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## Understanding the Role of Traditional Healing Practices in Pakistan: Leading Towards Holistic Healthcare

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**Abstract:** *This paper aims to understand the role of traditional healing practices through different examples. Traditional medicine has always been a crucial aspect of society, especially when it comes to healthcare and self-care practices. Cultural beliefs intervene in people's health-seeking behavior, which is pertinent to discuss, especially in the context of Pakistan, where alternative therapies or medicine have been practiced by people who believe in spiritual healing, herbalists, Hakeem, homeopaths, etc. The purpose is to help make the healthcare system in Pakistan more inclusive, informed, and efficient. Finally, the article emphasizes the need for a collaborative healthcare system by creating a niche for traditional healing practices.*

**Key Words:** Traditional Healing Practices, Healthcare System, Culture, Medicine

### Introduction

Despite the effective and overwhelming work of biomedicine, the role of traditional healing practices cannot be denied, especially in countries like Pakistan, where there has been a long tradition of such practices that are still largely being practiced even today. Along with the physical, political, and socioeconomic factors, cultural factors play a vital role in determining people's health-seeking behaviors. The Alma-Ata declaration in 1978 highlights that the inclusion of traditional medicine, local practitioners, and healthcare workers can help meet the needs of the community and provide equal healthcare to all.

The Healthcare system in Pakistan is decentralized, and its structure is divided into public and private domains. The lack of developed infrastructure, improper allocation of limited financial resources, and differences in access to quality healthcare contribute to the use of traditional methods. The private sector, in particular, is highly diverse, and it involves a variety of medical clinics, homeopathic clinics, herbalists, and spiritual healers both in urban and rural areas (Shaikh & Hatcher, 2005). The overall trend in Pakistan shows that 51.7% chose Traditional and alternative medicine, while 48.3% chose biomedicine as a priority. Of those who chose the former one, 20% also used biomedicine as well; 16% homeopathy, 12.4% Unani medicine, 2.1% mind-body medicine (faith healing), 0.9% biologically based practices, 0.05% energy medicine, 0.05% Traditional Chinese Medicine, and 0.02% aromatherapy (Hussain et al., 2012)

Traditional healing practices have deep roots in the cultural fabric of Pakistan. These age-old methods, passed down through generations, play a crucial role in the health and well-being of communities across the country. In this article, we delve into the significance of traditional healing practices, their integration with modern healthcare systems, and their impact on holistic health.

### Cultural Preservation and Holistic Well-being

Traditional healing practices promote cultural preservation and holistic well-being by emphasizing the balance and harmony of the mind, body, and spirit. These practices recognize that health extends beyond physical symptoms and encompasses emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions. By respecting ancient wisdom and cultural norms, traditional healers contribute to a comprehensive approach to health.

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## The Unani Tibb System

At the heart of traditional healing in Pakistan lies the Unani Tibb system. This Greco-Arabic system of medicine traces its origins back to Hellenistic Greece. Unani Tibb revolves around the concept of humors — balancing the four essential bodily fluids (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile) to maintain health. Practitioners blend herbal remedies, dietary adjustments, and lifestyle modifications to restore equilibrium.

## The Role of Traditional Healers

Traditional healers, often revered members of their communities, possess intricate knowledge of local herbs, rituals, and therapies. They bridge the gap between ancient wisdom and contemporary challenges. In rural areas, where modern healthcare services are scarce, traditional healers become primary caregivers. Their holistic approach considers not only physical ailments but also emotional and spiritual well-being.

## Integrating Traditional and Modern Medicine

The integration of traditional healing practices into modern healthcare systems is gaining recognition. By combining the strengths of both approaches, patients receive comprehensive care. For instance, herbal medicines, meditation practices, and physical therapies coexist alongside evidence-based treatments. This synergy acknowledges the value of cultural heritage while ensuring patient safety and efficacy.

## Challenges and Opportunities

Despite their contributions, traditional healers face challenges. Their knowledge is often orally passed down through generations, making it difficult to document systematically. Bridging this gap requires collaboration between traditional practitioners, researchers, and policymakers. By validating and preserving traditional healing practices, we can enhance healthcare outcomes and promote holistic well-being.

In the following sections, we explore specific traditional healing modalities, their effectiveness, and the need for continued research. Join us on this journey as we unravel the intricate tapestry of Pakistan's healing traditions and their impact on the health of its people.

## Literature Review

Traditional healing practices have played a pivotal role in healthcare systems across the globe for centuries. In the context of Pakistan, a country rich in cultural diversity and historical traditions, the significance of traditional healing practices is both profound and complex. This literature review aims to delve into the multifaceted aspects of traditional healing practices in Pakistan, exploring their historical roots, cultural relevance, contemporary challenges, and the potential they hold in contributing to a holistic healthcare approach.

## Historical Foundations

The roots of traditional healing practices in Pakistan can be traced back through centuries, reflecting the amalgamation of various cultural, religious, and medicinal influences. Ancient systems such as Ayurveda and Unani, along with indigenous practices, have shaped the landscape of traditional healing. Herbs, rituals, and spiritual elements have been integral components of these practices, passing down through generations as a form of communal knowledge. The historical continuity of these traditions underscores their deep connection to Pakistan's cultural identity.

## Cultural Significance and Diversity

The cultural significance of traditional healing practices in Pakistan is multifaceted. Beyond their role in addressing physical ailments, these practices often embody a broader understanding of health that includes mental, social, and spiritual dimensions. Traditional healers are not only healthcare providers but also cultural custodians, playing a crucial role in preserving and passing on cultural knowledge. The

diversity of Pakistan's cultural landscape is reflected in the myriad ways traditional healing is practiced, with each region contributing its unique blend of remedies and rituals.

### **Contemporary Challenges and Skepticism**

Despite the longstanding history and cultural importance of traditional healing practices in Pakistan, they face contemporary challenges that impede their recognition and integration into the formal healthcare system. Skepticism regarding the efficacy and safety of traditional remedies is prevalent among both the general population and healthcare professionals. This skepticism is often rooted in the absence of standardized practices, quality control measures, and scientific validation, creating a barrier to the acknowledgment of traditional healing within mainstream healthcare.

### **Integration into Holistic Healthcare**

The concept of holistic healthcare emphasizes a comprehensive approach that considers not only the physical symptoms but also the mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being of individuals. Traditional healing practices in Pakistan, aligned with this holistic philosophy, offer a unique perspective on health. Integrating traditional healing into the broader healthcare system could lead to a more patient-centered approach that respects and incorporates cultural beliefs. This integration, however, requires bridging the gap between traditional and modern medicine, addressing skepticism, and establishing collaborative frameworks.

### **Empirical Research and Validation**

While anecdotal evidence supports the efficacy of traditional healing practices, the integration process necessitates rigorous empirical research. Scientific studies exploring the bioactive compounds in traditional herbs, the psychological impact of rituals, and the cultural determinants of health outcomes are essential. Establishing a robust evidence base is crucial for gaining the trust of the scientific and medical communities, paving the way for a more seamless integration of traditional healing practices into mainstream healthcare in Pakistan.

### **Community Perspectives and Engagement**

The success of integrating traditional healing practices into the healthcare system relies heavily on community perspectives and engagement. Building trust between communities, traditional healers, and healthcare professionals is fundamental. Involving communities in decision-making processes and recognizing the agency of individuals in choosing their healthcare modalities fosters a collaborative healthcare environment. Community engagement also ensures that the integration process is culturally sensitive and responsive to the diverse needs and preferences of the population.

### **Challenges and Opportunities in Integration**

The integration of traditional healing practices into mainstream healthcare in Pakistan is not without its challenges. Standardizing practices, ensuring quality control, and addressing concerns about safety and efficacy are paramount. Furthermore, developing training programs that bridge the gap between traditional and modern medical practices can enhance the capabilities of traditional healers and facilitate their collaboration with conventional healthcare providers. Embracing a holistic healthcare model requires a paradigm shift in the perception of health and healing, emphasizing collaboration and mutual respect.

Understanding the role of traditional healing practices in Pakistan is a complex journey that encompasses historical, cultural, and contemporary dimensions. The potential for these practices to contribute to holistic healthcare is significant but requires overcoming skepticism, fostering integration, conducting empirical research, and engaging communities in the process. By acknowledging the cultural significance of traditional healing, addressing contemporary challenges, and promoting collaboration, Pakistan has the opportunity to create a healthcare system that combines the strengths of traditional and modern medicine, leading toward a more comprehensive and culturally sensitive model of care.



## Discussion

Arthur Kleinman views the medical system as a cultural system, considered a new paradigm that emphasizes the role of culture and belief systems in health. Any problem, when viewed outside the social and cultural domain, undermines the context in which disease is perceived. Health and sickness are not the results of single determinants but multifactor interactions of complex biological, psychological, and social levels (Kleinman, 1978).

The importance of Traditional and complementary medicine needs to be explored further. For example, the role of herbs and plants in ethnomedicine is quite evident in wound healing. Injuries are very common, and their treatment varies with the context and from community to community. One of the popular methods is using turmeric as an antiseptic for wounds and bonesetter also in case of fracture. Herbal medicines are widely used as remedies around the world. Many such herbal medicines are used for wound healing in the form of ointments, tinctures, infusions, and syrups as safe and reliable natural substances derived from medicinal herbs (Jarić et al., 2018).

People from rural areas have limited access to national healthcare services, which is one of the reasons for the utilization of traditional herbal medicines in those areas, as they provide a cheap and alternative source for primary care. A study in District Haripur, KPK, shows that the use of local plants for wound healing is prevalent in the region as people have expertise in the field and built-in trust in the method. These are used both internally and externally as phytotherapy, and their credibility was measured by the statistical tool to estimate the use value. Moreover, it also suggests that local plants are under threat due to deforestation and other reasons that could negatively impact the healing tradition (Siddique et al., 2019).

A study in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan by Sher et al., 2016 explores the use of medicinal plants to cure human ailments as the local biological and cultural heritage of the northern areas. Examples of ethnomedicinal use of such plants are ailments such as stomachache, inflammation of the oral cavity, eye and ear diseases, diarrhea, urinary system ailments, skin diseases, jaundice, diabetes, and arthritis. The Kalasha mostly used medicinal plants and had strong spiritual beliefs in the curative ability of these methods. At the same time, access to hospitals and doctors proved very difficult for remoter communities, and this was compounded by poor communication facilities (Sher et al., 2016). The use of traditional and alternative methods is common in many urban areas as well. Ethnobotanical research conducted at Margalla Hills National Park shows that the inhabitants use medicinal herbs for various ailments. (Shinwari & Khan, 2000)

The use of traditional healing methods by psychiatric patients is another important aspect to be discussed. People seek Islamic faith healing in Pakistani society, perhaps due to the taboo associated with mental illnesses. Yasmin Nilofer Farooqi explores that psychiatric patients who seek treatment in a public hospital in Lahore are also inclined towards traditional methods like homeopathy and Islamic faith healing, etc. Patients with schizophrenia, epilepsy, and anxiety disorders use multiple healing methods, among which tib, sorcery, Islamic faith healing, and homeopathy are quite common in both genders (Farooqi, 2006).

This elaborates that an understanding of the religious and cultural background of patients with a mental illness and their approach toward healing practices can help treat patients with less resistance and even greater effectiveness.

In the times of Covid-19, many cases went undetected because of people's different health-seeking behaviors. One of the common symptoms was fever, and many people preferred to purchase un-prescribed medications at pharmacies for self-treatment or visit traditional healers' non-registered clinics rather than hospitals as a place of first contact to seek help. Even in the time of the pandemic, it became a huge challenge to ensure equal provision of health not only in developing countries like Pakistan but also in developed countries (Tran et al., 2020).

An ethnographic study by Ullah et al., 2020, on traditional health-seeking practices of the people who belong to the fishing community of Gwadar, Pakistan, explores the contradiction of traditional healthcare and the biomedical healthcare provided by the state. It suggests that the traditional practices were stereotyped as uncivilized and suppressed by the state, but it might not help because the services provided

by the national healthcare system were not as efficient as required by the population; therefore, it would negatively affect the people's attitude towards national healthcare services. Members of the fishing community in Gwadar should not be compelled to shun their traditional health-seeking behaviors. Rather, traditional healthcare practices should be merged with cosmopolitan ones to address the sociocultural issues and meet the health needs of this marginalized population (Ullah et al., [2020](#))

Due to the underdeveloped infrastructure and geographical isolation of many communities in Pakistan, healthcare services have been quite inefficient, resulting in a lack of trust in biomedical healthcare among local communities. Unani Tibb is considered the viable solution for many local diseases, mostly in tribal areas and some urban areas.

For example, the communities living in the Sulaiman hills of Pakistan have a rich culture where people widely use animal fats and plants due to their curative properties. People living in areas along the Karakoram, Hindukush, and Sulaiman ranges have long been neglected, which poses a threat to the preservation of natural flora and fauna as well as traditional and natural healing practices as well. Therefore, collaborative healthcare, where traditional and biomedical healthcare fuse together, can provide a viable solution to health-related problems (Ahmad et al., [2021](#)).

## Conclusion

To develop and maintain efficient healthcare in Pakistan, we need to understand the pluralistic approach to health-seeking behaviors and treatments. The positive effort of both healing methods and approaches can help achieve the ultimate goal of improving people's health. The traditional medicinal sector is facing challenges not only in Pakistan but globally, which are now being discussed. These healing methods need to be recognized and endorsed to make healthcare accessible and certain for all.

In conclusion, the traditional healing practices in Pakistan play a significant role in promoting holistic healthcare. Throughout this article, we explored the rich heritage of traditional healing methods and their impact on the health and well-being of individuals and communities in Pakistan. Traditional healing practices, deeply rooted in cultural beliefs and practices, offer a unique and complementary approach to modern medicine, addressing not only physical ailments but also mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

One of the key findings of this study is that traditional healing practices in Pakistan are deeply intertwined with local culture, religion, and social structures. These practices offer a holistic understanding of health, emphasizing the importance of balance and harmony between the mind, body, and spirit. Traditional healers, often regarded as cultural custodians, possess a wealth of knowledge passed down through generations, making them an integral part of the healthcare system.

Furthermore, our research highlights the role of traditional healing practices in promoting community cohesion and social support. Traditional healers act as trusted figures within their communities, offering not only physical healing but also counseling, guidance, and emotional support. This holistic approach to healthcare fosters a sense of belonging and collective well-being, reinforcing social ties and resilience.

Another significant aspect of traditional healing practices in Pakistan is the use of natural remedies derived from plants, herbs, and minerals. These traditional medicines, known for their therapeutic properties, are often utilized alongside modern medicine, offering alternative treatment options and reducing the reliance on synthetic drugs. The integration of traditional and modern healthcare systems can enhance the overall effectiveness and accessibility of healthcare services in the country.

Despite the numerous benefits of traditional healing practices, it is important to acknowledge the challenges and limitations that exist. The lack of scientific validation, standardization, and regulation poses concerns regarding safety, quality control, and ethical practices. Integrating traditional healing practices into the formal healthcare system requires careful consideration and collaboration between traditional healers, healthcare professionals, policymakers, and researchers.

Moving forward, it is crucial to promote dialogue, research, and education surrounding traditional healing practices in Pakistan. By bridging the gap between traditional and modern healthcare, we can harness the strengths of both systems, empowering individuals to make informed choices and receive the



best possible care. Cultivating a respectful and inclusive approach that recognizes the value of traditional healing practices will lead to a more comprehensive and patient-centered healthcare system in Pakistan.

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