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ETHNOGRAPHY OF TREATING CHILDHOOD DISEASES WITH
FOLK AND MAGIC WAYS

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Abstract

In the present paper, the author considers folk methods of treating childhood diseases in the Chechens based on field materials and published articles. For the preservation of human health folk medicine was that constant, one might say, an inexhaustible source, in abundance containing a vital elixir intended to maintain human health, in which folk medicine revealed many means for treating various diseases, studied them and applied them in practice. Chechen folk medicine manifests not only the presence of traditional methods based on millennial practical knowledge, but also the observance of various magic methods that were irrational in nature. The historical approach to the study of traditional medical culture makes it possible to reveal the cultural interaction of ethnic communities and determine the place and role of folk medicine in ethnic life. It shall also be noted that the study of folk medicine, including the methods of treating childhood diseases, has particular theoretical and practical importance. The knowledge of folk traditions of medicine makes it possible to use them at present, since the accumulated rich experience of folk medicine continues to develop. In some cases the results of traditional folk methods of treatment indicate their high efficiency. On the other hand, they used various techniques that were magic in nature. Such a combination of rational and irrational, empirical knowledge and religious and magic ideas will be considered in the given paper.

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1. Introduction

Traditional methods of treating the Chechens have never been described, they were transmitted from mouth to mouth, from generation to generation, so many of its rational components were supplemented by different magic and religious ideas. And yet, in the traditional spoken medicine of the Chechens the same main sections that are known in scientific medicine have been preserved for centuries, in this case we will consider the sections related to our topic – the treatment of childhood diseases.

2. Problem Statement

The problem statement is that the available materials for treating childhood diseases give reason to state that traditional Chechen medicine is based on positive folk knowledge in combination with magic and religious means. Clearly, it was impossible to separate the practical knowledge accumulated over a long time from magic and religious means that were in interaction, although folk rational (practical) means of treatment were more effective.

3. Research Questions

The subject of the study is the analysis of traditional techniques and methods of treating childhood diseases in Chechens.

The paper also discusses the following:

- Folk methods of treating childhood diseases;
- Magic and religious remedies in the treatment of childhood diseases.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study includes the analysis of folk methods of treating childhood diseases in Chechens.

5. Research Methods

The present study utilized the comparative-historical method, which defines the approach to the studied phenomena as to certain realities of historical reality.

6. Findings

The interest in traditional folk medicine, which has increased in recent decades, should be explained by practical and theoretical results. The study of empirical ethnographic material provides an opportunity to expand the knowledge of modern medicine, an arsenal of therapeutic tools and methods. Bromley (1973) wrote that folk medicine "... is an indispensable part of traditional everyday culture. The latter forms the main core of the subject field of ethnographic science. This defines the importance to study folk medicine for the ethnographic characterization of the peoples of the world" (p. 35).

The academician also pointed out that:

The traditional experience of the peoples of the world in the field of medicine is now widely studied in many countries. Significant interest in folk medicine appeared in the USSR (Russia – Z.Kh.). It was studied in various parts of the country by the representatives of many scientific disciplines, both natural and social sciences. (Bromley & Voronov, 1976, p. 45)

The natural and climatic living conditions of the Chechens distinguished by wealth and originality, as well as other peoples of the Caucasus, contributed to the accumulation of quite rich experience in the treatment of various diseases and the preservation of health. It should be highlighted that the formation and accumulation of medical experience, as we see it, is connected not only with the wealth of nature, but also with the way of thinking, with various features of the world understanding, as well as the nature of socio-economic relations. The main form of medical knowledge transfer of the Chechens is oral-visual (Arshba, 2007).

Folk medicine of the Chechens, like other peoples of the Caucasus, is a generalization of centuries-old folk medical experience and practical knowledge. It (folk medicine – Z.Kh.) was characterized by the use of both rational and irrational methods of treatment, primarily in the treatment of childhood diseases, however in reality these two methods were quite intertwined.

It is noteworthy that Chechen folk medicine included a sufficient volume of rational therapeutic elements, which were based on dietetics, phytotherapeutic, biochemical and physiotherapeutic effects.

When the cause of the disease was clear and explainable, the doctors used the methods of rational treatment. It was believed that some childhood diseases are associated with adverse natural factors and living conditions – heat, cold, injuries, etc. In such cases, a sick child was treated with rational methods – compresses, warming, different herbal extracts, massage, and various medicines of vegetable and animal origin, goat fat. In case of cold-related diseases, the child's body was rubbed with internal or goat fat (*мохъ*), oil, a child was bathed in different herbal extracts; given marjoram and nettle herbal concoction, etc. In folk medicine, the Chechens distinguished between “hot” (*дагар йойъху*) and “cold” (*уело*) diseases. The main symptoms of the “hot” diseases – *йовхан цомгар* – were rapid pulse, high temperature, white plaqued tongue, etc.

The child was bathed in hot water, in a decoction of “sunny grass”, chicken droppings and garlic. A shirt wetted in this water was put on a child, and water was poured on a road fork (Bataev & Khasbulatova, 2012). Such methods of treating childhood diseases were also typical for other peoples of the Caucasus, Kabardians, “in case of cold-related diseases, which were frequent, they resorted to rational methods of treatment: children were given hot milk with goat or bear fat, at the same time they were rubbed with goose or goat fat and warmly wrapped, there were other remedies (Borlakova, 2014). The Georgians rubbed the body with vinegar, vodka, pork or goat fat. If there was a high temperature, socks wetted with vinegar were put on a child. During severe headaches, compresses were made: a wet towel or cloth wetted in a mixture of vinegar and water, cabbage or beet leaves were put on the head...” (Solovyova, 1995).

If a child caught a cold, he was put in an untreated stomach of a newly stabbed cow. The informants said that he had to be immersed in manure to the head and recovered if he fell asleep in it.

“Берана хьацар а долуш и талора” – “the child sweated and recovered” (Yusuphadzhieva, 1986; Umarhadzhieva, 1984).

As it was noted, the Chechens considered the heat a frequent cause of childhood diseases. For example, in summer the infant experienced sunken fontanel, swollen palate, increased breathing. In this case, according to many of our informants, black sheep’s wool wetted in a raw egg was applied to the fontanel. The child was bathed in hot water, i.e. in a decoction of “solar grass” – collected with the roots of wormwood, mint, marjoram with the addition of ash, chicken droppings and garlic. A shirt wetted in this water was put on a child (Saglaeva-Maltsagova, 1984). As we see, quite rational means here are supplemented by irrational actions. However, irrational methods of treatment also prevail in the custom of “*даш доьттар*” (lead drain), which is quite common in the past for Chechnya and Ingushetia. According to our field materials, this method of treatment was used in flat Chechnya if a child slept restlessly, startled or shouted in sleep. The reason for this condition was fright. People who were able to treat such diseases were both men and women. The “healer” warmed the animal fat and straightened the lead there, which immediately melted, the child was covered with a handkerchief and lead was poured into the water over his head three times, while pronouncing the name of an object or an animal. If during the next drain the form of lead corresponded to the named object or animal, this was the cause of the child’s illness. After the ceremony, the resulting lead figure, wrapped in a rag, was hung around the neck of a patient. After 3 days, the figure was thrown into the flowing water asking to carry away the disease and its cause – “*Везин Дела, кху доьдачу хица дIаахьойлакха цуьнан бала, кхерам*”. *Даш доьттина хи мала дезара. “Са йоI яра жIало кхерийна и даш доьттича тоелира*”. Water should have been drunk. Our informant said: “My daughter was sick, she recovered after lead treatment” (Khaladova, 1984).

It is noteworthy that using rational methods and methods of treating children, but not finding a rational explanation of the causes of diseases, quite often their (diseases – Z.Kh.) occurrence was associated with the influence and action of supernatural forces.

If a child had severe abdominal pain, the mother dragged him under her dress, turning his face to her, so that his tummy touched her abdomen and pulled through the collar of her clothes. If a child was older, his mother put him facing the wall so that his stomach touched the wall, and she sat with her back to the child’s back and swung from side to side.

The Chechens, like many other peoples of the Caucasus (Ingush, Dagestani, Abkhazians, etc.) (Arshba, 2007; Dzarakhova, 2013; Musaeva, 2007), considered an evil eye that could deprive not only health, but also life as one of the main causes of the disease of both adults and children. Our informants noted the ability of some people to look at the disease, smash a stone, deprive a cow of milk and even kill a person or animal, etc. In general, the Chechens attributed the disease of a child to the influence of the “evil eye”, “evil spirit”, various supernatural creatures (Khasbulatova & Madaeva, 2012).

It is noteworthy that a woman confined in a family circle was the guardian of traditions. From generation to generation, she passed on the customs of antiquity in the field of disease treatment, parenting, housekeeping, etc. Clearly, the entire cycle of magic techniques, customs, means and methods of treatment was aimed at preserving the life of children.

The Chechens, like other peoples of the Caucasus, widely used amulets to escape from the “evil eye”. The simplest were a red woolen thread tied on the hands of a child, pieces of a branch of quince,

hawthorn, sayings from the Quran sewn into the tissue or skin – “жайна” or “хлайкал”, which differed in their design. These amulets were to be sewn by a first-born girl whose parents were alive.

People having an “evil eye” could be not only living people, but also dead people. The amulets for such cases were amber beads “чилиж”, stones with holes, shells, salt, coal, bear claws, etc.

Most often, the cause of the child’s illness was considered to be an “evil eye” or “хьам” – “grievance of the deceased” that was relieved by a “specialist” by measuring the elbow with a handkerchief – “долл дустар”, which is confirmed by our field materials (Khamathanova, 1979). Pointing to such a diagnosis Islamov (1972) wrote:

Whispering some spell an ordinary women’s handkerchief was put three times over the head of a patient (a child – Z.Kh.) ... A knot was tied at one end of the handkerchief. Then, from this node, she measured the distance to the opposite angle with her elbow, while whispering a spell prayer. The distance measured in this way between these two points served as the basis for “diagnostics”. (p. 62)

There was another way of determining the “evil eye” – coal was thrown into the container with water, pronouncing the names of the suspects, whose corner would sink to the bottom of the container, that person had the “evil eye”. The informant noted that water and coal were thrown at the intersection of three roads (Abdulazieva, 1984; Mustigova, 1984).

The most common treatment for the “evil eye” was smudging and water spotting. Fire and water played an important role in all types of magic. The smudging procedure (“клар тухар”) could be performed by an older woman in the house, without resorting to the help of a healer. For smudging, the following components were collected: “чорне тляхь дериг – (хьакхар – fat), цеца тляхь ериг – (жьюраш – sifting); чам беи тьухарг (тьюха – salt), бьяццара бехчалг – (green flap), члера даьлахк – fish bone, хьожа егла буц – thyme, ахар – corn flour, саврамсекха чльюриг – garlic skin, хьоху чльюриг – onion skin. A flap of a person suspected of having an “evil eye” was put there, necessarily a flap of his mother’s clothes. All this was mixed and set on fire, and the child was exposed to smudging (Kudusova, 1991).

For all the peoples of the Caucasus, including the Chechens, the real disaster was childhood diseases and high infant mortality, which was mainly explained by the influence of the “evil eye” of various supernatural forces.

As noted earlier, the Chechens used various methods of treating the “evil eye”, for example, burning salt on fire, burning coal and salt in fire, etc. These actions were to be accompanied by appropriate conspiracies – “луца”. The salt and coal thus enchanted were wrapped in a green rag at the intersection of three roads and by throwing the content of the knot to the ground, they said: “Шад баьстича, бегаболда, йол лахьорца – лахьаболба, доьдачу хица гIолда, хи соьучу сацабалба” – “With the untied knot, let it shake off, let it gather with the earthfork, let it take off with flowing water, where the water will stop, let it stop!” (Yandaev, 1984).

The Chechens have long known childhood infectious diseases – “*tledarchy*” – rubella, “*khartanash*” – measles, “*morzgulash*” – smallpox, etc. In some diseases, with the help of various prohibitions, contacts were avoided, in others – contacts were approved.

The treatment methods were mostly irrational. For example, smallpox was guarded to be called smallpox, and was called “beautiful”, “kind”, it was spoken about affectionately, asked to leave them, referring to poverty, which is unbecoming for such a “good disease”, etc. Our informant Khokkhu Dadaeva, born in 1899, whose grandfather was a doctor, said: “*и цамгар хьилча, цле тледарчий хиттара, наварий ирралла йлира наьI сагIийна тIе, кора тIе чу хIоа а дуйллий стака хотта дура хи чохьа, меттаца а цIе хума тохара, бедар цIенаг юхара. ЦIийина шура, мерза хумнаш яа юьра сих тIе йьола алара. Бераш вовших лардора. Вокхачуна тIе ца йола алара*” – “with this disease, “red spots” appeared, sharp objects were put in the house at the doorstep, a container of water with an egg was placed on the window. When the child recovered, the egg was broken against the floor. It was impossible to step barefoot on the floor or let a barefoot person to the sick. People tried to make the bed with something red, the windows were also covered with red material. They tried to give more sweet, give more boiled milk. After recovering, the child was immediately bathed with fresh meat broth or warm whey”.

When the signs of smallpox appeared in the child, a rooster was cut in the center of the room – “*corza borglal*” – and the palms, forehead and cheeks of the child were covered with his blood. Some “doctors” suggested changing the cradle. Smallpox was very disfiguring, so this disease, as noted, was praised, caressed, asked to leave the sick child.

Similar infectious diseases also occurred in other people of the Caucasus, for example, among the Abkhazians. The Abkhazians have a great fear of smallpox compared with other diseases. It is considered that this disease has the divine patron and is treated differently than other diseases. Zoskhan is considered the master of smallpox. This Saint appeared in Abkhazia quite recently. Before eviction to Turkey the Abkhazians almost did not know smallpox at all. For the Abkhazians, as well as for all people of the Caucasus, it was forbidden to use any drugs to treat smallpox” (Smirnov, 1896).

For protection from a malefice, a fright, etc. the Georgians, as well as the Chechens, put coal, a knife under a pillow, hung up a bead in a cradle – “*самвалэ*” to avoid the “evil-eyed” person, a shell – “*гьринчила*” – to destroy an “evil eye” of a “white” person ...” (Solovyova, 1995).

To protect a child against “malefice” and “evil forces” the Balkars, put the claws of a wolf or a lynx, scissors in a cradle as an amulet; later they were replaced by the amulets connected with Islam religion ...” (Kuchmezova, 2003).

The list of amulets which protected the child from a malefice of the Chechens, as well as other people of the Caucasus, the Adygei, the Ingush, the Georgians, the Armenians (Khasbulatova, 2007) is so diverse that it may become a separate subject of research.

The care for a sick child was careful, the great importance was given to hygiene, a diet, food bans. The patient was surrounded with care, favorable atmosphere, protected against noise.

Due to the wrong treatment quite often children had digestive tract diseases. It is known that children liked to play in the spring melt water and in most cases it led to skin inflammation. Skin of hands and legs was then treated – soaked in warm water and greased with butter.

On the basis of the materials of the study it is possible to conclude that even in the absence of necessary conditions of leaving and keeping a child at early age, poor nutrition in a large family, etc. the Chechen women – mothers were capable to grow up children following traditions and customs of the people, which included the rational elements mainly based on observations and attention to the surrounding world.

7. Conclusion

Thus, traditional ways and methods of treating childhood diseases represent the interweaving of rational and irrational methods of treatment characteristic of folk medicine. But, nevertheless, in most cases, in the treatment of childhood diseases and, especially in customs and rites related to the protection of the health of a child, etc., various magic actions and techniques aimed at protecting the child from the surrounding hostile forces were quite important. Hence, traditional experience in the field of child health and treatment of childhood diseases reflects a complex set of religious ideas of the Chechen people and serve as important components of their spiritual culture.

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