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ETHNOGRAPHY OF TRADITIONAL WAYS OF TREATING CHILD DISEASES IN CAUCASUS

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Abstract

The paper considers traditional treatment methods of child diseases among people of the Caucasus on the basis of field materials and published data. It analyzes national ideas of the reasons of child diseases (cold, diet disorder, malefice, influence of supernatural beings, etc.), considerable volume of rational medical elements based on dietology, as well as on phytotherapeutic, biochemical, physiotherapeutic influence. People addressed to rational medical treatment when the etiology could be defined (cold, diarrhea, wounds, cuts, injuries, etc.). In such cases a child was treated with various rational means: diathermy, compresses, herbal extracts, ointments, animal and mineral drugs, massages. Traditional techniques and methods of child disease treatment demonstrate the combination of rational and irrational ways of doctoring typical for traditional medicine. The ratio of rational and irrational methods of treatment was different depending on the disease. The national experience in the field of children's health and treatment of child diseases reflects the accumulation of positive experience of doctoring and a complex set of religious ideas of the people of the Caucasus, their mindset being an important component of their spiritual culture. Traditional treatment of child diseases shall be considered within two aspects – as the accumulation of positive medical experience and as an important element of folk beliefs. The study of traditional medicine, in particular ways of treatment of child diseases, has important theoretical and practical value. In some cases, the knowledge of national traditions of doctoring allows using them at present.

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Keywords: People of the Caucasus, traditional medicine, child diseases, magic techniques, amulets, rational treatment methods.



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1. Introduction

One of the main values for the people of the Caucasus were children – successors of patrimonial, family and teip traditions. Parental status was perceived as an urgent need, without which human life, family and society was almost losing its initial significance. This belief was occasionally noted by ethnographers-specialists in Caucasian studies: thus, the people of Dagestan considered the birth of children, “continuation of life of the family and the lineage” as the most important family and social duty of a person (Musaeva, 2006, 2007). The same may be applicable to other people of the Caucasian region. In this regard it seemed logical that the traditional culture of the people of the Caucasus fostered the development of multiple ceremonies, rituals, rational and irrational methods related to the maintenance of physical and mental health, which overall objective was health protection of a mother and a child and treatment of child diseases.

2. Problem Statement

Prevalence of child diseases, high child mortality and lack of professional medical care in the majority of Caucasian regions led to the appearance and active development of national medical knowledge based not only on rich empirical experience, but also on religious ideas, beliefs in various magic methods of treatment, i.e. traditional medicine included both rational and irrational ways and methods of health treatment. The medical culture of the people of the Caucasus that was developing throughout centuries represented a synthesis of “medical thinking and medical practice of the people” (Mindadze, 2015). The ratio of rational and irrational methods of treatment was different depending on the disease.

The study of traditional medicine, in particular ways of treatment of child diseases, has important theoretical and practical value. The knowledge of national traditions of doctoring allows using them at present. In some cases, the application of traditional methods of treatment demonstrates their efficiency thus attaching practical significance to the study of traditional medicine (Arshba, 2007).

3. Research Questions

Traditional medicine is the field of knowledge that includes ideas of diseases, their appearance, course and treatment, treatment methods and means, as well as concomitant ceremonies and rituals (National Knowledge. Folklore. Folk art., 1991). The paper considers the main features of traditional ways of treatment of child diseases in the Caucasus particularly emphasizing some aspects of this extensive and many-sided topic.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this work is to study one of the key aspects of traditional medicine of the people of the Caucasus – a complex set of ways and methods of child diseases treatment, which ensured the protection of physical and mental health of the younger generation. Traditional treatment of child diseases shall be considered within two aspects – as the accumulation of positive medical experience and as an important element of folk beliefs.

5. Research Methods

The study is based on a comparative-historical method, which allows considering the studied phenomena within the historical reality that varies in time and under the influence of any specific historical conditions. Besides, the authors used synchronous and diachronous methods considering the subject of study in development, in unity of history and the present, revealing the mechanism of their interaction.

6. Findings

Traditional medicine of the people of the Caucasus, as well as other nations, represents a synthesis of centuries-old national medical experience and practical knowledge. Especially in the treatment of child diseases it requires the application of both rational and irrational ideas, which in reality were quite often combined.

The traditional medicine of the Caucasian people included a considerable amount of rational medical elements based on dietology, as well as phytotherapeutic, biochemical, physiotherapeutic influence.

People addressed to rational medical treatment when the etiology could be defined. According to them, many child diseases were considered a consequence of adverse natural factors – cold, heat, various injuries, etc. In such cases a child was treated with various rational means: diathermy, compresses, herbal extracts, animal and mineral drugs, massages, etc. Thus, in case of catarrhal diseases the Chechens applied mutton or goat fat or oil to a child's body; bathed a child in decoction of different herbs; gave drink decoction of marjoram and nettle; honey and milk, etc. The Chechen national doctors distinguished between “hot” and “cold” diseases (Bataev & Khasbulatova, 2012). During the treatment of catarrhal diseases, the Adyghe gave children “hot milk with goat or bear fat, or oil, and applied horse, goose, or goat fat on a breast and wrapped the child up with warm things. Besides, they used serum with unsalted sour cream, milk boiled with ramson or onions” (Mambetov & Maslov, 1981, p. 7). In case of cold and bronchitis the Azerbaijanis widely used garlic and a special grade of red onions (Zakhidova, 2017). In the same cases, the Georgians applied vinegar, vodka, pork or goat fat to a child's body. When a child had high temperature, he was put on socks moistened in vinegar; given lime tea with raspberry cooked with red wine, fig and cinnamon (Solovyova, 1995).

In case of diarrhea the Abkhazians gave fruits of wild pears to children, sometimes cooked porridge from it; in this case they also used the decoction of a skin of a pomegranate (Arshba, 2007).

The Adyghe used the inula root to treat the so-called childhood diseases (Tkhangapsova, 1996).

When people failed to find a rational explanation for a disease, its causes of occurrence were often explained by the influence of the supernatural domain. Thus, in most cases a child disease, especially the disease of a baby, was attributed to the influence of the “evil eye” and “evil spirit”, various supernatural beings.

The ideas of “malefice” were particularly widespread. Thus, according to the Chechens, the blue-eyed and black-eyed people, as well as people with wide eyebrows and dense eyelashes were mainly believed to have an “evil eye”. They thought that even a running horse can fall on fore legs as a result of malefice. There was a saying: “Malefice brings an animal to a cooker and a child to a grave”. According to national ideas, not only people, but also some representatives of fauna, including birds, could have an “evil

eye”. For example, if it was believed that a chicken was the etiology of a child disease, then it was killed and its inner internal cover of a stomach was filled with milk. If in this case the milk was folded, then the chicken was considered a source of evil. However, it was also used for treatment: a child’s body was covered with clotted milk. To avoid “malefice” a child was never praised, especially his beauty, health, behavior, without having spitted out three times. With the same purpose a forehead of a child was smeared with soot, sometimes people attached a big pin, hung up a necklace, tied up a wrist with red or blue threads in a visible place on a child’s clothes. The first 40 days of a child’s life were considered especially dangerous; during this period a child was protected from the influence of “evil spirits” using ash, scissors, matches, etc. as charms (Khasbulatova, 2018).

By saying the corresponding plots and spells the national doctors of the Adyghe “blew off a malefice”. It was believed that if a disease was caused by an evil eye, then a doctor “was blowing off” the evil eye and a patient felt better. For a child not to suffer from malefice, he was put an amulet on his neck and a blue necklace on the same thread, which protected him from malefice (Tkhagapsova, 1996).

To protect against malefice the Armenians dressed a child in the clothes sewed from seven pieces of matter of different color (Antonyan & Israelyan, 2012).

The Chechens used different amulets and charms attached either to a cradle or to a child’s clothes. These amulets represented a set of the most different plants applied sometimes against malefice, a necklace, etc. When a child started walking and could go outside from a yard he was put various charms: a necklace, sticks from quince or pear tree, a pin, etc. on a neck or a wrist to protect him against malefice. There were many different necklaces: they could be gold, amber, and wooden (from a birch), etc. The Chechens believed in the protective power of some trees – a quince, an oak. Early in the morning they took a quince twig and tied it on the left hand of a child. Oak bark was surely brought home where a child was born, fumigated a room and a cradle with it; a piece of bark was sewn up in a hat or hang on a neck. For the same purpose the Azerbaijanis used quince twigs.

The Georgians put a piece of coal, a knife with black handle, a pork bristle, matches in a cradle, hung up a cross from akaka tree, which was considered sacred, a pork snout, a piece of oak bark, shells, enchanted beads from amber or black gagate. Besides, a horseshoe and a pig snout was nailed to a house door against malefice (Solovyova, 1995). To protect their children from evil spirits the Armenians widely used various mascots, amulets, necklaces generally sewed on clothes (Minasyan, Sekhbosyan, & Pogosyan, 2012). Amulets were also widely used by the Ingush people (Dzarakhova, 2014).

To protect their children from evil spirits the Balkars put claws of a wolf or a lynx, scissors, or a knife as charms under the pillow in a cradle; later they were replaced by the amulets connected with Muslim religion: the collection of suras from the Koran, the prayers from the Koran (Kuchmezova, 2003).

The Chechens believed that the “evil spirits” are especially active after the sunset, therefore children were not taken out from the house at this time. If it was necessary to take the child out in the dark, then the parents took a charm (a piece of bread, a piece of coal, an iron item, matches, etc.). If a child fell, then saying a prayer this place was three times marked around with a nail, which was nailed to the place of falling.

If the cause of illness was difficult to detect, the Georgians carried iron objects (scissors, a braid, a sickle) around the head of a child and took them out to the yard or sacrificed in a sanctuary during a religious

holiday. In this case a mother often went door to door to her neighbors and collected flour, sold it and on the gained money bought a white shirt for her child, which he had to wear upon the appointed day in a sanctuary (Burduli, 2016).

The complex set of national ideas of the Caucasians was connected with the treatment of child infectious diseases. The Georgians called these diseases “mistres” and “angels” believing that they are caused by the arrival of supernatural beings into a house. These diseases included smallpox, measles, whooping cough, scarlet fever, mumps. Such diseases were considered sacred: they were called “a debt to god”, “a duty to angels”. Therefore, it was not typical to call a doctor or a healer to such patient, or to try treating him since it was considered as blasphemy. Supposedly the fate of a patient depended on the mood of “mistres”: where they got tender welcome, respect, they stayed for a short time and the disease run easily, otherwise the life of a patient was in danger (Solovyova, 1995).

The Chechens were careful to call smallpox “by name”, they called it “beautiful”, “kind”. When smallpox was diagnosed, a motley rooster was killed in the center of a house, then the corners of the house were greased with his blood and carried around the house three times. People tried to make the bed of a sick child with red fabric, fed him with sweet food. Smallpox could strongly disfigure a child, therefore it was necessary to praise and caress this disease thus cajoling it, at the same time it was kindly “asked” to leave the patient.

If a child had smallpox, the Adyghe made a swing for his entertainment, sang a special “song of smallpox” (Tkhagapsova, 1996).

The analysis of available materials describing the treatment of child diseases allows concluding that the traditional medicine of the people of the Caucasus had multiple rational methods of treatment from various diseases. Besides, this part of the national medical practice maintained the influence of the most ancient religious beliefs and ideas once typical for the people of this region. This includes different types of magic actions, echoes of veneration of sacred places, sacred trees, springs (springs “against malefice”, “milk” springs), iron, various wild (a wolf, a bear, etc.) and domestic (a bull, a ram) animals. This phenomenon is typical for the people of the entire Caucasian region. Thus, with regard to the people of Dagestan it is noted that “an early cycle in ethnography of the childhood was characterized by some archaism, various magic ceremonial actions, superstitions, which remained due to special conservatism and rigidity of the family and living standards” (Musaeva, 2007, p. 18). Researchers-specialists in Caucasian studies repeatedly emphasized this feature – surprising unity of the most ancient beliefs of the people of the Caucasian region. Thus, Arutyunov (2012) considering the Caucasian historical and cultural region an “areal integrity of the highest order” notes: “The pre-Christian and pre-Islamic national pagan patterns, myths, ceremonies, in particular sacrifices go back to extreme antiquity with firmness” (p. 62). The national experience in the field of children’s health and treatment of child diseases reflects the accumulation of positive experience of doctoring and a complex set of religious ideas of the people of the Caucasus, their mindset being an important component of their spiritual culture.

7. Conclusion

The analysis of the above materials demonstrates that many national ways of treatment may be rational thus leading to positive results: these are different types of massage, diathermy, herbal extracts,

different animal and mineral drugs, etc. A great number of rational treatment methods and techniques confirms relatively high level of traditional medicine in the Caucasian region. Traditional techniques and methods of child disease treatment demonstrate the combination of rational and irrational ways of doctoring typical for traditional medicine. The national experience in the field of children's health and treatment of child diseases reflects the accumulation of positive experience of doctoring and a complex set of religious ideas of the people of the Caucasus, their mindset being an important component of their spiritual culture.

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