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# Magic and Science of the Traditional Medicine. The consciousness of the Duality



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## Introduction

The World Health Organization defines Traditional Medicine as the total of knowledge, skills and practices, based on theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures, used in the maintenance of health, as well as in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illness [1]. In this definition already emerges a dualistic aspect of science and magic, as in all things or argument. We have scientific elements, such as knowledge, skills, theories, beliefs in prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of illness, but we also have magic elements as knowledge, skills, practices, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures. This first reflection brings us to the fact that magic has been the first level of mental evolution from which everything originated, but even that medicine has its origin and still be absorbed by magic [2] in rituals, suits and placebos. Rituals have a magical efficacy related to the connections between cosmos and spirituality, which goes beyond the techniques' efficacy. If we look at the complementary (or alternative) medicine, these refer to a broad set of health care practices that are not part of that country's tradition and that are not fully integrated into the dominant health care system, in some country, used in an interchangeable way with the traditional medicine [3].

The World Health Organization recognizes its importance, promotes its integration, produces related guidelines, but even supports research and promotes dissemination. Nevertheless, traditional medicine is often read under elsewhere archaic discrimination, which sees the other country's history as tradition and the science as culture [4]. It is necessary to be aware that each culture has its own ethnomedical beliefs and practices associated with health and illness, shaping diagnosis, treatments, and expected outcomes [5]. Even if traditional medicine is often relegated to the archaic elsewhere mentioned before, if we look at the scientific literature, we find it is present everywhere in the world, probably more than how we think. For example, typing

the term on the data Bank Pubmed.gov more than 21.700 articles appear, almost 9.500 with full text available, more than 2.000 published in the last year. The Data Bank Cochrane shows 44 reviews. Also, many countries in the world provide it and have regulation policies and available health insurance on it.

Once commented on the scientific dimension of traditional medicine, it is interesting to find out the magic part of conventional medicine to follow the dualistic reading of each phenomenon and find out hidden similarities. In all the forms of cure, health could be considered as a system based on vital energy or as a balance of five elements composing the organism: the wood, the fire, the earth, the metal, and the water.

It is common to see eastern medicine based on a concept of a body made of energy, health as an energy balance, and using cure based on natural remedies. It is, instead, more challenging to think similar concepts related to western medicine: in fact, we do not relate it to the vital energy, but we consider it is based on the idea of the body as a set of moving molecules, and the health as an ability to adapt the challenges when the stress attacks our energy. We have health problems when the stress is intense and prolonged, which could cause chronic diseases [6]. Going deeply in traditional medicine, the illness is described as a physical dysfunction or an unbalance with the whole thing in terms of cosmic energy. Diseases are classified according to their cause or origin, which could be sometimes natural, sometimes spiritual. The related causes could be several: a moral code violation, the non-compliance with the traditions or with the social order or rituals, once again energies unbalance, or contact with biological liquids which are considered impure [7-9]. The traditional medicine's principle of action is that the similar acts on the similar and it can heal the similar, but it could also produce its opposite, in the healing. Natural elements are –commonly- used in ritual practices: everyone and everything could contain a value or a power. As an example, a flame could contain the fire, or a hair could contain the vital principle.

Even traditional medicine considers the importance of an integrated approach, in which we have a good medicine if it is made by a good healer [9].

Lots of problems related to traditional medicine have been reported, first the lack of efficacy proofs. Nevertheless, we also have to consider that alternative drugs or therapies are usually available only in the nutraceutical market, in Western countries, with a serious reported risk of simplification and change of the original formula. This simplification brings to the creation of false equivalence, which could affect the lack of efficacy [10].

If we try to look at the resources of traditional medicine, we find several elements. The first is the healer, who is recognized by the community, even because it is the shared opinion that creates the magician or the healer himself. This figure could also be controversial because it is believed he could cause the diseases and even prepare the cure. His powers could be inherited or acquired through an initiation ritual as it could be a disease leaving visible signs or through contact with the ancestors' spirits. Power or skills could be got with a payment or a sacrifice, or, again, with an education path, acquiring knowledge of plants, rituality, and preparation of medicaments.

The healer has been chosen from the community because he respects the world and the disease's cultural vision. He also responds to a need, which could be the lack of other health services and structures. He is considered able to satisfy the person's health problem, even because he is a social phenomenon, coming from a specific context and experience that is an integrated part of the country. As cultural phenomena, the healers consider the conceptual frame of illness and disease of the community they belong to and where they can provide holistic care. The importance of traditional medicine and healers is out of question for both individuals and community to which they belong. In fact, being healed by someone who corresponds to the own specific medical paradigm reinforces people belief in the shared constructs of health and illness [11].

Another aspect to take into account is the shared thought that traditional medicine belongs only to developing countries. However, the literature explains that there are forms of traditional medicine everywhere and at any time. For example, in the pre-Enlightenment, the medicine was based on the humoral fluids' balance (as blood, phlegm, yellow and black bile). Health and illness were related to a balance, or an unbalance of these, and symptoms' cure was made by inducing them (for example, purging or bloodletting). Symptoms were seen as opposed to those of diseases, rather than treating that underlying causes [5].

Even modern medicine still be full of rituals, first starting from considering a specific sacred space of the cure. In this space, the ordinary becomes significant and, for this, sacred. The hospital could be considered as a temple and the medicine as a god. In this sacred place, we have specific roles, with specific dresses, such as the workers' uniform, but even the sick person's dress (pyjamas

or blouse). The patient often gets a new name that corresponds to the bed, the medical record's number or the illness' name, and the assessment could be compared to a confession [11]. The diagnosis made by the physician confirms his/her power to name an unknown phenomenon, using a sacred language not known to everyone. Also, the physician pronounces the health's conditions as an oracle. Usually, a sacrifice is requested (as following a therapy or a diet, to maintain, or replace, order and balance between health and illness). Last, we have to remind the placebo effect, which is conditioned from the doctor and patient interaction, as something that has to do with the sacred (*Ibidem*).

All the traditional medicines have core assets, and we have to consider them as science, not just cultural elements [4]. The potentials of this approach, linked to the socio-cultural dimension, in terms of individual and group identity, are high, so they have to be heard. One keyword should be integration between different approaches, especially as a good strategy of self-care, which could guarantee compliance. Essential is the presupposition of the person's centrality as a fundamental point and the resources present in the territory or health context. Let us conclude with this sentence from the World Health Organization, to remind the importance of all the forms of care and cure: the spirit that animates African medicine is the same that animates every other form of medicine. Every age and in every climate, fear of disease and death, and the need for food and health, have led men to seek help in what nature offers them [12,13].

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