

## 'Umm Hadeer'<sup>1</sup>: Herbalist and Fortune Teller

(Born in 1953, in the Beqa'; of Turkmen origin; currently living on the outskirts of the village of Irsal [Beqa']; recorded at home. Language: colloquial Arabic with a slight beduin accent.)

Let me tell you my story. My mother was a healer, a humane woman. She cured women who don't have babies, whose wombs are tired. I used to stay close to my mother, I'd watch how she did things, and her principles. Now, for the past fifteen years, I have been following her principles, her medicines, her way. A lot of people come from Beirut, from Saïda, from al-'Ain, from Labweh, from Ras Baalbek, from Hermel, from Homs. They come to me, a legitimate doctor, and I prescribe them medicines. These medicines cost \$50 dollars, maybe \$60 dollars. They either get them or give me money to get them. I get them [medicines] from the spice dealer. One of them is saffron. Each thirty grams cost 25,000 Syrian pounds. These things are cheaper in Syria than here. Here, the gram costs \$10 dollars. I buy it and mix it with authentic honeycomb. We avoid adulterated honey. I mix them together as my mother used to do a long time ago. Now I use it in the same way.

May God keep your health, my life story is like this, my grandfather followed the path of the sheikh, and the sheikh followed the path of my grandfather. This was forty or fifty years ago. He was in the area of Golan, Kneitra. He lived for a hundred and thirty years. Then God took him, so my father also followed the profession.

Michelle: How do you mean, he took the path of the sheikh?

Umm Hadeer: 'Sheikh' means he has his own 'way'. He sees hiddenwritten curses, he sees visions. Two of my sons also have the way, like their grandfather. I have another son who has four daughters who does the same thing. May God's good increase. This resource (mawrid) is one that we had in the past, and we are maintaining it now. People come and are grateful, thank God, and we keep up this way.

Michelle: Tell me about yourself, about your first recollections.

Umm Hadeer: My first recollections - until twenty five years ago, I was happy. But from the time he married a second wife and humiliated me, by God the story of my life is bad, not good as before. He hates the way I live with my companion's children. He sees me, excuse the expression, as a black snake.

Michelle: Are you the first wife?

Umm Hadeer: I am the first wife. And now all his concern is



Picture Credit:  
Marilyn Stafford.  
*A Photographic  
Journey through  
Lebanon in the  
Sixties*, Saqi  
Books, 1998.

with his wife. He rarely visits me. Only when there's a feast or something special. If there's nothing, he doesn't come. He pretends not to know us. And now I'm really tired. Here, let me show you my head (removes her veil and shows a mark on her head). Five or six days ago he hit me on the head. I had to go to the hospital. Why? Because he was upset. First, he hadn't got money from my sons. He got angry, he wants money from them. My children have become young men. And now, thank God, we are living comfortably. I have my sons, they are young men, they are healers. Thank God, now I am better than before.

Michelle: Tell me more about your life, any recollections you would like to tell me.

Umm Hadeer: Many things have happened, praise the

Prophet. The stories that have happened to me! For ten years, he [husband] has been trying to control me. He hardly gives me any money. He is angry with me all the time. He hates my children. And he won't allow his other children to stay in the house with me. He hates my sons. He has hated them for the past three years. He wants money from them, and my sons don't have money to give him. They work and they can barely feed their own children.

I have nine children and my companion has nine. I have five boys and she has five boys. I have four girls and she has four girls. Nine by nine. And you know, nine by nine, it's difficult to seat them around the same mattress or dish. I told him it's difficult for me to live with you with this crowd. I won't put up with it. She and I, thank God, are on good terms. She doesn't fight with me and I don't fight with her. And whatever you hear from me you will hear from my companion. We both agree against him. "Under destruction, under construction," we agree. A female does not harm a female, but a male does. If a male is good, the female will be better. If a man doesn't give face [give attention] to the child and the woman, you will find him having difficulties in his life. But my husband works, may God maintain your good health, he makes sieves, drums, rababas<sup>2</sup>. Wherever he goes, he solves people's problems. Only our problems, he makes them worse. Our situation is bad, very bad. If you need any favors, for an 'amal,' (curse) for undoing magic - - my mother, may God have mercy on all the deceased, died here in Labweh two years ago. I was trained by my mother. I took the same path that she walked on.

Michelle: Would you like to elaborate more on that?

Umm Hadeer: The 'doctor' always diagnoses a woman through the vein in her hand [wrist]. When she touches the vein in her wrist, if there's a child she'll know. If there's no child, she'll know. If the patient needs a medicine, it will hardly cost LL10,000. My mother would buy the medicine and mix it with honey and four other kinds [of herbs]. Thirty grams by thirty grams, she mixed them with honeycomb, which must not be adulterated. Everyday the man has to drink a fresh egg, and the woman has to take the medicine. If the problem was with the woman, they will know, and with God's will they will have children. For us this way has become a kind of inheritance. We inherited it from our mother and from our grandparents. My grandfather, the father of my father, was a sheikh of a path. And my mother was my grandfather's cousin, the daughter of his half sister's mother. She married her (maternal) uncle's son. And as they say, a whole life has passed, and they enjoyed their way of life. My mother's (maternal) uncle taught her, so she learnt Arabic medicine. She spent her first fifteen years in a convent in America, and she learnt about medicine and herbs. She learnt there and she gave out Arabic prescriptions for women. She

gave syrups. She prescribed for cysts and for fibroids. If one has an infection, he will drink the first cup; with the second, the sickness will be over. They used herbs that people walk on the street. But we buy them from the spice dealer.

Michelle: What other memories would you like to tell people about?

Umm Hadeer: Memories - people remember each other by kind treatment. When a person is good and kind, and treats one's neighbor well, then she is remembered. If your neighbor says a bad word about you, you have to pretend not to understand. If a person lives in a tent, then he can behave badly, all he has to do is fold his tent and leave. But when you live in a solid house, it is different. You cannot blacken your face with your neighbor, or your neighbor's son. Sometimes you are upset, sometimes he is upset. But he is before your mother and your father and your brother. Appreciation of the neighbor is more important than appreciation of family. Why? Because the life story of anyone starts with dealing well with others and humoring them.

Michelle: How old are you?

Umm Hadeer: I am forty five years old. We are originally from Lebanon, from Kub Ilyas, from the Rashed family. I only leave Lebanon to buy medicines, or other things. I go to Homs.

Michelle: I heard you speaking in another language.

Umm Hadeer: Yes, our language is Turkmen, Kurdish.<sup>3</sup> Turkmen are different from the gypsies. We are not gypsies. They call us gypsies, but we are Turkmen.

Michelle: What is the difference, could you explain?

Umm Hadeer: The difference is that Turkmen don't beg. They refuse to beg, and they never send their children to beg. Gypsy children who beg stand in the sun, they beg, "Give us for God's sake." These are the gypsies. We are Turkmen. We look for jobs. We sweep floors in houses, we wash dishes in houses, we clean houses ... I have suffered a lot but, thank God, now with these young men [sons], I'm resting. In the past, I suffered a lot.

Michelle: Tell me more about that.

Umm Hadeer: In the beginning, I didn't get pregnant. I got married very young. I stayed four years without children. Then I got children, I delivered them one after the other. I started struggling to feed them. There was no income in the beginning. There was no work. I used to work the land. Three quarters of us did that. We were laborers, we worked with vegetables, onions, fruit. We were living here. We worked as laborers on land that produced vegetables, eggplants, courgettes, peas, beans. I worked in this way. When there was work we could save around LL1000. LL1000 'talked' then [had value]. From year to year we would save LL2000. Some years we were able to save LL3000. We would be so happy! In

*"They call us gypsies, but we are Turkmen"*

the end my mother told me, "Daughter, this isn't a good way to earn a living for your children. You should observe how I work, and do the same".

We used to work in the summer with vegetables, on the land. In winter we worked in houses, sweeping floors, and washing dishes, wherever there were rich people - in Zahleh, in Shtura, in Muallaqa. We would leave our husbands and children during the day and come back at night. In the beginning when we worked, we would save money, as if in a money box, maybe LL250, LL100, LL50. Every month I would hide money in a shampoo container. In the beginning we did not even have shampoo containers, I hid money in a gasoline can. We would empty the can, clean it, dry it, then heat it on the fire and turn it into a money box. I saved money 'franc' by 'franc' without the knowledge of the man [husband]. By the end of the year I would find LL1000, maybe LL2000 in it. Then I would start buying things. I accumulated more money. The future came and we bought a piece of land. I bought this land alone [without husband]. Then I built a house, and sold it. I bought another house and have been living in it for the past thirty years. The house belongs to me. The next-door one belongs to the young men [sons], and I live with them.

I am an only daughter and I have an only brother left. He has been in Jordan for the past five years. May God maintain your health! my mother died, and then my father died. My father died this year. He moved around a lot, he made gold teeth and false teeth, he was a dentist. He was also a 'doctor' of women. But he grew very old, he was in his hundredth year. We were nine sisters with one brother. From the nine, I am the only one left. All died a natural death. Eight of them died, and now I am lonely and my brother is lonely. They died suddenly, God's death, heart attacks.

Michelle: What else can you recall from the events of your life?  
Umm Hadeer: That is all I recall now.

Michelle: What did they tell you in the hospital?

Umm Hadeer: They said that his beating reached the muscle. We were digging for water. I had brought a water driller because I was buying water by the lorry load, LL5000 everyday. Every day we need a lorry load. By the end of the month it amounted to LL300,000. No, we were ready to pay workers to drill for around \$100 and have water forever. We drilled a hundred and fifty meters and didn't reach water. Then God's mercy descended on us, they dug another two meters and we reached water. Thank God! It was when the water didn't come up that he got angry and beat me. He hasn't talked to me for the past fifty years and when the water didn't come up, he got angry and hit me because I hired a driller without informing him. He hit me. I couldn't tell what he beat me with. Maybe he slapped me, maybe he used something, I don't know. I lost consciousness and they took me to hospital. This

is my life story! I haven't been hit by him for fifteen years. Before that I was very oppressed. If I tell you that I often slept with my feet sore, believe me! He's a tyrant. Did you ever hear of a tyrant? I will never forgive him, not in this world, and not in the next. Inshallah he will suffer in the other world just as much as he made me suffer in this world. He will suffer in Hell's fire, inshallah. He doesn't give me money, even if I pluck my eye out. During the day time you will find him hanging around his wife. For me that's the best, if he stays with her I'll live like a queen. I live for my children. And I live from the sweat of my hands, may God maintain your health. For example a woman comes and asks me for a cure, if God grants her a son she'll bring me a hilwan [gift] of \$50 or \$100. Some of them give me L 500,000. Some of them promise me

LL200,000. It depends on their vow (nidr). People come to me because of my reputation. A lot of people know about my way, what I do, what I use. I touch the vein of a human being, I feel the pulse, I rub it. Then from the pulse I feel if there's a result or no result. If someone has problems with their thyroid, I also give them medicines. I prescribe a certain herb along with a kilo of lemons. They must keep the peel and throw away the pips. They mix the herb with the lemons and directly the patient should drink. The first day, the second day, whenever he drinks he throws up. He will throw up mucus or saliva. The thyroid will rest. The patient will come and tell me that his thyroid problem is gone, he will give me a gift. He may give money.

Two of my sons follow the same way. But they don't treat thyroid, they undo curses. They write a paper, they put it into a bottle without you knowing, they dissolve it inside the bottle, and they pour it for you and say "with blessings." "Did you drink it?" You say, "I did." If you have a husband who argues with you, if your fiance argues with you, they might make such a paper.

Michelle: Did they ever write something against your husband?  
Umm Hadeer: Yes, they did. My husband, may God keep your health, someone wrote for him against me. And my children undid it. They made a hijab (magico-religious spell) for me. I had an old one, they removed it and made a new one. I was fine for fifteen years. But now recently, you never know what has been written in the past two weeks after the beating he gave me. I didn't speak to him after that, because I know that the curse has been renewed. Now the boy [son] is preparing something new to undo the curse.

Michelle: Did they give you medicine in the hospital?

Umm Hadeer: Yes, I drank a medicine and they gave me eight stitches in my head. I don't know what he beat me with. But he hit me in front of the house. He pushed me to the wall. He hit me with his hand, with his ring, I don't know what he had in his hand, I just found myself unconscious. They took me to the

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hospital and gave me serum. I'd say I lost three kilos of blood. And for the past week I have been feeling so dizzy I can hardly lift a cup in my hand.

Michelle: Did you ever go to school when you were young?

Umm Hadeer: No. But my work is like a profession. Just like my mother prepared medicines from herbs, my father wrote a book about them. When my mother died, may God have mercy on all the dead, he took back the book. You know how old people are. A lot of young and old people came to him, he gave someone the book, and now the book is gone. I tried very hard to keep it. I don't know who took it. My mother spent fifteen years of her life in America. She read the Quran and Quranic verses. The Americans study it. You know that foreigners teach people and educate them. When my mother was in America, she gave birth to my other sisters who died, and my brother. She was married when she went to America and my father was with her. My father traveled to Turkey, Libya, Kuwait, Iraq, Egypt, and Jordan. He went to all countries under the sun, though if you met him you'd think he hadn't been anywhere [ie. he was modest]. He left no area without visiting it and, in the end, he came back and died in Ba'albek. He was visiting, he had his car and he died in it. They told me, "Your father is coming to visit you." I said, "Is it possible? My father is in Jordan." They said, "He is coming and he has prepared a big pick-up with all his things in it." He had meat, chickens, vegetable, he didn't leave anything. He was passing by the hospital because he had heart problems. It was Friday night, he was in Ba'albek, and the car was with him. He got in the car, he was about to start driving. Later they came and found the car. They brought him immediately. He died suddenly. I didn't see him before he died. He was in Jordan, he used to work and send money to my mother. When my mother died he was very sad. My mother also was coming over for a visit. She had the same story, she also died on a Friday evening. When she died, she had with her LS40,000. She came from Jordan to Syria, and from Syria to here. She brought LS40,000 and also some Lebanese [money] because she had carried so many things. She was going to stay for a week. On Friday night she died. Half an hour before she died she had taken a shower, and there was absolutely nothing wrong. Our house - we were renting a house lower down - because the new houses weren't finished, we had bought the land but the houses weren't yet built. My mother has been dead for three years, and the houses still aren't ready. Every time we make a couple of pounds we build.

Michelle: How do you find Lebanon as a place for women to live in?

Umm Hadeer: Well, I have lived in this Lebanon, and terrible things are happening. We Turkman people, we prefer to spend the night under our bed covers, in our long dresses. Excuse me, but you see these young girls, their clothes are shocking. Such

shocking clothes make trouble. Life in Lebanon is full of fear. If I don't recognize who is in a car, I'll never ride in it. People can never know what is going to happen. Tell me, where do you come from?

Michelle: I'm originally from Beit Shabab.

Umm Hadeer: I visited Beit Shabab a week before the 'events' [civil war], right before the battle between the Phalangists and the Palestinians. Abu Hassan [husband] was working for people there as a wood cutter. The 'events' started, and we escaped from the shelling. We worked on the lands there, with olives, vegetables, and fruit. We also worked in Wadi Shahrour. This was our work. Now I go every Saturday and Sunday to Al-Assi [river] to tell fortunes and see people's futures. But I don't allow them, my daughters, to leave the house. One of my daughters has two sons and two daughters. I don't allow them to go out. The future, the protection (*sutra*) of the girl is her house. Four of my sons and three of my daughters are still unmarried. One son and one daughter are married. My companion also has a son and daughter who are married. Our son Hussein works in sanitary equipment, in Hazmieh.

*"We inherited this  
[knowledge] from our  
mothers and grandparents"*

For twenty five years we lived in wooden houses in Kfarshima. We were children when we lived there. But life became difficult when the fighting started. And Beirut was very crowded, there were no longer opportunities for people. That's why I prefer the Beqa' valley. May God bless these parties that emerged! Hizbollah is strict with

these Shi'ites but it is protecting them. They're all wearing veils. They have a new way of thinking. Some people wear clothes above the knee, but these people are different.

Michelle: Are you Shi'ites too?

Umm Hadeer: No, we are Sunnis. We are a people who find that Christians have more pride and religion than Muslims. Why? Because if a Christian swears on his children, you can believe him. If he swears on the cross, you can believe him. I have spent a lot of time with them. They used to come to my mother for cures. They say "Inshallah we will return and bring you something", and they come back. The Muslims say, "Inshallah we will come back" but they never do. The Christians come for a diagnosis and they say, "By the cross, or by God, if our wish is realized we'll give you one gift on top of the other." Once they swear you know you haven't lost your time. One has to be kind. Our neighbors come twice a day to our house. They tell me that my heart is kind.

Recorded and translated by Michelle Obeid

## End Notes

1. 'Umm Hadeer' is a fictitious name.
2. Rababas are one-stringed instruments played mainly by beduin.
3. It was not clear why Umm Hadeer claimed both Turkmen and Kurdish origins.