1. Project Definition

1.1. Traditional Medicine in Yemen

Traditional medicine in Yemen includes medical beliefs and practices determined by epidemiological, cultural, historical, and economic factors. A part of the work carried out in Yemen consisted of establishing an inventory of the medicinal plants used in traditional therapy. For that purpose, the author of this report spent two and a half years as a pharmacist working in the laboratory of the French Medical Mission in the Ta’izz Republican Hospital.

Working in close cooperation with anthropologist Cynthia Myntti and botanist John Wood, we undertook an ethnopharmacological survey of traditional medicine in Yemen. The approach adopted was fundamentally anthropological, with a discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of traditional medicine, an overview of the practitioners, and an assessment of the healing options as perceived by the local people. We then undertook a study of the historical sources to determine the cultural background of the practices, to identify the pre-Islamic (Greek, Indian, and Chinese) elements of the pharmacopoeia, as well as that of Arabic medicine.

1.2. Conceptual Background

Greek medicine began with Hippocrates around 400 BCE. Recognized as ‘The Father of Medicine,’ Hippocrates’ humoral theory is based on four elements (earth, fire, water, air), four humours (blood, yellow bile, black bile, phlegm), and four qualities (hot, cold, dry, wet). These elements, humours, and qualities in various combinations compose an organism and characterize its personality or temperament. Good health is defined as an ideal condition in which equilibrium between the four humours is properly maintained in the body. Two famous authors, Dioscorides (1st century CE) with De Materia Medica describing 519 medicinal plants, and Galen
Jacques Fleurentin (d. after 203), ‘The Father of Pharmacy,’ are the most important sources of this tradition of medicine.

One starting point of medicine in the Islamic world is with the medical recommendations of the Prophet Muḥammad. ‘The Prophet’s’ or ‘Islamic’ medicine combines medical content and religious belief. The Prophet’s immediate successors, the first caliphs, expanded Islamic control over all of Arabia and beyond. This development was reinforced during the time of the Umayyad Dynasty (660–751) that was based in Damascus and established sovereignty over vast territories from the Pyrenees to Central Asia. The Abbasid Dynasty with its capital in Baghdad (751–1258) made significant contributions to the development of culture, the arts, and the sciences. Sponsorship of learning was also extended to north-western Africa (the Maghreb) and the Iberian Peninsula (al-Andalus). Many of the treatises of Greek and Ayurvedic medicine were translated into Arabic and thus became available to the Muslim scholars. Innovative new medical treatises were composed, including *The Comprehensive Book on Medicine* by Rhazes (d. c.925) and the *Canon of Medicine* by Avicenna (d. 1037). Ibn al-Bayṭār (d. 1248) wrote the *Treatise on Simples*, describing no less than 1500 drugs. The texts of classical Arabic medicine were eventually translated into Latin and provided the basis for European medicine.1

1.3. **Methodology**

The science of ethnopharmacology is the interdisciplinary investigation of the full set of medical approaches that use remedies of vegetable, animal, or mineral origin. It includes the relevant knowledge and practices that are implemented by vernacular cultures for therapeutic, curative, preventive, and diagnostic purposes.2 Thus, ethnopharmacology is the study of traditional medicines and the corresponding pharmacopoeias with the help of numerous disciplines. It bridges the gap between practices from the past and modern scientific knowledge. At the same time, it serves as the meeting point between the humanities and the natural sciences—that is, ethnology, history, and linguistics on the one hand and botany, pharmacology, pharmacognosy, and medicine on the other. While it is respectful of traditional practices, ethnopharmacology is resolutely open to innovation.

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1 See Fleurentin and Younos, ‘Médecine islamique’.