

Herbal Medicine in Yemen: Traditional Knowledge and Practice, and Their Value for Today's World

*Ingrid Hehmeyer and Hanne Schönig, eds.
Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012. 249 pages.*

Herbal Medicine in Yemen contains eleven studies on a wide range of virtually unrelated subjects. In their introduction, the editors mention that “religious and magical rituals are employed side by side with *material medica*” (p. 1) in Yemen. This should serve as warning for what is to come and send practitioners of phytotherapy into flight. They assert that Yemenites employ an enormous variety of plant-based medicines and allege that “[t]his is different in other Islamic countries, e.g. Morocco, where animal drugs are widely used” (p. 1). As an herbalist who has lived for extended periods in Morocco, who has also travelled widely therein and met many of its herbalists and healers, their latter assertion is not accurate. In all of the stalls and stores I visited in markets in cities nationwide, the only animal drugs I ever saw were small quantities of dried lizards and other such creatures; I found more animal drugs in the shops of sorcerers and witches who dabbled in the dark arts.

Chapter 1, Ingrid Hehmeyer’s “The Validity of Traditional Medicine as an Effective Tool in Issues of Human Health,” is valuable. She uses the colocynt to demonstrate the value of traditional healing methods and

makes an important point regarding “meaningfulness” in medicine. But instead of focusing on faith in a major monotheistic religion, Hehmeyer seems to endorse the use of “magico-religious rituals,” even though the integration of magic, superstition, sorcery, and witchcraft into traditional Islamic medicine caused it to fall in disrepute and ultimately contributed to its downfall.

Chapter 2, Efraim Lev’s “Eastern Mediterranean Pharmacology,” is partly based on one of his previous publications and seeks to enlarge our knowledge via previously unexploited historical sources. Importantly, he demonstrates that “most of the medicinal plants from South Asia were available in Yemen,” which made the country the medicinal entrepôt for Cairo that, in turn, traded with Sicily, Syria, North Africa, and beyond. Chapter 3, Petra G. Schmidl’s “Magic and Medicine in a Thirteenth-Century Treatise on the Science of the Stars,” is interesting in itself but fits poorly into the study as a whole. In my experience, most Islamic herbalists and *Yūnānī* physicians would be appalled to hear someone associate their medicinal arts with magic. In fact, most *Yūnānī* practitioners seek to disassociate their branch of medicine from all religion, including Islam, considering themselves to be medical doctors trained in ancient Greek medicine.

Chapter 4, Daniel Martin Varisco’s “*Qat* and Traditional Healing in Yemen” provides a generally objective survey of the plant, its use and how Sufis and scholars viewed it, as well as its positive and negative effects. Still, he seems to favor its use despite all of the evidence against it. Although Varisco seeks to address much of the misinformation about *qat*, he provides no clear conclusions regarding its pros and its cons. If anything, it seems that much more research needs to be conducted on this plant.

If Varisco needs to be called out on anything, it is his claim that “the legal issue of treating *qat* as an intoxicant or narcotic in accordance with Islamic opinions” is not “one that needs to be negotiated by anyone outside Yemeni society” (p. 73). And yet he does just that, instead of leaving it to the *mujtahids* or jurists. Muslim clerics have compared *qat*’s impact, which is felt far beyond Yemen, to that of the crack epidemic. For example, some Somali youths in Toronto and Minneapolis have organized themselves into gangs with the predictable results: murder, mayhem, and the destruction of families. Thus Varisco sounds like an outsider when he says that only Yemenis can question its acceptability according to Islamic criteria.

Chapter 5, Miranda Morris’ “The Aloe and the Frankincense,” examines how these plants are used in various Yemenite regions. She points out, perhaps to the disappointment of her colleagues, that witches have fallen out of favor

in Soqatra over the past fifty years. Chapter 6, Ester Muchawsky-Schnappers “Healing through Medicinal Plants,” overviews the Jewish Yemenites’ medicinal treatments prior to their mass migration to Israel around 1950. The chapter includes some interesting use of herbs, but suffers from the book’s fatal flaw: an overemphasis on “the craft.”

Chapter 7, Mikhail Rodionov’s “Honey, Coffee, and Tea in Cultural Practices of Hadramawt,” leaves much to be desired. If coffee and tea can be considered herbs, the same cannot be said of honey. With regards to the history of coffee and tea, the author makes many mistakes. Coffee did not reach Hadramawt “several centuries ago” (p. 148), as the first rumors of its presence can be traced to the thirteenth century (Anthony Wild, *Coffee: A Dark History*, p. 32) and it was widely produced there by the sixteenth century (p. 31). When speaking of the shift from coffee to tea in Yemen, Rodionov associates the former with tradition and the latter with modernity and enterprise (p. 151), despite Wild’s insightful statement: “Once Islam had gone into a general decline, Muslim countries . . . adopted what some see as the more introspective, less excitable tea to accompany the contemplation of their former glories” (p. 227).

Chapter 8, Jacques Fleurentin’s “From Medicinal Plants to Therapeutic Drugs,” is characterized by an ethno-pharmacological approach that respects traditional practices but remains open to innovation, as all herbalists should be. He reminds readers that both Greek and Ayurvedic medical texts were translated into Arabic. Most revealing, however, is the relation of Islamic medicine with Chinese medicine, a relation that has not been fully explored. Unlike other contributors, who conflate bona-fide herbalists with charlatans, he distinguishes among healers who specialize in classical Arabic medicine, engage in magico-religious practices, and practice herbalism. He also shares some of the results of his ambitious study of Yemen’s medicinal plants. Of the 160 plants studied, France’s University of Metz has confirmed through pharmacological evaluation that 75 percent of them are effective (p. 159). The findings, provided on pp. 159-64, are of great benefit.

Yet Fleurentin’s article does contain mistakes. For example, he alleges that coffee was first cultivated in Yemen (p. 158). For a scientist of his caliber, such a mistake is inadmissible. As Wild has shown in *Coffee*,

It is common for the coffee industry to assert that, whilst Ethiopia was the cradle of coffee, Yemen, having imported plants from Ethiopia, was the first country actively to cultivate and trade in the new beverage. In fact, until the mid-sixteenth century, the demand for coffee was met by Ethiopia entirely. Evidence of coffee exports from Zeila, near Djibouti on the western Red

Sea coast, can be found in reports of the jurist Ibn Hadjar al-Haytami of Mecca in the late fifteenth century as well as in an account of a boat captured by the Portuguese in 1542 on the way to Shihir in Arabia. (pp. 69-70)

Furthermore, genetic research into coffee's spread suggests that the original domesticated or cultivated coffee plant came from Harar, eastern Ethiopia (p. 70). As Wild concludes, Harar was the "epicenter of the genesis of the world coffee trade: its cultivated varietal was the source of coffee traded in the earliest days" (p. 70).

Chapter 9, Mohammed al-Duais and Gottfried Jetschke's "The Miraculous Plant Halqa," is an important study of a potentially valuable plant resource that needs greater protection. Little-known outside of Yemen, it may elicit a great deal of interest from outsiders. Chapter 10, Ulrike Lindequist's "A Pharmacist's View of the Potential Value to Modern Medicine of Plants and Fungi Used by Traditional Medicine in Yemen," reports that "extracts of 108 species (about 60 percent of the whole number tested) showed one or more remarkable biological activities" (p. 187). "In many cases," she writes, "the results of the biological screening validates [*sic*] the use of the plants in traditional Yemeni medicine" (p. 187). The results, listed on pages 187-93 and 198-201, are worth their weight in gold. While the scientist reports on some positive effects of *qat* on rats, she stresses that "[t]he results need confirmation from human studies but already they could be helpful in evaluating the risk and/or potential of *qat* for human health" (pp. 192-93). In other words, the jury is still out on *qat*.

In "Health Issues in the Mountains of Yemen," the eleventh and final chapter, Amin al-Hakimi, Anhar Ya'ni, and Frédéric Pelat examine the traditional knowledge of subsistence farmers and the importance of preserving it. Unlike most North American farmers, who are totally disconnected from nature and more closely connected to Monsanto, Yemeni farmers can identify all of the wild and cultivated plants found in their environment, and most of them can identify their major medicinal uses. The list of plants found on pages 207-10, along with the properties ascribed to them by informants, clearly shows how these "illiterate" individuals can be completely literate when it comes to their natural surroundings, whereas most literate members of modern societies are utterly illiterate when it comes to interacting with nature.

Uneven, disjointed, and disconnected, *Herbal Medicine in Yemen* is, on the whole, a mediocre mix of disparate elements. In an apparent recognition of this reality, the editors attempted to give it greater cohesion by describing it as "interdisciplinary." But while this volume does span numerous disci-

plines, it studies no single topic. For example, what does the “science of the stars” have to do with herbal medicine? What about cutting and cauterization and the transferring of disease to a live dove? Why is honey, a non-herb, included, and what do witchcraft, sorcery, and magic have to do with herbal medicine? Besides its overemphasis on “the forbidden arts,” it stresses the role of Yemenite Jews so much that it almost minimizes that played by the Muslim majority. Furthermore, the work contains some annoying instances of inconsistent font sizes. Viewed partially, however, with a focus on specific studies, *Herbal Medicine in Yemen* does make some extremely important contributions to scholarship in the field. This, in and of itself, redeems the work and recommends it to scholars and scientists.

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