TRADITIONAL HEALING IN AJARA
(Based on the Practice of Aishe Mjavandze)

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Abstract: Traditional Georgian folk medical culture has a rich and ancient history. Over the centuries, it has evolved and changed, and to this day, various healing methods and remedies have been preserved, which have played a significant role in the daily lives of different communities. Georgian folk medical culture is diverse, shaped by geographical conditions, as well as historical and socio-economic particularities.

In the modern world, the study of ancient folk medicine is becoming increasingly relevant, as numerous studies confirm that folk medicine was capable of addressing various complex diseases – most importantly, primarily through organic means and by adapting closely to nature.

In addition to natural healing methods, magical-religious healing practices have been widespread among different peoples since ancient times. The use of such methods required specific esoteric knowledge, which was passed down from generation to generation, thus maintaining the continuity of healing traditions.

The Georgian people were no exception, as religion has held a significant place in their lives since ancient times. Due to historical processes, various religious layers have accumulated in Georgian everyday life, which can be observed precisely in magical-religious practices.

This article, based on ethnographic material, aims to present the everyday medical practices of a female folk healer active in Adjara in the first half of the 20th century and to explain the role of magical-religious beliefs used by healers within that specific community.

Keywords: folk medicine, medical anthropology, healing, incantations, Adjara, Kobuleti, healer,folk practitioner.

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Introduction. Folk medicine constitutes one of the essential components of the medical culture of different peoples and was especially widespread in pre-modern societies. It represents a system of healing practices developed within local communities to address both psychological disorders and physical ailments.

Traditionally, folk medical culture is divided into two main types: the empirical-rational and the magico-religious. The first encompasses the naturalistic and empirical understanding of diseases and healing methods, relying on herbs and natural remedies; the second is grounded in beliefs, rituals, and magical-religious practices concerning illness and recovery (Mindadze, Traditional Medical Culture of the Georgian People 2013).

Among Georgians, as among many other peoples, both types were practiced. Religion has always occupied a central place in Georgian life, and alongside herbalists, there were individuals who healed through magical means-primarily incantations. Various charms were used to cure specific ailments, and almost every village had at least one such healer, typically a woman. Folk healers were regarded as wise and knowledgeable persons, highly respected by the community. They were believed to possess special abilities to identify disorders and restore health.

According to scholarly perspectives, empirical folk medicine may be viewed as the initial stage in the historical development of medicine-a complex of orally transmitted medical knowledge within specific communities. As medicine evolved, traditional healing developed further on its basis and continued to exist even after the establishment of formal, institutional medicine. In many contexts, it still functions today as an autonomous system (Mindadze, Georgian Folk Medicine (Based on the Ethnographic Materials of the Highlanders of Eastern Georgia) 1981).

Regional variations are one of the characteristic features of folk medical practice. These differences are conditioned by biogeographical and ecological factors, as well as by the historical and social development of particular communities. Consequently, healing methods and remedies differed from one region to another. Because the transmission of folk medical knowledge was primarily oral, traditional medical culture accumulated multiple layers-terminological, semantic, and religious-reflecting the historical processes through which it evolved.

The tradition of folk healing in Adjara forms part of the broader Georgian healing practice but also possesses specific local features. The region's turbulent history, shaped by continuous Russo-Ottoman wars, had a profound impact on the social and political life of the Adjarian population. The absence of social welfare and medical institutions particularly affected rural inhabitants, who lived in poverty and isolation. Under these conditions, the need for traditional healers grew, and the institution of the so-called ekimbashi-the folk doctor-acquired renewed significance.

As in many parts of Georgia, the transmission of healing knowledge and methods in Adjara generally occurred through inheritance. Several families were especially renowned for their healing traditions-among them the Gorgiladze, Khabazi, Mikeladze, Gegidze, and Duadze lineages. Some specialized in treating surgical conditions, while others (such as the Gorgiladze and Gegidze families) focused on internal diseases. (Chirgadze 2008)

In most cases, women practiced internal medicine. These local healers, functioning as dastakrebi (wise women or midwives), received modest compensation in kind or in money, but there was no fixed payment rate (2008) n.d.).

Our research focuses on the healing practice of Aishe Mjavandze, a traditional healer from Kobuleti, whose ethnographic case allows us to illustrate the broader picture of folk medicine in Adjara and the specific methods employed by local practitioners.

Methodology: The presented paper is based on oral and folkloric materials; therefore, the research process employed the method of interviews, as well as qualitative analysis of letters, personal diaries, and other written documents, through which the ethnographic data discussed in the article were obtained.

Aishe Mjavandze's Healing Practice

According to oral testimonies provided by her grandchildren, who as children closely observed her interactions with patients and the preparation of various remedies, Aishe Mjavandze was a renowned folk healer and self-taught midwife living in the village of Tskhavrokva, Kobuleti District. She was born approximately between 1865 and 1870 and assisted in the delivery of around 1,500 women throughout her lifetime, without a single recorded fatal case.

She inherited her medical knowledge from her grandmother, and today her granddaughter continues to prepare various curative ointments based on this transmitted knowledge. Thus, the lineage of healing practice within this family extends over at least three generations-spanning roughly three centuries.

According to family recollections, Aishe Mjavandze spent most of her life traversing the mountains and rocky terrain, collecting medicinal herbs-roots, bulbs, stems, leaves, and flowers. She possessed detailed knowledge of the curative properties of each plant. From these, she prepared melkhem-ointment-particularly effective for wounds. The ointment was always applied with a bird feather, an act symbolically associated with purity and softness in local folk belief.

Numerous cases attest to the effectiveness of such traditional treatments. There were instances when physicians were unable to help patients, yet the intervention of a folk healer produced positive results. As Eteri Kalandarishvili recalls, Aishe successfully treated a patient suffering from skin cancer-referred to locally as „mchameli“ (“the devourer“). Nevertheless, she was once arrested, as at that time healing through folk methods was officially prohibited.

Eteri Kalandarishvili also recounts how Aishe saved a young man from leg amputation. Using an herbal ointment she had prepared, she managed to restore the injured leg within several days, preventing its loss. Such cases contributed to her reputation, and she became widely known not only in her own village but throughout the Kobuleti region.

Given the socio-economic circumstances of the time, compensation for treatment was typically provided in kind. Patients brought everyday goods-soap, sugar, gauze, or occasionally money-as payment. However, in most cases, Aishe offered her help without charge, treating wounds, skin diseases, hernias, rickets, and rheumatism.

One particularly noteworthy ritual employed by Aishe Mjavandze was used to treat rickets (rakhiti). On the day before treatment, at dawn and in complete silence, she would walk to the mill and collect seven stones from the millstream-stones touched by „the waters of seven mills,“ as she described it. She then gathered various herbs and prepared a chain. At home, she lit a fire, placed the chain in the flames, and then added the collected stones. She boiled the herbs in a pot over this fire, and when the decoction was ready, the child to be treated was wrapped in warm cloths and held above the steaming pot. When the steam began to fade, Aishe would drop one of the glowing stones into the pot, releasing another wave of steam, and then gradually added the heated chain, allowing the child to „bathe“ in the vapor.

After the steaming, the child was taken to a staircase, through which Aishe performed a symbolic act: she would lightly strike the step with an axe near the child’s feet, then pass the child over seven steps, together with the chain used in the ritual. The rite was performed only during the period when peach trees had leaves. In conclusion, the healer placed peach leaves in a cradle, laid the naked child upon them, covered the child with more leaves, and wrapped them together so that the child would sweat. This ritual was repeated three times, on nights of the full moon. According to local belief, after this treatment the child would inevitably begin to walk. Although the incantation accompanying the ritual has not survived, the use of peach leaves clearly reflects an understanding of their therapeutic properties-possibly their effect on muscular strength and firmness.

Particularly striking is Aishe’s use of seven stones drawn from the millstream. In Christian symbolism, the number seven signifies completeness and perfection, associated with the seven days of creation and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is thus plausible that this numerical motif entered the ritual under the influence of Christian tradition and was interpreted as a means of restoring bodily wholeness.

Another healing method practiced by Aishe concerned injuries caused by falling from trees-a common occurrence in rural life. When someone fell, she would immediately dig into the earth at the site of the accident, locate pieces of charcoal, wash and crush them, dissolve them in water, and make the unconscious person drink the mixture, which, as witnesses report, would rapidly revive them.

For rheumatism, Aishe used baya flowers each spring. She washed and crushed the blossoms, placed them into a small box, applied the substance to the patient’s calves, and wrapped the area tightly. After several days, the skin burned and formed ulcers that released fluid. She then treated the wounds with her ointment until they healed completely. As her granddaughter recalled: „She said everyone must do this in the spring-to draw the dampness out of their legs.“

In addition to empirical remedies, Aishe Mjavandze also used incantations (shelotsvebi) for various ailments. Thanks to the efforts of her granddaughter, Meri Kalandarishvili, several of these incantations have been preserved.

As previously noted, Aishe Mjavandze employed not only empirical remedies but also magical-religious practices-incantations (shelotsvebi)-which were recited to cure a range of illnesses. The ethnographic material reveals a syncretic layering of pagan, Christian, and Islamic elements deeply embedded in everyday life. These charms thus represent valuable ethnographic artefacts that reflect the coexistence and gradual transformation of religious traditions over time.

All prayers and charms began with the invocation:

“In the name of God,
The Father, the Son,
And the Holy Spirit…“

and concluded with the formula:

“As the knife’s edge is cut,
So may the knife’s handle be joined;
As the Billhook’s edge is cut,
So may the Billhook’s handle be joined;
As the Billhook’s edge is cut,
So may the Billhook’s handle be joined;
My prayer is a true prayer,
Let it suit this woman/man/child [name and surname],
I am the one who prays,
Blessed be the Creator, Amen.“

Incantation against the Evil Eye (Version I)

In the name of God,
The Father, the Son,
And the Holy Spirit.
I pray against the evil of the eye-
Of the fair-skinned, the dark-haired, the red-haired,
The tall and the short,
The insider and the outsider,
The old and the young,
The woman, the man, the child,
The neighbor, the relative, the friend.
O Lord, protect them all
From the envious and malicious eye,
Bless with Your cross this woman/man/child [name and surname],
And whoever drinks or uses this blessed water,
Amen.

Incantation against the Evil Eye (Version II)

In the name of God,
The Father, the Son,
And the Holy Spirit.
I pray against the evil of the eye.
The one who harms, the one who glares,
The one whose gaze burns-
O Lord, remove from this person
The curse of the evil eye!
Let the bronze burst,
Let the gaze dissolve,
Let the venom retreat,
Let the black water and the dark serpent depart!
Let owls cry over it,
Let its shoulders grow weak,
Let it wither and vanish,
The one who has looked upon you with an evil spirit.
Amen.

Incantation for a Swollen Throat

In the name of God,
The Father, the Son,
And the Holy Spirit.
I pray for the one whose throat is afflicted.
The swelling has risen
Upon the neck and throat-
Deer and gazelle, why do you gnaw upon this child?
In the winepress of Yagund,
Christ stood at the altar;
Christ said to Peter:
“Why do you not eat bread,
Why do you not drink water?
I will breathe life into you,
I will drive away your pain.“
Amen.

Incantation for Migraine

In the name of God,
The Father, the Son,
And the Holy Spirit.
I pray for the one suffering from migraine.
Migraine came upon me
On a Monday morning-
I was eating leeks, bitter as gall,
Saint George appeared
And drove it away at dawn.
Amen.

Incantation for Milk Retention (of Cattle or Nursing Women)

In the name of God,
The Father, the Son,
And the Holy Spirit.
I pray for milk to flow freely.
O milk, O gentle creature,
Why do you not rise, why do you not flow?
What evil spell is upon you?
I will cut you with the dawn,
With a blade long-handled and bright,
I will cast you into the pot of the Rioni River,
I will boil you, I will froth you,
I will make you flow like water,
I will make you run like the wind.
Amen.

Incantation for a Stiff Neck (Performed with Massage)

In the name of God,
The Father, the Son,
And the Holy Spirit.
I pray for the one whose neck is stiffened.
Two trees stood in the sea-
One with roots, one without;
Two doves perched upon them-
One winged, one unwinged.
Adam strengthened his side,
He spoke to the tree,
The tree spoke to the water,
The water flowed into the sea,
The sea boiled like foam.
O Lord, drive it away,
Let the stiffness vanish like the wind.
Amen.

Incantation for the Frightened (Children or Adults Suffering from Shock)

In the name of God,
The Father, the Son,
And the Holy Spirit.
I pray for the frightened soul.
O heart, come home-
What has frightened you?
The cat has frightened you,
The dog has frightened you,
The cow has frightened you,
The horse has frightened you,
The man has frightened you,

The woman has frightened you,
A spirit has frightened you-
Whatever has frightened you,
May that very thing heal you.
Amen.

These incantations exhibit the deep intertwining of religious symbolism and folk cosmology within the healing tradition of Adjara. The coexistence of Christian formulae, nature imagery, and animistic motifs demonstrates the persistence of pre-Christian beliefs transformed through the moral and spiritual framework of later religious layers.

Conclusion. The case of Aishe Mjavandze, as documented through oral and ethnographic materials, is one of many examples of traditional folk healing in Adjara. Nevertheless, it is distinguished by several unique practices that are not widely encountered elsewhere and therefore constitute important local specificities within Georgia's ethnomedical tradition.

Traditional medicine in Georgia exhibits regional variation, shaped by ecological conditions, historical developments, and religious influences. In Adjara, the ethnomedical system combined empirical–rational approaches (such as the use of herbs and natural substances) with magico-religious elements, including ritual healing and incantations. These practices formed a complex therapeutic worldview in which the physical and spiritual dimensions of illness were inseparable.

Although the institution of the ekimbashi (folk healer) and the practice of traditional healing have lost their former prominence, they continue to exist today. A central question arises: why do people still turn to folk medicine despite the availability of modern medical alternatives?

From our perspective, several factors contribute to this continuity. First, there remain strong natural and cultural connections within communities that sustain traditional practices as integral aspects of daily life. Customary prohibitions, taboos, and religious beliefs-closely linked to the natural environment-continue to frame people's understanding of health and illness.

Second, many turn to folk medicine because of its immediacy and accessibility, as well as the perceived emotional closeness between healer and patient. Modern medical institutions often impose long and impersonal procedures, while folk healers offer a more personal and culturally resonant approach. Patients frequently report that communication with a traditional healer feels easier, more respectful, and spiritually grounded.

Furthermore, folk remedies are often sought to avoid invasive or prolonged medical interventions. The perceived efficacy of traditional treatments-particularly in cases where official medicine has failed-remains a powerful factor in their persistence.

Traditional pharmacology and healing systems have played a vital role in Georgian life across generations, especially in remote communities historically excluded from formal healthcare structures. This study, focusing on one healer from Adjara, reveals only a small fragment of the region's broader ethnomedical heritage.

Future research should aim to document more comprehensively the diseases treated by traditional methods in historical Adjara, the natural and supernatural means employed, and the materials-plants, minerals, and ritual practices-used in therapy. Such research can shed light on the mechanisms of knowledge transmission and the dynamic interplay between empirical and spiritual healing.

We believe that ancient ethnomedical knowledge, once properly studied and systematized, deserves to be integrated-where appropriate-into contemporary medical practice. In the modern world, new diseases continue to emerge, as exemplified by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Ancient folk medicine offers a valuable platform for understanding and enhancing traditional medical wisdom, emphasizing both the treatment and the prevention of illness.

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