

AFRICAN CULTURE,  
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# MUSLIM SCRIPTURES AND THE USE OF HONEY FOR HEALTH-CARE AND METAPHYSICAL PURPOSES

S. A. SHITTU

## Introduction

The use of Honey for metaphysical purposes would be examined from two ways. One, Qur'anic and prophetic recommendations and the other one would be through *Nawaqil*<sup>1</sup> of West Africa Muslim scholars with which the present writer is familiar. Recommendation on how to distinguish fake honey from the original precedes the conclusion.

## The Honey

Honey was simply defined as "a sweet, sticky yellowish substance made by bees from nectar"<sup>2</sup> Honey could be dark, brown, light brown, yellow or white depending on the type of plant and fruits. The taste and flavour also vary, as in the case of leather honey, the honey formed from scented flowers and so on.

Honey-producing bee depends on various products of earth i.e. flowering plants for their sustenance or nutrition. And at the same time the plants also depend on various insects including bees for pollination. The bee assimilates the juice of various kinds of flowers and fruit and forms within its body the honey which it stores in its cells of wax. It is the kind of food or plant which the bee sucks that determine the colours of honey. This has been stated as follows:

Nectars are collected from different fruits and its sugar content ranges from 5% to 8% or higher depending upon the floral source and a number of environmental conditions like temperature, humidity and rainfall<sup>4</sup>

What makes honey unique is the mixture of substances which are of importance to human beings, Honey, when fully ripened, consists of the following substances approximately in their percentage:

- (1) Levulose (fructose) 41.0
- (2) Dextrose (Glucose) 35.00
- (3) Sucrose 1.9
- (4) Dextrins 1,5



- (5) Minerals 0.2
- (6) Water 17.0
- (7) Undetermined

A tablespoon of honey (21g) is higher in energy value than a tablespoon of sugar (11g).<sup>5</sup> It has been found that honey contains the following enzymes: diastase, invertase, saccharase, catalase peroxide and lipase. Its enzymatic contents are one of the highest in all foods.

Other constituents of honey include Salts of Calcium, sodium, Potassium Magnesium, Iron, Chlorine, Phosphorus, Sulphur and Iodine. Honey contains vitamin B<sub>1</sub>, B<sub>2</sub>, B<sub>3</sub>, B<sub>5</sub>, B<sub>6</sub>, BC, C, E, K and Cartoin although the vitamin content of honey depends on the pollen admixture in it.<sup>6</sup>

### Honey and Islam

The Qur'an reveals:

And behold! Your Lord has inspired the bee with this: Build thy house in the mountains, trees and in men's habitation, then eat and follow the ways of thy Lord made smooth: *from within their bodies a drink of various colours wherein is healing for men*, verily in this is a sign for those who give thought.<sup>7</sup> (emphasis mine)

This verse deals with the Qur'anic theoretical directions concerning the honeybee. Looking at the first phrase: Behold! Your Lord has inspired the bee. The world *Awha* referred to here means; intuition, *Ilham* or guidance of Allah (*hidayatul-Lahi*) to the bee that it should build her cells on the hills, trees and in men's habitations. It is through Allah's guidance that all bees know how to build their wonderful factory with separate combs to rear brood and turn nectar into honey.

Allah used the word *Nahl* (bee) which is in a singular form but later used plural form *butunha* (its bodies) when discussing the output of honey. It explains the wonderful guidance of Allah endowed on the bees to organise themselves into a cooperative society for collective efforts to run the "factory" with the queen and thousands of workers to perform a variety of specific tasks. Despite the fact that the kingdom of the bees does not exceed one half metre in length and breath its kingdom comprises of: The Queen, a fertile female bee which develops from fertilized egg. It has a sting which is used to kill rival queens. The drones are males, which develop from unfertilised eggs and lack sting. Their only function is to mate with the queen.

The worker bees are sterile females, which develop from fertilized eggs and possess sting, which is used to protect and care for the colony. The bee is a highly efficient insect, modified structurally for its role in honey production. The creator endowed it with two stomachs:

- (1) For collecting nectar and secreting the necessary yeast for transforming it into honey.
- (2) Devoted to digestion: It does it with a special sac for storing the seeds of pollination:

There are guards at bees kingdom; soldiers who stand ready for an alien invader. They resemble fighter-bombers circling around the boarders. The bees were endowed with smelling faculty because the guards do not ask for identity or information before interception of any stranger approaching the colony. The smooth and successive running of the colony is worth noting as some go out, some return, some carry the dust of pollination and the nectar of flowers while some carry water, all of them follow an accurate system. The act of socio-harmony, discipline, commitment, diligence and industry in honey producer-kingdom is really worthy of emulation for man.

### The Use of Honey for Health Care Purposes

On the use of honey, Prophet Muhammad says "wherein healing for men" with a prophetic saying which was narrated by Abdullahi b. Masud; adding that "Hold fast with two medicines, Honey and the Qur'an."<sup>8</sup> Interpreted as thus: "Hold fast two things for your healing; the use of honey and the use of Qu'ranic verses." This states that honey is a medicine. In an *Hadith* reported by al-Bukhari and Muslim which was related by Qatadah and others, who said a man came to the messenger of Allah (SAW) and said "Oh Messenger of Allah, my brother is suffering from stomach trouble". The prophet said, "Tell him to drink honey" then he went away and came back to say, Oh prophet, he had drunk the honey but the trouble increased" The prophet gave the same advice until the fourth occasion, the prophet then says:

Allah's (word) is the truth and the belly of your brother has lied". So he gave him honey to drink again and then he was cured.<sup>9</sup>

An *Hadith* transmitted by al-Bu-khari which was narrated by Said b. Jubayr from Ibn Abbas that the messenger of Allah said:

The cure with Honey is in three things. Cupping (act of removing black blood from the body) curing of suffocation and curing of cauterisation but I forbid my *Ummah* from the bodily burning"<sup>10</sup>

The present writer benefited immensely from the Internet facilities on the use of honey for medicinal and nutritive purposes. Jeffrey in his article mentioned about five different uses of honey for health care purposes, namely:

- (1) antibacterial (2) its efficacy on gastroenteritis (3) gastric ulcers, (4)

wound healing (5) diabetes.<sup>11</sup>

Subrah Manyam added that honey is also efficacious as experimented and published in medical reports. "Honey impregnated gauze versus polyurethane film" quickly heals wound-dressing; burns; effective medicinal properties for therapy.<sup>12</sup>

### General Uses of Honey-food and Medicine.

- (1) **Honey serves as antibacterial:** It is agreed that there is natural healing power in honey for man. Undiluted honey clearly exhibits antibacterial activity. The bacterial cells dry out because growth is retarded in the acidic environment which honey provides. It was also observed that most of common pathogenic bacteria which infect human are killed in honey; thus honey acts as a bactericide.<sup>13</sup>
- (2) **Treatment of Wounds:** Honey has been found efficacious for the treatment of wounds. It was said that external application as a surgical dressing has been successful due to a combination of its bactericidal and osmotic action on wounds. It is non-irritating, non-toxic, self-sterile cheap, easily obtained and applied.
- (3) **Honey in the Treatment of Diabetes:** Beekeepers have reported numerous cases of individuals suffering from diabetes who have recovered by using honey as their source of sweets. Patients who are under the care of a physician and not too advanced may use honey in small quantity at first, after which if sugar does not show in the urine or blood, the quantity should be increased. There are indications that honey from a particular plant source is more desirable, particularly of high levulose content since the body is unable to utilize levulose until it is changed into glucogen and then to dextrose, a slower in-filtration of dextrose which is immediately available to oxidation. This portion of honey can cause over concentration of sugar in the blood therefore the use of honey in cases of diabetes should be under the prescription and dosage of a physician.<sup>14</sup>
- (4) **The Use of Honey for Reproductive Health Care:** Abnormal pain during menstruation and when menstruation continues even after its stipulated days are treated with two spoonfuls of honey every four hours for a period of three days. Also when a woman is encountering problems at the early stage of her pregnancy, like vomiting too much, severe headache, eating less and lesser food, abdomi-

nal pain and general body weaknesses, two spoonfuls of honey also cures the problems. If problems persists, it could be taken three times daily.<sup>15</sup>

- (5) **The Use of Honey in Chest Related Problem:** Honey is used to treat chest pain, cough and asthma. A mixture of honey and gum Arabic is used to treat chest pain while unsliced lime is boiled to become soft and mixed with a spoonful of honey to cure ordinary cough. But for an asthmatic patient a mixture of honey and seed of common cress powder is given by two spoonfuls, three times a day.<sup>16</sup>
- (6) **The Use of Honey for Eye Diseases:** Honey has long been considered most effective remedy for many eye diseases. An ancient Egyptian papyrus gives the recipe for a honey ointment and instructions on how to use it. Ibn Sina (Avicenna 980 1037) recommended honey mixture with onion juice, clover or wheat grass for the eye. Honey was held as a good remedy for burns especially those affecting the eye, and an excellent cure for inflammation of the eye, although it was said that only sterile honey from honeycomb should be used for the eyes and under the supervision of doctor or ophthalmologist.<sup>17</sup>
- (7) **The Use of Honey for Skin-Therapy:** Honey is used as a skin therapy because of its hygroscopical nature i.e. (it attracts moisture and is easily absorbed by the skin) A facial made up of 75g (1/3 cup) fine ointment with 15g (3 teaspoons) honey or enough to make a smooth paste and 5ml (1 teaspoon) rose water, if spread over a clean face for 30 minutes, then rinsed-off with cold water heals any skin problems and promotes beautiful skin, especially if naturally oily. Honey is used for various skin problems like eczema, skin pimples, burns, coarse skin and abnormal hard skin.<sup>18</sup>
- (8) **Honey Impregnated Gauze Versus Polyurethane Film in the Treatment of Burns:** A group of physicians treated about 46 patients with partial skin thickness burns average 23% of body surface, was treated with honey-impregnated gauze; a second group of 46 patients was treated with Opsite, a polyurethane film. Healing was quicker in group A (average 10.8 days, maximum 16 days) than in B (average 15.3 days, maximum 24 days). This research was carried out and codified as a journal article in India.<sup>19</sup>

- (9) **The Use of Honey for Metaphysical Purposes:** The use of Honey for metaphysical purposes could be examined in two dimensions. The earlier Prophetic saying quoted above i.e. "Hold fast with two Medicines. Honey and the Qur'an"<sup>20</sup> helped in solving the dimensions. Abdul Khaliq<sup>21</sup> in his commentary on the Hadith, said

"The combination of Honey and the Qur'an is just combining God's made medicine on the earth i.e. Honey which its production was inspired by God, with heaven medicine which is the ultimate miracle words of Allah, without combining the two together, every one is sufficient in its efficacious medicinal nature.

It is on this basis that Prophet Muhammed (S.A.W) says: "Whoever takes honey three times a month will not meet with any great disaster."<sup>22</sup> It was also related from Ali b. Abi Talib<sup>23</sup> who said:

when one of you needs a cure, he should write a verse of the Qur'an and wash it with rain water and take a dirham (money) from his wife and buy honey with it and drink it<sup>24</sup>.

This is enough as a cure as Allah says: "And we sent down from sky the blessed water."<sup>25</sup>

- (10) **A Pre-caution Against Wild Animal:** It is believed and efficacious when a man knew that he is going to pass through a forest, it is recommended to put small quantity of honey on his right palm then recite these:

Nuhu alayhis-salam" and "Wa ma takun bi rasulil-Lahi Nusratuhu Intaqahul-Ussu fi Ajjamiha tajumi." 7 times then lick the honey any dangerous animal will run out of the person's path.<sup>26</sup>

- (11) **A Curative Medicine for a Mentally Imbalanced Person:** Write this verse of the Qur'an on a black slate<sup>27</sup> (Laysaiaha min dunil-lahi Kashifatun)<sup>28</sup> then wash with rain water that did not touch the ground nor roof then put three spoonfuls of honey for seven days he or she would be mentally balanced with the power of Allah.<sup>29</sup> The same method is also useful for a pre-caution against un-foreseen fearful incident which atimes causes un-rest of mind.<sup>30</sup>

- (12) **Mixing of Honey with Fresh Cow milk:** When honey is mixed with fresh cow milk and it is taken very early in the morning it enhances more energy and adequate quantity of ejaculation during sexual intercourse. It also regulates woman menstrual period pro-

vided it is used two days prior to the starting period.<sup>31</sup>

- (13) **Public Acceptability:** When a small quantity of honey is put on the right palm and the following line of poem is recited on it 3 times:

*Fahuwal-Ladhi tamma ma'nahu wa suratuhu  
hummastafau habiban Bariul-Nasamj*

then the person would lick it, the person would be loved by all and sundry.<sup>32</sup>

- (14) **Seeking of Retentive Memory:** When these verses of the Qur'an are written on a Black slate

*Sanuqriuka fala tansa* (11) times<sup>33</sup>  
Naha aniyal - 'Alimul- Khabir 480 times<sup>34</sup>

it will be washed with rain water then little quantity of honey is added. This would be repeated for seven days. It has been experimented for a dull child and by grace of Allah, he has become a brilliant child now.<sup>35</sup>

- (15) **Seeking Proficiency in Speech:** When this verse of the Qur'an is written on a black slate 9 times for male or 7 times for female:

*Rabbishraha li Sadri Wa yasir li amri  
wahlul Uqdatan min lisani yafqohu qawlu,*

it will be washed with a clean water, then it is mixed with two spoonfuls of honey and administered for 9 days for male and 7 days for female. The person would gain proficiency in any language intended.<sup>36</sup>

- (16) **Bedwetting:** When bed-wetting continues beyond the age of three, let the child put a table spoon of honey on his/her right palm and recite *La ta'khusuhu sinatum wala Nawm*<sup>37</sup> 3 times every night before he or she sleeps, he or she will see the wonders of honey and the Qur'an.<sup>38</sup>

General uses of honey were not limited to Muslim circles in West Africa but also extend to traditional African countries, towns and villages during naming, marriage and local graduation ceremony of an apprentice. Traditional African people are of the belief that honey should be licked before praying for a new-born baby, newly wedded couple and an apprentice who is gaining freedom to stand on his own.

It must be emphasised that the honey-based prescriptions in this section are those the present writer had tested on patients and cli-

ents and has found them efficacious. They are not mere speculation or superstition.

- (17) **Distinction between Original and Fake Honey:** Due to the value of honey and its efficacy some people in West Africa started faking honey. The sugar-cane honey looks and tastes like original when it is properly refined but the real honey could be differentiated through these two simple experiments:

(1) Original or Real honey when split on the floor would not attract any ants whereas the sugar cane honey does.

(2) Sugar cane honey refrigerated appropriately would become solid, whereas genuine honey will not be solidified through refrigeration.

### Conclusion

Honey which has been of great socio-economic importance to people in the olden days, still has a tremendous contemporary value. It is used in various ways both in drugs and raw as a medicine against various ailments. Its chemical composition had been scientifically proved to contain valuable components.

A lot of people now take to bee-keeping (Apiarist) which is presently an important aspect of modern agriculture, and it has served as a means of employment and income earning in many societies.

### Notes and References

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  13. K. Adetunji *al-Nahl The Honey*. p. 64.
  14. *Ibid.*
  15. A. E. Jeffrey "medical Uses of Honey" and K. Adetunji, p. 68.
  16. K. Adetunji, p. 70.
  17. Also confirmed by A. Issa, *Bee keeping consultant* H.O.D Pest Control Unit, N C R I Moor Plantation, Apata Ibadan Nigeria.
  18. Ibn Sina known as Avicena: The great Muslim Physician wrote dozens of prescriptions containing honey in his famous medical textbook "*the canon of medicine*".
  19. M. Subrahmanyam: Honey impregnated gauze versus Polyurethane film (opsite) in treatment of burns a prospective randomised study.
  20. A.G. Abdul Khaliq: *al-Tibb al-Nabbawi*, p. 27.
  21. Hadith was narrated by Abu Hurayrah and transmitted by Ibn Majah and Sahihayn-Sah-h Bukhari vol 7, p. 397.
  22. K. Adetunji: *al-Nahl The Honey Bee*, p. 37.
  23. *Ibid.*
  24. *Ibid.*
  25. *Qur'an* 50:9.
  26. The prescription was given by Shaykh Abdul Kareem Muhammed al-Awwal Balogun Gambari Ilorin Age 67 A great Shaykh in Tijaniyyah order Nov. 5, 1998.
  27. Known as *Walaa dudu* in Yoruba circle of Nigeria used with black ink made from leave or sugar known as *Tadaa* or *Tadawa*.
  28. *Qur'an* 53:57.
  29. The prescription was given by Shaykh Nurul-Faydah bn Muhi Jamiu Mazankore Balogun Gambari, Ilorin, Nigeria age 53: a great Shaykh in



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30. *Ibid.*
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33. Qur'an 87:6.
34. Qur'an 66:3.
35. The prescription was given to me by Shaykh Mustapha Abdullah. A 50 year old great Shaykh Tijaniyyah order Osunte, Offa Kwara State Nigeria.
36. The Prescription was given by Shaykh Tijani Nyass al-Kawlakhi in Nigeria during one of his visit at Lagos in 1996.
37. Qur'an 2:255.
38. The Prescription was given by Shaykh Bashir Siise of Senegal during my visit at Madina Kawlakh Senegal June, 2001.

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