

Volume 10, No 2, 2018, PP (69-98)

## **Belief as a Means of Healing Using "Tsebel" in Treating Kidney Stones: The Case of Bata Maryan Church, in Gondar City, Northern Ethiopia**

**Emwodew Melkegnaw Demeke<sup>1</sup> and Lemma Tekeba Fetene<sup>2</sup>**

### **Abstract**

**Background:** In Ethiopia, because of the very limited modern health facilities, private and public, nearly 90% of the population uses traditional medicines such as the holy water as the primary health care service. The main objective of this study was investigating the role of *tsebel* as a means of healing kidney stones with a particular emphasis on Bata Maryam church, Gondar.

**Methods:** For this study, in-depth interviews, participant observation, FGD, and key informant interviews were used. To this end, the church, and participants were recruited using purposive sampling. The long healing history and accessibility of target population were the main reasons for using purposive sampling. Finally, the data were analyzed using the thematic analysis technique.

**Results:** The study showed that *tsebel* played an undeniable role in healing kidney stones. Specifically, *tsebel* drunk early in the morning for one to three weeks (usually 3-5/day) was found to be the most effective healer of kidney stones. Moreover, interviewees confirmed that *tsebel* gives spiritual and psychological satisfaction along with its health benefits. But, it should be associated with a strong belief as stated in the New Testament “*He who believes and is baptized will be saved*”.

---

<sup>1</sup> Authors' information is available at the last page

**Conclusion:** Despite this fact, the use of traditional medicines is often considered backward, risky for health, and unimportant by modern health practitioners. But, it plays an important role in curing illnesses and diseases, including kidney stones. Thus, equal emphasis should be given to both traditional (here *tsebel*) and modern health care.

**Key words:** Healing, Tsebel, Kidney Stones, Bata Maryam

1.University of Gondar, Gondar, Ethiopia [melkegnaw@gmail.com](mailto:melkegnaw@gmail.com)Po. Box, 196.

2.University of Gondar, Gondar, Ethiopia, [zenebdegen@gmail.com](mailto:zenebdegen@gmail.com), Po. Box, 196

## 1. Background

The World Health Organization (WHO), defines traditional medicine as practices, approaches, skills, knowledge, and beliefs consisting of animal, plant, and mineral-based medicines as well as spiritual remedies (including holy water) and local techniques used separately or jointly to prevent or treat illnesses and diseases (1)

At the global level, people are facing many social and health related problems. Both illnesses (usually caused by sociocultural factors) and diseases (biologically driven) are big challenges to many governments in maintaining sustainable health and wellbeing of the societies. As a result, people may use traditional or modern health care systems, depending on the level of their technology, orientation, cultural and social contexts, education, economic power, and other determinant variables (2).

While it comes to our country, as it is already known, the vast majority of the population is living in rural areas where modern health care facilities and other public sector resources are very limited in which 90% of the total population uses traditional medicines as the primary healthcare option (3). Traditional medicine, sometimes known as indigenous or complementary as well as alternative medicine, is used by people who are living with different diseases, including HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis (TB), and cancer (4).

The use of *tsebel* (holy water) in the form either shower or drink is a common remedy for illnesses and/or diseases among the Ethiopian Orthodox Christians as it is easily and frequently accessible to the people, economically and geographically (2). In the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, holy water is part of the sacrament; it is a means of getting the blessing of God. There are many ways in which the holy water is could be used in church along with baptismal which the water is powered from the side of Jesus when he was pierced by a spear while he was on the cross. It is a strong belief of Orthodox Christians that demons can be driven out with holy water (5). Simply, for followers, believing the Bible and holy water re more than modern doctors (6)

In most cases, Abush et al. (2015) in their studies indicated that these people considered *tsebel* not as complementary to modern medicine but as the “only” curator. Further, particularly more than 67% of the people with HIV/AIDS prefer *tsebel* when they hear most people are cured of

HIV/AIDS and other dangerous diseases because they believe that HIV/AIDS itself is caused by an evil spirit, or the demon (4).

In addition, there are more than 160 sacred holy water sites in Ethiopia, where an increasing number of Orthodox Christians are seeking treatment (7). To mention some, Entoto Maryam church to the north of Addis Ababa, Tsadkanie Maryam of *Semien* Shewa, Wonkishet Gebriel at Tis Abay, Wanzaye in Fogera *woreda* and so forth are the commonly known holy water sites. Thus, many believers are treating themselves in spiritual ways (8).

In fact, *tsebel* as a means of treating illness and disease, in addition to modern medicine, is a widely accepted practice of Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. In the Orthodox Christian, it is not new to hear and see the miracles of *tsebel* in treating different socially caused illnesses and diseases, for instance, the evil eye, TB, and HIV/AIDS. Despite this fact, only limited studies have been conducted on it. So far, Berhanu (2006, 2007) studied holy water sites where people used it as an alternative medicine to antiretroviral therapy (9;10). Recently, in 2010, he also investigated the use of holy water as an intervention in HIV/AIDS, and some others like Abush et al. (2015) showed the prevalence of the use of holy water as a complementary treatment.

Thus, the basic motive of conducting this study was to reveal the untold roles of *tsebel* in treating kidney stones with a particular emphasis on Bata Maryam church, Gondar.

## **2. Materials and methods**

### **Study area**

Bata Maryam is one of the 44 Orthodox Tewahedo churches of Gondar. It is located in *kebele* 10; the church was established in 1775. Gondar is found at a distance of 738 km from Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia (11). Out of the Ethiopian Orthodox Churches, which make holy water services available, Bata Maryam (St. Mary) church found in Gondar city, was selected as the unit of analysis for this qualitative study. This area was selected on the ground that there are several *tsebeltegnas* (people who use holy water in the form of drink or shower) throughout the year by coming from every part of the country. Besides, the long history of the church in curing diseases was the initiating factor to conduct the study

**Research design:** Since the study was conducted mainly at Bata Maryam church in Gondar city, the case study design was employed. It is a single method of data collection but it is a broad methodological approach which embraces several procedures, such as in-depth interviews, personal observation, document analysis, focus group discussions (FGDs) etc. (12). It also enables to collect rich, and detailed information across multi-layered dimensions to understand the situation from users points of view about one particular case or a few cases (13).

**Sampling:** For this study, both the study area and target population (those who use the holy water) were selected purposively. As stated above, the church was selected due to its long healing history and accessibility to the *tsebeltegnas*. A total of 29 **research** believers over 18 years of age were recruited. Of these, three were priests, 16 discussants, and 10 interviewees.

**Research methods:** Anthropologically, it is sometimes difficult to quantify traditional medicines like that of holy water because of its holistic nature. Thus, qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews, FGDs, participant observation, and key informant interview were used along with the integration of secondary data.

In-depth interviews were conducted with the *tsebeltegna* using the Amharic language. So, 10 interviewees were selected based on the information obtained from priests and deacons on the basis of their long stay at the *tsebel* and the nature of their problems. Individuals with critical cases were included, and two FGDs were held with participants with eight members.

Likewise, participant observation was also conducted after receiving approval from the church administration and priests. In doing so, researchers drank the *tsebel* accompanied by observation. Last but not least, key informant interview was also held with the priests.

**Data analysis technique:** The collected data were analyzed using the thematic technique. After the raw data were coded and recoded, related initial themes were grouped and analyzed.

**Ethical issues:** The researchers obtained an ethical clearance letter from the Social Anthropology Department, the University of Gondar, and the church administrator. Study participants were also informed about the aims of the study, besides oral and written consent.

### 3. Results

This section presents the major findings of the study regarding the roles of *tsebel*, especially that of Bata Maryam church in kidney stones healing. It has two major themes, *tsebel* from the points of view of the people and its role in healing kidney stones.

#### ***Tsebel* from the points of view of the people**

People hold that Orthodox Church *tsebel* heals illnesses and diseases, especially HIV/AIDS and other deadly diseases. But this study focuses on the role of *tsebel* in curing kidney stones. Thus, when informants were asked about their opinions on holy water, they narrated the following evidences at Bata Maryam church.

All interviewees and discussants believed that holy water was highly important in healing diseases that could not be cured by modern treatments. They said that other individuals who took the holy water after suffering from kidney stones, gastritis, liver disease, and other internal diseases as well as mental illness were the results of the interference of the Devil. Therefore, the only solution to these types of illness, they said, was the mercy of God and the intercession of the Virgin St. Mary and other saints.

First, a 49-year-old mother from East Belesa has underlined her views about *tsebel* as follows:

*Tsebel, it is our hope. It is our greatest treasure of trust. There is a common saying in our religion, “he who believes and is baptized shall be saved, but he who does not will be condemned”. The blessed holy water is generally more than a physician. No costs, no energy, and it is easy to find for everyone.*

The above explanation points out that *tsebel* provides not only a treatment for disease and illness but also reduces costs, especially for poor families. This view presumes that holy water is better than modern medicine in reducing the incidence of deadly diseases and in terms of other advantages. It is especially affordable for people living in rural areas and that is why they consider it appropriate. In short, *tsebel* in the form of either shower or drink is important particularly for Orthodox Christians.

Similarly, a mother from around Gondar city, Weleka, said the following:

*Oh! My child. Our creator, God, never treats us as rich, poor, tall or short. Rather, he has given us a long-lasting medicine, i.e., holy water. By this, I mean if you go to a doctor, you only get medical treatment if you have money. But, here you are free to get tsebel treatment. It is a gift to everyone.*

This means God has given the holy water to everyone equally. *Tsebel* does not divide people based on their economic status. The service is open to everyone, and confession to any faith is always open. But in modern hospitals, if people do not have money they never get services.

A 47-year-old woman came from Teda, near Gondar, stated her opinion in the following manner:

*Simply, tsebel is my life. Of course, formerly I was in trouble because of continuous headache. But now, I got my health back with the help of the Virgin Mary. Certainly, if you trust the Virgin Mary you will be cured.*

The result presented above indicates that followers of Orthodox Christianity do have a special feeling for the Virgin Mary. It shows that before taking *tsebel* believing in its potency makes it more effective. This is widely cited in the Holy Bible of the Orthodox, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned”.

Likewise, the information collected from discussants also assured the above argument as:

*Tsebel is our pride, for instance, when we are possessed by bad spirits and catch diseases. But what if we do not have tsebel? Sure, we might not survive until now. Praise to the Creator, we are provided with medicine in the form of holy water.*

The comments imply that most of the people (*tsebeltegna*) assume the holy water is their pride in that it heals many kinds of illnesses and diseases. They linked it with their existence because they highly associated with their religion, culture, and life. Even though it is difficult to calculate the mean values of participants’ responses. The above views of informants indicate that they have positive attitudes towards *tsebel*.

### **The role of *tsebel* in healing kidney stones**

As noted above, the holy water has a marvelous role in curing illnesses, diseases, and driving out bad spirits, and diseases. Hence, with regard to the role of *tsebel* in curing kidney stones, one of the informants said,

*I have no enough words to describe the miraculous role of tsebel because there is no illness or disease that escape from it. It is beyond our imagination. That is why I cannot describe it, simply it is a gift. It is real medicine, given from the Almighty God. But, it needs your trust in God and his Mother St. Mary. Tsebel also provides spiritual and psychological satisfaction along with its health benefits.*

In justifying the above story, one of the priests referred to a saying from the New Testament of the Holy Bible, “*He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not will be condemned*” (Mark 16:16). Both ideas clarify that *tsebel* is seen as a real medicine for all kinds of illnesses and diseases, but it requires a strong belief of the people. The priest added, the Great Bible has also assured the importance of *tsebel* as “*I baptize you with water, but He (God) will baptize you with the Holy Spirit*” (Mark 1:8).

Similarly, the story below confirms the role of *tsebel* as follows:

*I was told to undergo surgery because of kidney stones. The doctors told me to ready myself by paying twelve thousand ETB. Unfortunately, I could not pay this amount of money within the specified time. Moreover, I was not prepared to be operated on. As a result, I went to Bata Maryam church which is renowned for curing all internal diseases. I started to take showers and drinking the holy water for three weeks consecutively. I took three liters per day. After I drank the holy water, I vomited and excreted water, stones, and egg-yolk type feces. Now, I am totally cured from kidney stones, thanks to Bata Maryam holy water.*

This story supported by a saying in the Bible’s. “But when the bad spirit is gone out of a man, he walks through dry places, seeking rest and finds none” (Matthew 12:43). This indicates that water with the Holy Spirit has the power to eliminate the bad spirit, illness, and disease.

The group discussants responded that the fact that Bata Maryam cured kidney stones patients was no surprise to them because in addition to kidney stone patients, they saw over 50 people affected by evil spirits using the *tsebel*.

Another interviewee pointed out the role of the water as follows:

*When I was told that I had kidney stones and given an appointment. After that, I felt depressed. However, beginning on the first day the priests continuously told me to believe in the Savior God. Similarly, they advised me to confess first to the priests about my sins*



*and to follow the prayer (both individually in day time and in mass at night) and read the psalms, attend mass and the covenant. As a result, after I started to practice all these and availed myself in the church, I began to have an exceptional feeling of consolation. This particularly happened soon after my showering with the tsebel. The happiness, I am telling you is about not expressible. It is not a kind of joy that you feel at a moment. It is a type of internal joy that my body and soul experienced at that time.*

The above case reveals that the taking of holy water is accompanied with prayers, readings of the psalms, attending mass and the covenant. All these together bring long lasting joy and healing. It reminds that taking holy water is not the only thing performed to be cured.

Furthermore, one of the female participants from Gondar stated what follows:

*The role of holy water is not explainable by my rhetoric. I am starting to use holy water to be cured of kidney stones. As I saw for a number of years and now that people living with demons are freed through the use of holy water. Many people shout when taking holy water. The demons are exorcized from these people once and for all via communicating in the name of saints. Consequently, holy water is the only long lasting solution to be free from the occurrence and recurrence of the disease. It was after taking the pinnacle of penances that I started to take four liters per day. Now, I am relieved of the pain I had around the right side of my kidney.*

This indicates that it is not kidney stones alone that holy water heals. It is also believed that the emergence and reemergence of diseases is eliminated only by holy water treatment.

The stories above show that individuals take different amounts of holy water in their attempt to get free from diseases. However, the amount of *tsebel* that individuals take varies depending on the ability and decisions of the individuals.

According to priests, unlike the *tsebeltegn*a who believed that the more water they took the shorter the process of treatment would be, the volume of holy water taken does not affect the healing. Rather, it is the belief in God and goodness that matters most. In this regard, the priest cited the verse from the Holy Bible **የመን የተጠመቀ ይደናል** meaning “He who believes and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16). Therefore, the belief of those who take the holy water matters in the healing.

#### 4. Discussion

This part of the paper largely spotlights the role that *tsebel* plays. As stated in the results section and according to Orthodox Christians in Ethiopia *tsebel* is believed to cure any type of diseases along with giving spiritual relief. As a result, thousands of *tsebel* sites are found in the country.

Among the Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, *tsebel* in the form of drink or shower is widely accepted not only as a cure but also as a source of spiritual relief. Though this study focused on the role of *tsebel* in healing kidney stones, the findings of other studies were cited. The study shows that many people are cured of kidney stones by means of the holy water (through showers and drinks); people from rural areas are among the leading beneficiaries.

The priests who sermonize on *tsebel* sites continuously spoke about the role that holy water has on the *tsebelteгна*. In this regard, they quoted the evidence from The Old Testament “... *the spirit of God was borne over the water*” and in the New Testament verses “*And he said to him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam (saint). So, he went and washed, came back seeing*” (John 9: 7) and “*He who believes and is baptized will be saved*” (Mark 16: 16). This affirms the vibrant function of *tsebel* in curing people from any disease or illness.

With regard to the role of *tsebel*, Pili (2009) pointed out that people go to holy water for a variety of diseases, such as skin problems, infertility, disability, personal and social problems. He added, many people use *tsebel* to mediate with their beloved God and to purify their sins (14). By the same token, in their study entitled *The Prevalence of the Use of Holy Water as a Complementary Treatment*, Abush and Shewangizaw (2015) assured that almost 67% of the respondents had experiences of using *tsebel* as a complement to ART treatments.

In addition, as pointed out by Baye Berihun (2015) the Ethiopian Orthodox Christians consider both demonic possession and mental illness are results of evil spirits, and they firmly believe that these misfortunes could be removed only by using holy water and holy powder (*eminet*) rather than modern hospitals (15).

The curing of disease is not the function of *tsebel* alone (showering and drinking) rather, it is allied with prayer, confession, preaching, attending mass and fasting. Thus, all these can be seen as a package of holy water treatment that help individuals to be well (8).

Research results show a positive relationship between spiritual healing and health benefits. The belief of the people and their taking of holy water treatment had a positive effect on physical illness. Although the practice of *tsebel* among Ethiopian Orthodox Christians is quite different in its nature and practice; however, as far as its impact on individuals is concerned it can be seen in a similar fashion. Moreover, have been discussed about the curing powers of *tsebel* in this work are the beliefs of the interviewees. As a matter of fact, the beliefs are held not only by the interviews but also by medical doctors who refer their mentally ill and other patients to churches for better treatments (16).

Although the miraculous power of holy water averred in our and other similar studies cannot be ignored, we presume the issue needs to be left open to researchers so they made longitudinal investigations and find scientific or other explanations.

## **5. Limitations**

Basing itself on Bata Maryam and learning out other churches in and around Gondar city, which might have given the researchers inclusive data, our study was solely focused on the role of holy water in healing kidney stones while other churches within and around Gondar city were not included in the study. Thus, researchers recommended further study on related themes shall be conducted. So far, the challenges faced during data collection were difficult of using cameras and video recorders since men and women (*tsebeltegnas*) showered and lathered with the blessed holy water were fully naked.

## **6. Conclusions**

In most cases, traditional healing practices including *tsebel* have been given less consideration. An even worse tendency that modern practitioners often assume the traditional healing practices as useless, backward, and full of risk for health. But practically, there are exceptional illnesses and diseases which cannot be fully cured by modern treatments and drugs, for example, bad spirit, demonic possessions, HIV/AIDS, the evil eye, etc. However, we the researchers have witnessed that the above mentioned illnesses and diseases were healed by holy water.

Finally, we wish to conclude that practitioners should give equal considerations to both traditional and modern healing practices. Integrating these health care practices could be

advisable for a sustainable development of the health sector instead of undermining one another, especially in tradition-bounded societies like ours.

### **Abbreviations**

ART- antiretroviral therapy, FGDs- focus group discussions, TB- tuberculosis, and WHO- world health organization.

### **Declarations**

#### **Ethics approval and consent to participate**

At the beginning, a letter of approval was obtained from the Social Anthropology department. Then, the church administration permitted us to conduct the study. Finally, both oral and written consents were collected from the study participants.

#### **Consent for publication**

Not applicable.

#### **Availability of data and material**

The data used in this study are available with the corresponding authors on a reasonable request.

#### **Competing interests**

Authors declare that they have no competing interests.

### **Funding**

Not applicable.

### **Authors' contributions**

First of all, EM generated the idea, concepts and prepared the proposal. Simultaneously, he has collected related materials in the area. Whereas, LT reviewed and edited the paper as well as contacted priests and other informants. But, the rest of the activities were done jointly.

### **Acknowledgments**

The authors highly acknowledge study participants who contributed a lot while collecting the required data. We are also grateful to thank the church administrator of Bata Maryam for

approving the request. Demeke Dessu also deserved a special thanks for his role in editing the paper.

### Authors' information

<sup>1</sup>MA in Development Anthropology, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Gondar, Gondar, Ethiopia, e-mail [melkegnaw@gmail.com](mailto:melkegnaw@gmail.com) or [emwodew.melkegnaw@uog.edu.et](mailto:emwodew.melkegnaw@uog.edu.et) , Po-Box 196. <sup>2</sup>MA in Development Anthropology, University of Gondar, Gondar, Ethiopia, e-mail [zenebdegen@gmail.com](mailto:zenebdegen@gmail.com) , Po-Box 196.

### References

1. **WHO.** *Legal Status of Traditional Medicine and Complementary/Alternative Medicine, A World Wide Review.* Geneva: World Health Organization, 2001.
2. *Care and Support and People Living with HIV and AIDS at Holy Water: An assessment at Four Selected Sites in Addis Ababa.* **Sena, L.** 2010, J HIV AIDS Soc Serv, pp. 260-80.
3. **WHO.** *Traditional Medicine Growing Needs and Potential.* Geneva: World Health Organization, 2002.
4. *Prevalence of Use of Holy Water as Complementary Treatment among PLWHA at Debrebrihan Referral Hospital and Health Centre, North East, Ethiopia: Cross-sectional Study.* **Abush Kebede and Zewudu Shewngizaw.** Debrebrihan: s.n., 2015, International Journal of Medical Science Research and Practice, Vol. 2, pp. 85-89.
5. **EOM.** *The Sacramentals.* In *A. Wondmagegnehu, & J. Motovu (Eds.), The Ethiopian Orthodox Church.* . Addis Ababa, Ethiopia : Berhanena Selam Printing Press, 1970.
6. **FMoH.** *Ministry of Health Report.* Addis Ababa: Federal Ministry of Health, 2004.
7. **FHAPCO.** *Report on Progress towards Implementation of the UN Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS.* Addis Ababa : Federal HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Office , 2010.
8. *'Holy Water as an Intervention for HIV/AIDS in Ethiopia'.* **Berhanu, Zena.** Addis Ababa : Journal of HIV/AIDS and Social Services, 2010, Vol. 9.

9. **Zena, Berhanu.** *Care and Support and People Living with HI/AIDS at Holy Water: An assessment on Four Selected Sites in Addis Ababa. (Unpublished Thesis).* Addis Ababa : s.n., 2006.
10. ———. *Experience with Antiretroviral Drugs and Faith-healing Practices among People Living With HIV/AIDS in Addis Ababa: A survey on a Local association at Entoto.* Addis Ababa: s.n., 2007.
11. **CSA.** *Statistical Abstract.* Addis Ababa : Central statistical authority of Ethiopia, 2005.
12. **Blomberg, J.** *An Ethnographic Approach on Design.* s.l.: Blekinge Institute of Technology, 2002.
13. **Creswell, John.** *Research Design: qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Method (second ed.).* London : Sage Publication, 2003.
14. *Aynä té la: The Shadow of the Eye: Healers and Traditional Medical Knowledge in Addis Ababa. In: Proceedings of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, ed. by Svein Ege, Harald Aspen, Birhanu Teferra and Shiferaw Bekele, Trondheim. Pili, Eliana.* Addis Ababa : IES, 2009.
15. *Demonic Possession and Healing of Mental illness in the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahdo Church: the Case of Entoto Kidane-Mihret Monastery.* **Berihun, Baye.** Addis Ababa, Ethiopia : American Journal of Applied Psychology, 2015, Vol. 3.
16. *Faith as a Means of Healing: Traditional Medicine and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in and around Lalibela.* **Anderson, Lauren.** Lalibela, Ethiopia : s.n., 2007.