parturient in the first days after birth and taken out her liver, so women put some skewed onions under parturient bed to repel it. They also fence with a sword around the parturient and the baby's bed [14, 29].

D- Common superstitions to treat other diseases: Some of the superstitions were used for overcome various diseases. Some people believed that hanging spells from a chain around neck, and praying and chanting some prays, and not mentioning the name of cholera, especially with children can prevent the epidemic outbreaks of the disease [30]. Setting up the mourning groups for Imam Zain al-Abidin (PBUH) was considered an effective way to treat cholera. However, the most effective and common means of preventing and treating cholera was resorting to magic and spells. According to John Wishard: "When the cholera outbreak emerged, sellers of such things made a lot of money" [31]. The patient affected by malaria should carefully break eleven almonds and took out their inner kernel; the almonds were sent to the Mullah for consecration, and Mullah carves holy signs on the almonds and the patient used the almonds with a firm belief and then (as he hoped) he recovered from the malaria. If the treatment was not effective, the patient in fever and chills went to a desert at night and listened to the jackals near the village. The patient took off his rope style belt and attempted to tide up a howling jackal; after

seven howling and seven tide-ups, he returned home with a tighter belt, while believing the malaria will disappear [1]. People believed that the epilepsy is caused by the puck and accordingly they said if a person is enchanted, the medicine does not work [14]. The manuscript wrote by Aman al-Baliya in the 19th century, collected most of prays for the elimination of plague and cholera [19]. Nasser al-Din Shah believed that eating a special soup during the outbreak of the disease can protect him from being infected with this deadly disease; hence, he ordered this saviour soup every year. In 1890 Dr. Fvouria by participating in a ceremony wrote: "...while the cooks, with their dirty hands, about 20 people, poured vegetables, meat, and eggplants into pots ... in the evening, they will cast the cooks of the Shah in any kind of dishes which is available, and take to the blessed people who receive this bliss" [32]. Or for the treatment of abdominal diseases it was recommended: "Since Mars is more powerful than Leo, write 40 letters on the forehead skin of camel, ..., if the written was in good fragrance with saffron, and tight it to his leg and while he is walking, he does not get tired, especially if the moons is in cancer; but if he writes on a glass bowl and washes it, and waits until the water penetrates into the bowel, any person who drinks the water, will get rid of abdominal diseases" [28]. For the treatment of paralysis of the limbs also there were certain spells [9].

Mrs. Sorena argued: "Many of these treatments came from a full-blown naiveté. A piece of paper that some verses of holy book were written on and it was a treatment for fever. If you wrote Allah on eggshell and held it under the armpit for 24 hours, all your pains would be treated. Donkey or goat legs could cure some diseases; if a woman carried a small piece of skin with herself she would never become pregnant. Hanging a diamond to necklace strengthens the eyes, and touching it makes you brave. The diamond also protects you from epilepsy. Loosen the rotten teeth without tooth pain treats infertility in women" [27].

Muhammad Rafiq in a thesis titled: "Prays and litanies (talisman) provide a collection of prays and amulets for various health problems including tooth pain; it also inspects the dying patients, identifies the cause of the illness and pain, and relieves it. It also gives baby to women with poor delivery" [33]. If there was a sick person in a family, on that day one of the family members took a tray and anonymously referred to neighbors, and everyone donate and put some raw material, such as onions, salt, and rice, ... inside the tray; by the combination of these materials the family cooked a soup as they believed it can heal the patient [22]. Some believed that visiting patients on Sundays and Tuesdays is not lucky [29].

Some also believed that they cannot interfere with the urgency and delay in the death wished by God, and therefore did not make any effort to improve the situation. [29]. The pilgrimage was also one of the most important things that usually carried out during

disasters. Tehrani people used to go to Ibn-Babawayh, the shrine of Hazrat Abdul Azim (PBUH), from the Shrine of Imamzadeh Hassan and Imamzadeh Ahl Ali (PBUH) [34].

People of Lorestan used to go to the shrine of Imamzadeh Shahzadeh Ahmad (PBUH) and the people of Dezful used to go to the tomb of the Prophet Daniel (PBUH). [19], but Pollack believed that: "The patient by going on pilgrimage changed his mode that was not useless, as well" [14].

Conclusion: from long time in the history when the society suffered from backwardness, poverty, and despair and there was no way to escape, the tendency toward superstitious increased. Perhaps one of the main causes of the spread of superstition among people was ignorance, lack of awareness, and illiteracy. Over the centuries that many Iranian were away from learning and thinking, a suitable condition was provided to spread superstitions in the society, and gradually superstition turned into the integral part of the lives of the Iranian people.

Iranian in Qajar dynasty faced frustrations, ignorance, and lack of modern sciences. So, the superstitions were used in many different ways to treat patients, and gradually superstitions took the place of sciences. Superstitions and fanaticism in the Qajar era, unlike past periods for sciences such as astronomy and astrology, were replaced with soothsaying, spells, magic, amulets, divination, and ... . Also in the areas where medical facilities-health was poor, superstition among the common people of the region was more applicable for their treatment. In addition, because women in Qajar era had a lower opportunity for education than men, use of superstitions among them was more frequent. During Qajar period, women's rights were largely ignored, and they were often enclosed in homes and, of course received less knowledge and education. This is a reason for the tendency of women toward superstitious.

Awareness and literacy has reversed correlation with a common superstition in a community, and because small portion of people were literate in Qajar era, superstition was abundant in the society. It is clear that by changing beliefs, superstitious that endured centuries in the life of Iranian people, have an effective role and became part of the culture, cannot be changed easily. In fact, even in today's modern societies, science and information era, some superstitious are observed clearly.

## DISCUSSION

Given that throughout history and in most countries of the world, superstitions have always been used instead of the treat, we tried to rely on the texts of the first batch of history, consider the common superstition at the community level in Iran during the Qajar period and to investigate whether in Qajar era Iran has superstition instead of the treatment of disease was common or not.

## CONCLUSIONS

In a period that cultural poverty, low level of literacy, lack of health and medical facilities in country was abundant, it was natural that the tendency of ordinary people, instead of scientific approach to the treatment of illness is commonplace with superstition. Aside from the fact that in the current society of the country, there are many superstition in most areas.

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Naturally, when in a society, ignorance and illiteracy are dominant, people of that society resort to superstitions instead of a scientific approach to problems and illnesses. Unfortunately, in Qajar era, due to cultural poverty and lack of literacy of the majority, superstition was the basis of healing.

## Conflict of Interest

We have tried here briefly to review the prevailing superstitions at the community level, but it should be considered that traditional medicine was also popular among people and traditional physician,s offices had its own customers and also many medical books were

written and translated in Qajar period but superstitions continued along with traditional medicine for the treatment of diseases.

## Funding

Since the subject has been located in the past centuries, field studies was not possible, therefore, we only use library studies. As a result, no specific financial resources were used.

## Ethical Consideration

In examining historical points, we must note that in which historical period, we will examine that subject. If we see that superstitions are widespread in society, we must take into account that this has been the subject of centuries before and there should not be any contempt for the people of that period and knowledge of that time.

## Author's Contribution

We as much as possible, have tried to review resources from the first category and by collecting information about this subject, check out the common superstitions in the Qajar era and this research was carried out using the guidance of respected teacher Mr. Emadi.

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