The Relationship Between
Modern and Traditional Medical Systems:
A Case-Study from Northern Jordan

by

Muhammad Bayir Tbaishat
(B.Sc. in Medical Technology 1987)
Yarmouk University

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Masters in Anthropology in the Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology of Yarmouk University.

Dr. Seteney Shami, Chairman
Dr. Laila Bisharat, Member
Dr. Victor Ayoub, Member

1991
The Relationship Between
Modern and Traditional Medical Systems:
A Case-Study from Northern Jordan

ABSTRACT

The present study seeks to describe and analyze the modern and traditional medical systems in a small town in northern Jordan through a focus on the practitioners. First, the study examines the community and the major socio-economic changes which affected it. Then, it describes the variety of available medical beliefs and practices, and the social dimensions of the medical systems including the social positions of the practitioners, the medical practitioner/patient interaction, and the type of medical knowledge used by the practitioners. In addition, the study examines the various aspects of the traditional medical system in the past and contrasts these aspects with the present day system.

Finally, the study recounts the findings of the preceding analysis and makes the following conclusions: Until the 1940’s, the town’s community depended mainly on agriculture and animal husbandry. The means of production were owned by the principal social unit, the ‘ashirih. The ‘ashirih was headed by a group of shyukh. The main healers in the town came from these shyukh who also served as the town’s religious and political leaders. In the past, religious teachings provided the basis for traditional healing. Upon the fragmentation of landownership, the increasing dependence of the town’s community on modern education became the main route to jobs either in the government or in the army. Government positions and modern education became principal sources of social differentiation, in addition to the previous basis of differentiation based on social origins.

Since it was introduced to the town, the modern biomedical system has been characterized by its great emphasis on the physical and curative aspects of illness. Now, this system is highly valued by the people in the town, particularly the educated and wealthy people; therefore, it occupies the highest symbolic status and is over utilized by the inhabitants of the town.

The traditional medical system and modern biomedical system cannot be regarded as isolated and distinct from each other, as they are connected through the use of modern knowledge, materials, and by the informal referral of patients. These connections have affected the traditional medical system. Specifically, when we examine the various aspects of traditional healing in the past, we find the following changes: First, there is an increasing emphasis among traditional healers, as well as ordinary people, upon a physical and secular interpretation of sickness as opposed to a religious interpretation. Second, the majority of the present healers in the town who practice on a full-time basis come from the groups which did not occupy leading political positions in the town. Third, in the past, traditional healers received people whom they knew because social relationships existed between them. Now all of the healers who were studied receive patients who are not related to them.

Therefore, this study argues that the study of the co-existence of modern and traditional medical systems in socially stratified societies, requires the analysis of these medical systems in the context of their respective socio-economic structure. In addition, the analysis must include the process of interaction between the various types of medical beliefs and practices, and its impact on modern and traditional medical systems.