

## Abu Ali Sina (Avicenna): Treatment of The Buyid Prince Suffering from Melancholy with Delusional Metamorphosis of Boanthropy

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### ABSTRACT

*A good-natured prince was affected by melancholy; he was shouting “there are few cows fatter than me in town. If the chef cooked “harissa” (goulash) of my meat, his pocket would turn into a silver treasure. Hurry, cut my throat, take me to the butchery”. From morning to evening this was his state; with his friends this was the only topic of debate. No passage of day and night passed without him mooing like a cow; “With a knife or machete kill me as I am losing weight”. This progressed to the degree he would not take food or remedies from any one. No healers could cure him, hence they sought help of Avicenna who instructed, “go and tell him that tomorrow morning, the chief butcher will come to slaughter you knife in hand”. On the hearing the good news, the patient rejoiced and became excited. In the morning Avicenna went to the patient’s house shouting, “Where is the cow?”. The patient came out, laid down in the middle of the yard, saying “I am the cow, such and such come forward”. Abu Ali bound his hands and feet firmly, sharpened his knives and sat down. As a butcher would measure an animal, Avicenna inspected him and stroked his sides and back. Afterwards, Avicenna said, this “cow is still undernourished; it is not wise to kill him today. Feed it for some time, never let it go hungry. When it is fat enough, I shall draw the blade, so its slaughter is not a waste”. They untied his hands and feet and put food in front of him. Everything they gave to him of food and medicine he took and ate without resistance, so, as cows he will gain weight. Eventually, the delusion of being a cow faded away.*

### Keywords

Avicenna, Depression, Psychosis, Psychotherapy, History of psychiatry.

### Introduction

The belief of shapeshifting into animals is an old concept that has existed for centuries. Clinical zoanthropy, however, is a rare form of delusional metamorphosis where patients believe that they are undergoing transformation or have transformed into an animal. This syndrome is often observed in patients suffering from schizophrenia-spectrum disorders and severe depression. We aim to discuss Avicenna’s description of a severely depressed and psychotic young patient, which is probably one of the oldest descriptions of zoanthropy in the history of psychiatry.

### A brief biography of Avicenna

Avicenna or Abu Ali ibn Abdullah ibn Hassan ibn Sina was born on 3rd August 980 AD in Afshana near Bukhara and died at the age

of 57 in 1037 AD in Hamadan in the northwest Iran [1]. Avicenna came from a noble family from Balkh, Afghanistan, however, his parents left Balkh for Bukhara where his father Abdullah served the Samanid King Nuh ibn Mansour [2,3].

Avicenna is regarded as one of the most significant polymaths of the Islamic world [4,5]. He wrote about 450 books and his “The Canon of Medicine”, and “The Book of Healing”, originally written in Arabic, were translated into Latin by Gherrado de Cremona in the 12th century and into Hebrew by Nathan bar Meccatti in 1279. Canon is among the most influential medical books and became a standard medical text and remained in use until the 17th century [2].

Avicenna's legacy in psychology is primarily embodied in the Kitab al-nafs parts of his Kitab al-shifa (The Book of Healing) and Kitab al-najat (The Book of Deliverance). He wrote on temperament “mizage”, and psychosomatic medicine, and was of the view that

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“brain either on its own, or alongside with the heart controls our mental functions, and organs” [2].

### **Zoanthropy in literature**

The belief of shapeshifting or metamorphosis into animals, or zoanthropy is an old concept that has existed for centuries. Nebuchadnezzar II (c.630-562 BC), King of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, who per the Book of Daniel “was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle”; is referred to as one of the oldest recorded cases of zoanthropy, or in his case boanthropy [6]. In the Farsi-Dari language, the term “maskh” for metamorphosis into an animal is used; as a “change of the form to an uglier form” in other words a deformation. It is also defined as a “transition of man’s soul into an animal body”, or in other words, a “distasting” something [7]. The term is used mostly in religious context as a form of punishment of sinners; “Indeed you knew those amongst you who transgressed in the matter of the Sabbath. We said to them: Be you monkeys, despised and rejected” [8]; “Say: shall I inform you of something worse than that, regarding the recompense from Allah: those who incurred the curse of Allah and His wrath, those of whom He transformed into monkeys and swine, those who worshipped Taghut (false deities); such are worse in rank, and far more astray from the Right Path“ [9]; “So when they exceeded the limits of what they were prohibited, We said to them: Be you monkeys, despised and rejected“ [10]. Similarly, Rumi, is debating this theme in his chef d’oeuvre, Masnawi Ma’nawi, and provides examples of both physical and spiritual metamorphosis, in “disobedient” and “oath-breakers” [11].

### **Clinical zoanthropy in medical literature**

The oldest known case report of zoanthropy in the modern European medical literature comes from Robert Bayfield (1630-1690) who in his Treatise de morborum capitis or diseases of head (published in London in 1663) gives quite a remarkable and comprehensive description of metamorphosis into animals; “Lycanthropy, Wolf-madness, is a disease, in which man run barking and howling about graves and fields in the night, lying hid for the most part all day, and will not be persuaded but that they are Wolves, or some such beasts. Donatus ab Altomari (1506-1562, Italian physician) saith, they have usually hollow eyes, scabbed legs and thighs, very dry and pale, and that he saw two of them in his time. Wierus (Ioannes, Johannes Wier, Dutch physician, occultist and demonologist, 1515 – 24 February 1588) tells a storie of such a one at Padua, 1541 that would not believe to the contrary, but that he was a Wolf: he hath another instance of a Spaniard, who thought of himself a Bear. Forestus (Pieter van Foreest or Petrus Forestus, Dutch physician born in Alkmaar, 1521 – 1597), confirms as much as by many examples; one amongst the rest, of which he was an eye-witness, at Alcamer (Alkmaar) in Holland; a poor Husbandman, that still hunted about graves, and kept in Church-yards, of a pale, black, ugly, and fearful look. This malady, said Avicenna, troubleth men most in February, and is now adayes frequent in Bohemia and Hungry, according to Heurnius (Johannes, 5 February 1543 – 11 August 1601, Dutch physician). A certain young man, in this city, tall, slender, and black, of a wild and strange look, was taken with this kinde of malady, for he run barking and howling about the

room where he was, and would make to get out; so that its most like, if he had got abroad, he would have haunted some solitary place: I remember I opened a vein, and drew forth a very large quantity of blood, black like Soot” [12].

A delusional belief in metamorphosis to animal as “imitative monomania” is described by Dendy (1847); Bariod (1850) describes a patient, who thought he was a pig and Morel (1852) describes a man who believed he had turned into a wolf or “lycanthropy”. Furthermore, clinical zoanthropy, as “insania zooanthropica” is described by Fahy (1989) and as “delirium of metamorphosis” by Bianchi (1906) [13].

### **Avicenna’s treatment of the psychotic patient**

Avicenna’s treatment of the Buyid prince is recorded initially about 100 years after Avicenna’s death by Ahmad ibn Umar ibn Ali of Samarkand (circa 1110-1161 AD), poetically named as Nizami. A second description is provided by Abdurrahman Jami (born in 1414 in Jam, Ghor, Afghanistan). Both Nizami in ‘Chahar Maqala’ (‘Four Discourses’) and Jami in ‘Haft Awrang’ (‘Seven Thrones’) account that “one of the princes of the house of Buyid was attacked by melancholy and was in such wise affected by the disease that he imagined himself to have been transformed into a cow. All day he would cry out to this one and that one saying, “kill me, so that a good stew maybe prepared from my flesh”. Until matters reached such a pass that he would eat nothing, and the days passed and he continued to waste away and the physicians were unable to do him any good. Now when the physicians proved unable to cure this young man, the case was represented to prince Ala’ud Dawla (full name Husamud-Din Abu Ja’far Muhammad bin Dushmanziyar, the ruler of Isfahan and adjacent districts between 1008 and 1041 AD), and his intercession was sought, so that he might bid his minister (Avicenna) take the case in hand. So, Ala’ud Dawla spoke to Avicenna to this effect, and Avicenna consented. Then said he, “give good tidings to the patient, and say the butcher is coming to kill you!”. When the patient was told this, he rejoiced. Then Avicenna mounted his horse and came with his usual entourage to the gate of the patient’s house, which he entered with two others. Taking a knife in his hand he said, “Where is this cow, so I may kill it?” The patient made a noise like a cow, meaning, it is “here”. Avicenna bade them bring him in to the middle of the house, bind him hands and feet, and throw him down. When the patient heard this, he ran forward into the middle of the house and laid down on his right side, and they bound his feet firmly. Avicenna came forward, rubbing the knives together, sat down, and placed his hand on the patient’s rib, as is the custom of butchers “O what a lean cow!”, said he; “It is not fit to be killed: give it fodder until it gets fat”. Then he rose up and came out, having bidden them loose his hands and feet, and place food before him, saying, “Eat, so that you may speedily grow fat.” They did as Avicenna had directed and set food before him, and he ate. After that, they gave him whatever droughts and drugs Avicenna prescribed saying, “Eat well, for this is a fine fattener for cows”. Hearing this, he would eat, in the hope that he might grow fat and they might kill him. So, the physicians applied themselves rigorously to treating him as Avicenna had indicated, and in a month’s time he completely

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recovered and was restored to health [14-16].

Neither Nizami nor Jami specify the identity of the Buyid prince treated by Avicenna. Nonetheless, evidence suggests that the prince suffering from “melancholy” was prince Abu Taleb Rostam with the honorific title of Majd-ud-Dawla (striving in wealth), son of the Fakhr-al-Dawla, the third Buyid ruler and Queen Sayeddah of Ray. Prince Abu Taleb, according to Khezri [17] was only four-years old, when his father died in 997AD. As he was unable to rule, instead his mother Queen Sayeddah took the reins of government [3, 18]. Utbi [19], records that during the reign of Prince Abu Taleb the principality of Ray and surrounding regions were in constant feuds, hence the young prince got depressed, isolated himself from the power and left his mother to govern. Prince Abu Taleb would have been 21 years old when suffering from the psychotic episode of “melancholy” or “black bile disease”; this occurred around the years 1014 AD or 1015 AD, when Avicenna lived in Ray [1, 20]. In 1006 AD or 1007 AD, Prince Abu Taleb tried with the help of his vizier Abu Ali bin Qasem, to escape from the tutelage of his mother. Nevertheless, Queen Sayeddah hold onto power with the help of her son Abu Taher Shams-al-Dawla (the ruler of Hamadan) and Kurdish Badr Hasanuya, and Prince Abu Taleb was imprisoned for a year [19]. After the death of Queen Sayeddah in 1014 AD, Prince Abu Taleb felt menaced by his rebellious soldiers, so he asked Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi of Afghanistan for help. Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi occupied Ray in March-April 1029 AD captured Abu Taleb and sent him to Ghazna, where he died [3,18,21].

As far as the pharmacological treatment of the prince Abu Taleb is concerned, neither Nizami nor Jami mention any. Yet, it is quite likely that Avicenna could have used camphor, a volatile oil obtained from the camphor tree of Eastern Asia. Camphor (or kafur in Arabic) was first popularised by the great physician Avicenna, but in Europe was firmly established in the seventeenth century as a remedy for mental disorders including melancholy, mania and psychosis. David Bayne Kinnier (? - 1758), physician working in Edinburgh and Bath used camphor for treatment of patients suffering from mania. Similarly, Leopold von Auenbrugger (1722-1809), a physician from Vienna acclaimed camphor as a specific in certain types of insanity comparable with opium in pain and quinine in tertian and quartan fevers. Furthermore, camphor was one of the standard drugs used for treatment of mental disorders until the 1940s [12].

## Discussion

Clinical zoanthropy is a rare condition, and according to a literature search between 1850 and 2012; only 56 cases of metamorphosis into an animal was reported. The clinical diagnoses were variable, and most individuals presenting with delusions of metamorphosis were diagnosed with schizophrenia-spectrum disorders (25%), psychotic depression (23.2%), bipolar disorder (19.6%), and other psychotic disorders - 12.5% [13].

Clinical presentation of zoanthropy varies, however, cynanthropy (change to a dog), and lycanthropy (werewolf) is the most common

form of zoanthropy recorded in medical literature. Furthermore, cases of boanthropy (metamorphosis to a cow), ailuranthropy (metamorphosis to a cat); as well as metamorphosis to birds, bees, frog, gerbil, goose, horse, snake, and other animals have been reported [13].

Zoanthropy has been linked with wide-ranging themes as lunar influences, witchcraft, demonology, and cultural and religious variables [13]. Avicenna as Galen (AD 129-217) views the phenomenon of zoanthropy as a type of melancholia [14].

Psychoanalytical models tend to trace the origin of delusion of metamorphosis to an unresolved intrapsychic conflict or an actual trauma, and label it, as a concretistic expression of primitive “id” instincts by means of a splitting mechanism that serves to avoid feelings of guilt [22]. Some have linked this condition to a primitive expression of sexual and aggressive urges [23]. Zoanthropy has also been conceptualised as a severe form of depersonalisation [24].

Zoanthropy is also linked to a relatively rare condition, congenital erythropoietic porphyria, characterised by photosensitive skin manifestation as erythema, bullae, erosions, hirsutism and hyperpigmentation [25].

Most people suffering from symptoms of delusional metamorphosis, or zoanthropy are treated with medications, especially antipsychotics. However, electroconvulsive therapy, and psychological interventions also seem to be effective [13].

## Conclusion

Clinical zoanthropy is a rare form of delusional metamorphosis where patients believe that they are undergoing transformation or have transformed into an animal. Avicenna’s description of a severely depressed and psychotic young prince is probably one of the oldest descriptions of zoanthropy in the history of psychiatry. The oldest known case report of zoanthropy in the European medical literature comes from the English physician Bayfield who in his Treatise on diseases of head (1663) gives description of metamorphosis into animals, as wolf and bear. This phenomenon, alongside Capgras syndrome, Fregoli syndrome, reduplicative paramnesia, and inter-metamorphosis, are variants of the delusional misidentification syndrome [26]. The syndrome is often observed in patients suffering from schizophrenia-spectrum disorders, severe and psychotic depression; and respond relatively well to psychopharmacological treatments.

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