

HEALING BY SORCERY IN 17th AND 18th CENTURY MALTA*

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The type of medical care available in Malta from the 16th to the 18th century ranged from that provided by the academically trained doctor, usually a graduate of the medical schools of Salerno and of Montpellier, and by his auxiliaries the surgeon and the barber-surgeon to that obtainable from his rivals, i.e. the lay healers without any medical background. These were elderly Maltese women and Moslem slaves.

I propose to deal with these lay healers because this aspect of our medical history has not been adequately dealt with and because its documentation does not form part of conventional medical sources and, therefore, it is bound to escape the notice of the researcher who restricts his investigations to exclusively medical archives. In fact, the information about this topic is to be found among the records of the trials of the Tribunal of the Inquisition which was set up in Malta in 1575 and remained in action until 1798 when it was abolished by Napoleon on his taking over possession of the Maltese Islands.

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The Tribunal of the Inquisition took cognizance of all issues touching the religious beliefs of Catholics which ranged from blasphemy and heresy to reading and keeping prohibited books, engaging in magical practices to treat illness, believing in the effects of spells as causes of diseases and holding communication with the devil (AIM 79a).

The most notorious healer that persistently occupies the centre of the stage is the Moslem slave. The existence of Moslem slavery is one of the most salient features of Maltese history between 1530 and 1798 when Moslem slaves formed an important component of the population of our Islands during the rule of the Order of St. John. They were owned by wealthy private individuals or by the Order. Besides being engaged as rowers in the galleys, slaves were employed in the building and repairs of the fortifications, in public works, as labourers in workshops and as domestic servants with knights and Maltese families. In 1630 there were some three thousand of them in Malta (population about 60,000) who, because of their occupations came in daily contact with all sections of Maltese society (Mallia Milanes, 1975). In contrast to that of the galley-slave, the life of the land-slave was

not rigorous. It is true that his liberty of movement was restricted but he was protected by law against ill treatment so much so that penalties were laid down for Christians who insulted, molested or beat him. When sick he was treated either at the Holy Infirmary or at the Prison Infirmary at Valletta (Cassar, 1965a; Cassar, 1968).

The slave-healers were either picked up at random from the streets or else they were recommended for their reputation of expertise at treating the sick. There was, for instance, the so-called "barberotto" or barber-surgeon of the Slave Prison who, in spite of his title, does not seem to have received any surgical training at all; the "Papasso" or Mohammedan priest of the same Prison who claimed to be able to "read and write Arabic" and who treated sickness by writing excerpts from the Koran on slips of paper which were handed to the patient (AIM 108a); Stephen Abdalla, to whom "many went to be cured" in the second decade of the eighteenth century (AIM 108b); Gaetano Schembri, a baptised slave, who had been employed for nine years in the Holy Infirmary in the inunction of venereal patients with mercury (AIM 137a); and another slave, who earned his living by repairing shoes (1636) but was renowned for his ability to treat epilepsy (AIM 51a).

The consultation and treatment were usually held in the patient's home, the slave charging from four "tari (one "tari" = 5 m^{ills}) to three "scudi" (one "scudo" = 10 cents) for a visit (1636) but sometimes as much as six "scudi" were asked for, two of which to be paid before the initiation of treatment (1720) (AIM 51b; AIM 108c).

Besides slaves there were elderly Maltese women who undertook the treatment of diseases by instructing members of their families or their neighbours in the application of the traditional remedies that they themselves had learned from their ancestors, or from their own personal experience. Thus a woman from Zebbug (Malta) told the Tribunal how she came to acquire her reputation of treating jaundice. She said that she had suffered from

this disease when she was ten years old and was cured by a man from Attard who treated her with fumigations of burnt blessed oil and candles and with recitation of prayers. Years later she again developed jaundice and treated herself in the same manner with recovery. She then taught others how to treat themselves for this ailment but they preferred to go to her rather than carry out the treatment themselves. Indeed it was public knowledge that patients visited her daily to be cured of their jaundice (AIM 135a).

Sometimes these healers gained their experience from treating sick animals by the casting of spells. Thus in March 1722 a woman from Valletta undertook to treat human beings after having successfully treated sick pigs and dogs struck by the evil eye by fumigating them (AIM 108d).

By the end of the eighteenth century there were no less than five women living at Zebbug (Malta), Qormi and Lija known for these activities. In 1792 a family of three—father, mother and daughter—were similarly engaged (AIM 135b).

Occasionally one comes across priests as healers of bewitched patients. A Sicilian friar at the Carmelite Convent in Valletta was active in 1635. Having diagnosed illness as due to a spell, he prescribed the rubbing of joints with oil and the ingestion of a syrup concocted by himself. He received fees (AIM 51c).

In April 1722 a priest was approached by a sick man who believed that his illness was the result of a spell. The priest tried to persuade him that it was not a question of bewitchment and recommended that he should bathe himself with white wine containing "various herbs and aromatic substances". The man, however, persisted in his belief and went back to the priest. The latter then wrote the name of the person, who the sick man believed to have cast the spell, on a slip of paper and told the patient to burn it while pronouncing these words:— "May the person who is seeking to harm my body and my soul be burned like this paper" (AIM 108e).

Very rarely a priest became involved unwittingly by being asked to bless water

or oil which was subsequently used in a magical ritual as happened in a case in 1720 (AIM 108f).

Finally there was the swindler who undertook to provide the client with the necessary herbs and ingredients but actually supplied counterfeit ones. Thus in 1636 a man confessed to the Tribunal of the Inquisition that he had given powdered tobacco and St. Paul's Earth to a woman who had instead requested powdered "vinca" plant ("Vinea major" and "V. minor." "Gisimin aħmar") and a piece of loadstone to bind her paramour by a spell (AIM 51d).

In February 1722, a slave who had diagnosed illness in a woman as being due to the influence of the evil eye, admitted to the Tribunal that he had undertaken to treat the woman because she was rich and he grasped the opportunity to earn some money which he had to share with the pharmacist who had acted as a go-between (AIM 108g). In September 1794 another slave made a similar confession stating that he had no experience of sorcery and that he did not even know how to read or write but that he pretended to be a sorcerer "only to earn some money to feed himself and his wife" as they were starving (AIM 137b).

Nature of Illness

The nature of the malady is very vaguely stated (1636). It is referred to in such generic terms as a "long standing illness", "illness of seven months duration" "indisposition"; sometimes the sufferer mentions more specific complaints such as "headache", "eye disease", "blindness", "continued fevers", "terzana" and "jaundice"; and occasionally such nosological entities as "epilepsy" and "madness" (AIM 51e; AIM 108h; AIM 135c).

Although it was then a wide-spread belief that illness could be brought about by the harmful influence of the evil eye or by bewitchment or spells, the existence of "natural disease" was not excluded. It was, therefore, important to distinguish between the two types of illness.

The following procedure was adopted by a Moslem slave in August 1722. The

patient was given a piece of paper with a script. After fumigating it with a given "perfumo", it was placed under his pillow. If his illness was a natural one, he was not expected to dream at all but if he was smitten by a spell, he would dream how the spell was cast upon him (AIM 108i). It was important to make this distinction because if the disease was a "natural" one, it called for "natural" remedies but if it was due to a spell this could only be removed by the casting of a counter-spell. Thus a bewitched patient was told by a slave to eat some flour made into a paste with the saliva of the person who had cast the spell (AIM 108j). In the same year another slave claimed to recognise the nature of the disease by observing the urine of the patient in a glass vial (AIM 108k). In 1792 a woman-healer made the differential diagnosis between natural illness and disease due to bewitchment by placing some salt and water in a plate and floating a few drops of oil on the surface. If the oil spread, the sickness was attributed to a spell; but if not, the ailment was a natural one (AIM 135d).

Typical Case Histories

To illustrate the procedure followed by the patient and healer and the background against which it was carried out, I am reproducing two typical case histories. They are translated from the Italian as found in the files of the Tribunal of the Inquisition.

On the 15th November 1636 John Paul Grima of Luqa was accused of obtaining the services of a Moslim slave for the treatment of his niece by witchcraft. "I have a niece", he said, "called Maria, wife of Peter Caruana, who is always ill. I went to the Slave Prison in Valletta to talk to a lame slave, known as the barber-surgeon ("barberotto"), with the intention of asking him to undertake to treat her. After seeing her, he said that he was sorry that he was not in a position to cure her because he did not possess certain herbs that were needed for her treatment. However, he referred me to another slave from the same prison who, he said, would cure her as he was a better "doctor" ("medi-

co") than him. I, therefore, sought out this slave and after giving him an account of her illness he came to visit her at home in Luqa. In the presence of her husband, myself and others, he passed several small pieces of paper containing some writing over a fire and then fumigated them with a perfume which he had brought with him. Then he asked for a receptacle with water which he covered with a bed-sheet. He told us to put our hands in the water and stir it. He next passed a live hen over the head of my niece and later put the already mentioned pieces of paper in a mortar which he pounded into a paste with the "ruta" plant ("Ruta bracteosa. Fejgel) while muttering some words in a low voice. He then instructed us to anoint the legs of my niece with the resulting juice. Finally he told us to melt a lead ball and throw it into a vase of water which the patient had to place over her head. The slave charged us four "tari" and took the bed-sheet saying that it was of no further use for us (AIM 51f).

Here is a summary of another case that was dealt with in the same year. After seeking orthodox therapy at the hands of several physicians, a woman of twenty-two years consulted a Sicilian Carmelite friar at Valletta who ascribed her ailments to a spell and who promised that he would cure her. He gave her some oil with which to rub her eye-brows, ears, nose and upper lip and her knees and feet for four nights. He also prescribed a mixture by mouth which the patient declined to drink as she had heard that the friar had caused the death of several persons who took it. She did not improve and in despair she went to a slave who confirmed that she was under a spell and proceeded to remove it. He took a hen, cut its head, placed it in a bowl and asked the patient to urinate on it. He then divided the hen's head in two and buried the halves under the threshold of two different houses. The following day he gave the woman a mixture to drink consisting of incense and musk in white wine. He then wrote some words on a piece of paper with saffron instead of ink, placed the paper on her chest and afterwards burned

it. He instructed the patient to scatter the ashes on the floor of the church of Porto Salvo at Valletta to remove the spell because, he said, it was in that church that her enemies had bewitched her (AIM 51g).

Social Strata

These beliefs and activities were not restricted to the untutored populace but infiltrated also the higher social strata of the community including members of the Order of St. John and of the priesthood.

In April 1635 the Italian Knight Vittorio Scaglia appeared before the Tribunal of the Inquisition where he accused himself of reading books on necromancy; of having bewitched three persons and indulged in magical practices to find hidden treasure; and of having gone to the extent of invoking the aid of the devil in carnal matters (AIM 51th).

In March 1676 we read of Antonia, wife of the physician Dr. Fabrizio Gauci, resorting to the most repulsive and weird spells to re-kindle her husband's amorous passion for her. As, however, the means adopted by her proved unsuccessful her love turned to hate and she decided to procure his death. She, therefore, invoked the devil and pleaded with him to destroy her husband promising the devil that if he destroyed her husband she would surrender herself to him and allow him to have sexual intercourse with her (AIM 79b).

According to evidence submitted in another case in 1635, the Rev. Pietro Cutajar, who had been sick in bed for four months, believed that his illness had been brought about by a spell cast upon him by another priest, the Rev. Santoro dello Piscopo. Cutajar was convinced that unless Santoro visited him and removed the spell he would not get well. Eventually Santoro did so and Cutajar recovered from his illness so much so that while previously Cutajar "shouted and was agitated he now became calm and restful" (AIM 51i).

At this period a Franciscan friar availed himself of the therapeutic services of a Greek who treated him for a disease of the spleen by placing the patient's foot on the succulent leaf of the prickly pear and then cutting the leaf round the contour of the

foot (Bonnici, 1967).

It is also on record that a lame priest sought treatment from a slave for his disability in 1722 while another one confessed before the Tribunal in the same year that he had fallen "under the influence of a slave to such an extent that he blindly carried out everything that the slave suggested" (AIM 108 l).

Some patients, after the treatment failed, regretted having been so gullible. Thus a woman who was treated by a slave for an ocular ailment in January 1636 not only declared her loss of confidence in her healer but insisted that he should return the fees she had paid him for two visits (AIM 51j). Another sick woman (163b, suspended the remedies ordered by a slave on becoming aware that she was being hoodwinked (AIM 51k). The relative of a patient declared before the Tribunal of the Inquisition in 1792 that the patient recovered from his illness not because of the treatment he had received at the hands of a Turkish slave but because the illness was a reversible one (AIM 135e).

Why did people seek lay healers?

1. Some patients went to the slave or other lay healer because of the reputation he or she enjoyed as a healer; or because they believed themselves to be sick because of a spell cast upon them by an ill-wisher. Other misfortunes were also ascribed to bewitchment, as failure in business affairs, and the course to take was to seek a sorcerer to remove the spell by casting a counter-spell (AIM 37).

2. Others (1636) sought treatment from a slave because they thought that the remedies prescribed were "natural" ones and not magical practices (AIM 51l); or else that the slave had learned them from some medical practitioner (AIM 137c).

3. A number of sufferers decided to seek the help of slaves after they became disillusioned with the treatment of the orthodox physician from whom they did not obtain the relief they craved. Such was the case dealt with by the Tribunal in 1636 of a woman of twenty-two years from Valletta who had been sick for seven months and who after having had "re-

course to prayers and to the physicians" went for treatment to a Sicilian friar and finally to a slave. "I became so confused and so depressed on account of my affliction", she told the Tribunal, "that I did not care by what means the slave would treat me as long as I obtained the desired cure" (AIM 51m). A similar confession was made in 1677 by another woman aged twenty-three years who had been subject to continuous fever for four months and had been unsuccessfully treated with "all the remedies ordered by the doctors". In despair she went to a slave and asked him to prescribe her "the remedies in use in his country" (AIM 79c).

In 1792 a patient suffering from jaundice sought the ministrations of an old woman-healer from Zebbug (Malta) because she felt "so tormented" by her illness that she did not care whether she acted sinfully or not in seeking a sorceress. Another woman with ocular disease and "a pannus in one of her eyes" was induced to resort to magical therapy by the fear of losing her eyesight (AIM 135f).

Methods of Treatment

1. The standard treatment was the fumigation of the patient (1636) with burnt ingredients. In March 1636 a Maltese elderly woman prescribed the fumigation of a sick child with the smoke of a mixture consisting of oil blessed in honour of St. Peter the Martyr, a laurel leaf and a small piece of wood removed from the house door. This method, used in the treatment of three children, cured two of them but failed in the third child who died (AIM 51 n).

Sometimes the material to be burnt consisted in pieces of paper containing some writing which the patient could not decipher (1636) (AIM 51o). This is how a youth of 17 years was treated for epilepsy in 1636. In 1677 a woman suffering from a long standing fever was advised to burn a written piece of paper over lighted coal in a jar and then fumigate herself with the smoke. She was also given a similar slip of paper and told to immerse it in water and drink this water. In 1678 a

patient was fumigated with the smoke of a burnt mixture made of a written paper, saffron and musk. A separate piece of written paper was soaked in water and the patient directed to have three mouthfuls of the liquid and wash the affected parts of the body with the rest (AIM 79d).

Occasionally the fumigation was combined with far more complex ritual. In October 1631 a Maltese woman advised the smoking of the patient's head with the fumes of the resin from "Dorema ammoniacum"; then mixing the ashes with water and, after pounding them, make the sign of the cross over the body joints and finally throwing away the remainder of the mixture from the window saying:—"May the spell be removed as this mixture is being scattered" (AIM 51p). In 1792 a woman treated eye diseases by fumigation with burnt oil and candles while pronouncing the following verses:—

Jekk il ghajn hia kahla
tmur mal berqa
u jekk l-ghajn hia zeroa
tmur bhan-nahla (AIM 135g).
If the eye is blue,
Let it go with lightning.
And if the eye is azure
Let it go like a bee.

In ancient times, fumigation, consisting in the burning of such odoriferous substances as incense, formed part of the pagan religious ceremonial of the Egyptians, Greeks and Hindus and, in more recent times, of the Catholic Church as a symbol of the ascent of prayers to Heaven. It acquired its medical usage through this mystic association with the godhead. Hippocratic writers recommended fumigations with burnt herbs for gynaecological disorders, the smoke being directed into the vagina by means of a reed emerging from the vessels containing the smouldering herbs (Mathison, 1953a). Fumigation also constituted the standard preventive method against the plague by the Maltese sanitary authorities at the Lazzaretto as late as 1810 for passengers and the 1880s for letters (Cassar, 1965b).

2. Although written papers as already mentioned were mainly employed in conjunction with other remedies, their use by

themselves was deemed sufficient to effect a cure. Thus in September 1720 a slave pretended to treat a mentally sick woman by giving her husband three slips of paper with writings on them and telling him to tie one of them to a tree; to let another one to be blown away by the wind and to tear the third one.

The script on these papers appears to have been in Arabic though it is possible that in many instances it was only a pseudo one. In fact one of these papers submitted to the Tribunal of the Inquisition in September 1720 although apparently written in Arabic characters "could not be read as it was made of syllables that made no sense at all"; another paper was described as having a Turkish script. In another instance the wording was genuine and consisted of quotations from the Koran. One of the slaves summoned by the Tribunal in July 1720 stated that what he wrote "were all prayers which we offer to our saints to intercede with God to cure the patient's illness and restore him to good health... They are all taken from the Koran" (AIM 108m).

It is of interest to know that it is customary among Arabian women to-day to wear amulets round their neck in the shape of silver cases containing texts of the Koran written with ink in which myrrh and saffron have been mixed (Mathison, 1958b).

3. The laying of hands figures in some cases. In May 1636 a young man with jaundice was taken to the wife of a baker at Mosta. She treated him by laying her hands on his head and muttering some words which he did not understand (AIM 51q). An old woman from Senglea treated ailments of the spleen in 1635 by laying her hands on the patient's abdomen while reciting prayers and invoking the names of St. Peter and St. Nicholas of Bari.

One may recall that healing by touch has a biblical tradition. Paul raised a dead man to life at Troas by laying himself upon him (Luke, The Acts, Chap. 20, v 10). In Malta Paul healed Publius' father by praying and laying his hands on the ailing man (Luke, The Acts, Chap 28, v 8). In later

Christian times, the saints healed the sick by the same process, i.e., the transference, through their hands, of invisible miraculous forces from themselves to the patient. The possession of a similar supernatural power was attributed to the Kings of France and England to whom patients suffering from scrofula were brought for the "Royal Touch". It is to be noted that the last recorded instances of such treatments occurred as recently as the accession to the throne of Charles X of France in 1825 (Bloch, 1973).

4. Bathing parts of the body was prescribed for various ailments. In 1636 a slave treated a woman suffering from headaches and pains in her arms and eyes by washing her eyes with cotton wool soaked in a solution of rose water containing the white and yellow of an egg. As there was no improvement the patient was told to throw some salt in the street.

In January 1636 a woman of seventy years from Mosta told the mother of a sick child to wash him with water containing the goose-foot plant ("Chenopodium vulvaria." "Nittiena") but had to be careful not to mention the name of Jesus or make the sign of the cross during the bath as it was said that the devil had washed himself with water containing that herb (AIM 51r).

5. Reading from a book over the patient was the method adopted by a slave in 1677 (AIM 79e). The same procedure was used in 1794-97 by priests who believed that a man, diagnosed by doctors as suffering from mental disorder, was really a case of Satanic possession (AIM 137d).

6. The idea was current that evil spirits possessed the power to substitute healthy children by sick ones, hence the term changeling ("mibdul") given to sick children. In 1678 the mother of an ill child was advised to bathe her child in water containing a "certain herb" and then repeat three times the formula:— "Take your child and give me my own" (AIM 79f).

7. In 1636 a sick woman, whose illness was diagnosed as being due to bewitchment, was given two wax dolls by a slave and told to bury one of them in her house

and to melt the other one over a fire (AIM, 51s). This procedure was inspired by the concept of transference of disease, i.e., the belief that sickness could be removed from a patient by passing it on to others or their substitutes by means of objects that have come in contact with the patient. In this particular instance the dolls represented substitute human beings to whom the disease was transferred through touch with the patient; the destruction of the dolls through burial and melting symbolised the annihilation of the human beings to whom the disease had been transferred.

8. Sometimes the religious element predominated in therapy. An elderly woman from Zebbug (Malta) was treating sufferers from jaundice between 1789 and 1792 by smoking them with a burnt mixture of oil and candles blessed on the Day of Purification of Our Lady and making the sign of the cross over the head eyes and joints and reciting prayers to the Holy Trinity and the Madonna. She explained that she expected the patients to get well only if "they had the necessary faith and if they prayed with devotion... I firmly believed that God, by means of prayer, fumigation and the symbol of the cross, would free them from jaundice" (AIM 135h). She was obviously relying on a well-known psychological trait — the suggestibility of the patient — to obtain the desired therapeutic effects.

9. Very rarely, rational methods devoid of magical significance, were employed. A slave ordered venesection from the arm for a patient suffering from headache and the application of ice on the head and hot baths for the feet. He used the same treatment, with minor variations, for a mental case (AIM 137e).

10. These lay healers occasionally practised a sort of preventive medicine by the distribution of amulets. A slave gave one such charm to a man to guard him from getting injured by weapons. It consisted of a piece of paper with a Latin script and the cabalistic knot of King Solomon and the words "Deus meus". Belief in these protective amulets was still current a century later when we come across a priest who carried on him pieces of paper with

extracts of the Gospel of St. John and of the "Miserere" psalm to guard him against being wounded (AIM 108n).

Plague was a dreaded disease in the 17th century not only in Europe but also in Malta. A woman, to protect herself from infection, wore a gilded silver ring on the inside of which were engraved a number of crosses and these letters:— Z+Dia+ Bir+ Sab+Z+HGF+BFRS+ (AIM 51t).

Penalties

The offence of treating sick persons by sorcery, though not countenanced by the state, did not constitute a breach of the lay criminal code but of the laws of the church which condemned superstitious beliefs and witchcraft as being attempts to alter life's events by thwarting Divine will. That is why these cases were dealt with by the Tribunal of the Inquisition and not by the law courts of the state.

Many of the patients tried by the Tribunal had denounced themselves spontaneously "to clear their conscience" when they learned that the practices they had followed were sinful ones; or else they applied to appear before the Tribunal on the advice of their confessor.

The penalties awarded by this ecclesiastical court were of two kinds — corporal punishment for the convicted Moslem slave who was condemned to be publicly whipped through the streets of Birgu, Senglea and Bormla (1720 and 1722) (AIM 108o); and spiritual penance for the Catholic patient seeking cure by sorcery. This penance usually consisted in renouncing all heretical and superstitious beliefs; undertaking not to incur again in the same errors; and promising to fast on Saturdays and to recite set prayers for a period of two years and going to confession and receiving Holy Communion four times a year (AIM 51 u). The patient was then absolved from the excommunication in which he had incurred by his acts (AIM 135i).

In the case of a baptised slave convicted of sorcery in 1797, the penalty consisted in exposing him at the entrance of a church, during the celebration of Mass, with a placard over his chest on which

was written the nature of his offence. This punishment, however, instead of humbling him served as an advertisement of his reputation as a sorcerer. In fact, when asked by passers-by whether he was really a sorcerer he took advantage of their eagerness and readily admitted being so to entice them as clients and exploit their credulity for financial gain (AIM 137f).

Tribunals of the Inquisition abroad have acquired a notorious reputation for their appalling record of witch hunting and burnings of heretics (Sprenger & Kramer, 1968). By contrast the Maltese Tribunal of the Inquisition, although it did not shirk from burning at the stake a Francesco Gesualdo for spreading Lutheranism in 1545 (Vella, 1964) and although it made use of torture to extract information from reluctant witnesses (AIM T. 13), showed great restraint in the penalties it awarded to offenders. Indirectly it exercised a salutary check on illicit medical practice in the Island by deterring patients from seeking the superstitious ministrations and so-called magical remedies of lay healers.

Comment

The activities here described were opposed to the tenets of the Catholic Church and were considered to pose a serious threat to the dominant faith of the island. In spite, however, of the efforts of the church to suppress them they remained alive and constant for many years reflecting the remarkable credulity of the Maltese people of those days in the supernatural. They thus illustrate the paradox or dichotomy, of how the Maltese Catholic, instead of trusting blindly in divine help when faced with adversity, in conformity with the teachings of his church, did not shrink from seeking the assistance of prohibited intermediaries when labouring under the stress of illness.

The influence of Moslem slave-healers, though infiltrating all strata of Maltese society, made itself felt particularly among the humbler people of low socio-economic status. This phenomenon affords an instant of cultural hybridization whereby an alien group, hostile to the national interests and to the established religion of the com-

munity, is actively utilised for its supposed knowledge of magical practices and its alleged ability to harness recondite supernatural forces in an attempt to combat the effects of illness.

A factor which, apart from the pain and fear engendered by physical disease, might have neutralised the polarity between Catholic and Moslem and facilitated communication between the two groups, was the fact that there was hardly any language barrier between them owing to the existence of a common vocabulary between Arabic and Maltese.

Indeed there is nowhere any hint in the documents examined, of the need of an interpreter between the Moslem healer and the Maltese patient; on the contrary the fact that the Arabic and the Maltese languages are so much akin to each other served as a bridge to span over the traditional religious enmity between the two groups.

Although from the medical angle these healers may be dismissed on the ground that their type of medicine was scientifically unsound and therapeutically sterile, they occupy a place, however humble, in the social history of Maltese medicine; indeed they are a mirror of the social and religious context that flourished in our island during the 17th and 18th centuries; they also show how this context moulded the people's beliefs and behaviour and how it left its impact on the medical matrix of those days by the emergence of lay healers at a time when academic medicine and surgery had very little to offer by way of relief and cure. Indeed it must be recalled in this respect that it was only in the late 19th century that medicine and surgery began to emerge as scientific disciplines and to provide some effective treatment.

The remedies applied by lay healers now look absurd; they fitted into the uninformed and illiterate world of the time and into the contemporary attitude towards the supernatural. After all, even to-day, in spite of the profound changes that have occurred in the educational and medical fields, there are people that still believe in the sinister influence supposedly exercised by the evil eye. It is not uncommon to see

a big red "coral" hanging on the inside of the windscreen of cars or to meet women wearing a silver horn on a necklace round their neck, sometimes combined with a religious medal; or a gold horned hand with other charms on a bracelet to ward off the harmful effects of the evil eye. This attitude is encouraged by newspapers that advertise the sale of amulets and publish horoscopes, etc.

Lay medicine appealed also because it seemed to offer a quick solution to problems which contemporary medical thought failed to provide. This attitude still exists and we are all familiar with the patient of to-day who resorts to fads and folk remedies as a protest against formal medicine when this is unable to allay his pains and anxieties. After all, as doctors we are quite aware that there are many situations with which we are unable to deal effectively because of lack of therapeutic knowledge or because the aetiology of disease is still beyond our comprehension. In this regard, therefore, we are not such a long way from the 17th and 18th centuries and we must not be surprised when our patients, faced with the riddle of disease and the impotence of modern medicine and surgery, seek therapeutic assistance from anyone — be it a human or a divine agency — and by all means — whether it be the offering of a votive candle to their protective saint or the wearing of a copper bracelet against rheumatism; for the emotions of anxiety and fear still constitute a universal and perennial trait of human psychology.

References

- AIM 37, fol. 295, Cathedral Archives, Mdina.
- AIM 51a, fol. 933.
- 51b, fols. 346 & 953.
- 51c, fol. 927.
- 51d, fol. 1059.
- 51f, fol. 334.
- 51g, fol. 953.
- 51h, fol. 48.
- 51i, fol. 135.
- 51j, fol. 346.
- 51k, fol. 927.
- 51l, fol. 953.
- 51m, fol. 953.
- 51n, fols. 126 & 896.
- 51o, fol. 933.
- 51p, fol. 921.

- 51q, fol. 94.
 51r, fols. 346 & 941. .
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 79b, fol. 174.
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 79d, fols. 224 & 428.
 79e, fol. 353.
 79f, fol. 383.
 AIM 108a, fol. 122.
 108b, fol. 501 et seq.
 108c, fol. 122.
 108d, fol. 387.
 AM 108e, fol. 922.
 108f, fol. 122.
 108g, fol. 501 et seq.
 108h, fols. 501, 646, 687 & 958.
 108i, fol. 100.
 108j, fols. 387 & 772.
 108k, fol. 501.
 108l, fol. 558.
 108m, fols. 122, 646, 719 & 772.
 108n, fol. 616.
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 135b, fols. 306 & 409.
 135c, fol. 306.
 135d, fol. 306 et seq.
 135e, fol. 721.
 135f, fols. 306 & 443.
 135g, fol. 443.
 135h, fols. 306, 322 & 443.
 135i, fol. 306.
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