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# ANCIENT AFRICA

MYTHS, MAGIC AND MEDICINE

As the debate between science and spirituality continues, Adria W Lake explains how an extraordinary culture offers a broader perspective.

**Out of Africa** – the birthplace of mankind and cradle of civilization – came the world's first organized system of herbal and medical science. The knowledge that took root on this culturally fertile land had such profound impact that all other systems of medicine, including TCM, Ayurveda and modern Western Medicine, all contain a seed of its wisdom.

Earlier and more strongly than any other civilizations, the Egyptians developed a belief system that defied human limitations. For long centuries, man's most distinctive and highly cherished ideals came from Egypt. In the valley of the Nile we find the earliest imprints of man's spiritual and intellectual awakening.

The discovery of a four-thousand-year-old Egyptian mummy revealed that physicians in the pyramid age understood that blood, pumped by the heart, flows around the body – a notion that was not firmly established until the 17th century. They gave patients concoction of willow bark, which contains natural painkiller that is chemically similar to aspirin; and use mouldy bread on wounds, suggesting that ancient medics were already fighting infections with a sort of proto-antibiotics.

Dated to approximately 2000 BC, the papyrus uses hieratic, a style of writing that was already archaic then, indicating that the document is a copy of an original at least a few hundred years older. Edwin Smith, an amateur Egyptologist, acquired the papyrus in 1862 and kept it until his death in 1906. James H. Breasted, who spent ten years translating the papyrus in the 1920s called it "the oldest nucleus of scientific knowledge in the world".

The author of this rich and insightful medical text is believed to be Imhotep, the chief physician to King Zoser of the Third Dynasty (circa 3000 BC). Sir William Osler, a well-known medical historian, tells us that Imhotep was the "first figure of a physician to stand out clearly from the mist of antiquity". Imhotep diagnosed over 200 diseases, performed surgery, extracted

medicine from plants more than 2,000 years before Hippocrates, the Father of Medicine, was born.

The world's first multi-genius was also a sage, scribe, astronomer and a master architect credited with building the Step Pyramid complex at Saqqara. Breasted noted, "in priestly wisdom, in magic, in the formulations of wise proverbs, in medicine and architecture,



this remarkable figure of Zoser's reign left so notable a reputation that his name was never forgotten".

Imhotep's remarkable life and astonishing accomplishments earned him the title "God of Medicine". He was worshipped as a god and healer in Egypt, Greece and Rome.

Imhotep himself, however, sought divine intervention. He, as all Egyptians living at the time, believed that medicines alone could not cure. No matter how potent, his herbal concoctions could only be expected to assuage the pain. Only magic, incantations, spells and prayers could remove the illness. Ancient Egyptians believed that disease and death were not natural and inevitable, but caused by some malign force belonging to the

invisible world. Physicians therefore, had two equally important duties to perform: appease the spirits and medicate the body.

Important as it was, Medicine was ancillary to Egypt's all-encompassing cosmology and complex belief system. Known as the Memphite Theology (c. 3,000 BC), this impressive body of knowledge had considerable influence in the development of other systems of traditional medicine.

Egyptian cosmology, in effect, gave form to the Chinese principle of Yin and Yang, and Ayurveda's system of Tridosha.

Taoism, the foundation of Traditional Chinese Medicine, echoes the Memphite's Theory of Unity, which sees no boundaries between rest and motion, time and space, mind and matter, sickness and health. TCM's duality of Yin and Yang and its primary emphasis on the balance of Qi, or Life Energy constantly flowing throughout the body may also trace its origin to the Egyptian concept of "Nu" or formless water, and the duality of "Shu" and "Tefnut" the complementary energies that flows in the universe.

Similarities between Ayurveda and ancient Egyptian philosophy are even more numerous. This comes as no surprise as India was once a part of the Cushite Empire. Sir Flinders Petrie's excavations (1892-1933) in Egypt revealed the remains of a distinct race that preceded the Egyptians. He named this ancient pioneering race of East Hamatic Africans the Cushite Empire of Ethiopians. In ancient times, Ethiopia extended over vast domains in both Africa and Asia, including India.

The ancient gods of India are shown with Ethiopian crowns on their heads. The Dravidians who established the great Indus Valley Civilization around 3,000 BC were descendants of the Cushites who brought with them many spiritual sciences that became the foundation of Ayurveda.