

# BAQUET

Authored by  
**mohammad looti**

October 10, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *BAQUET*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=42626>

## BAQUET (Mesmeric Tub)

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** History of Medicine, History of Psychology, Quackery, Mesmerism

### 1. Core Definition and Structure

The **Baquet** (French for "tub" or "vat") was a central therapeutic apparatus utilized in the late 18th century by the Austrian physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815) and his followers. Functionally, it served as a means of concentrating and distributing the hypothesized universal fluid known as **animal magnetism**. This container was typically a large, circular, covered wooden vat, meticulously constructed to facilitate the supposed flow of magnetic energy necessary for healing. Its design was essential to Mesmer's group therapy sessions, which aimed to induce a state of profound physiological crisis, known as the "crisis" or "convulsion," believed to be curative. The Baquet was not merely a vessel; it was the technological centerpiece of Mesmer's practice in Paris, combining elements of chemistry, physics, and theatrical performance.

Structurally, the interior of the **Baquet** was highly complex and shrouded in deliberate mystique. It was generally filled with various materials believed to be potent conductors or accumulators of magnetic fluid, often including water that had been "magnetized" by Mesmer himself, ground glass, and copious amounts of magnetized iron filings or slag. The covering of the tub was pierced, allowing for the protrusion of several iron rods or jointed metal rods. These rods were the primary interface between the apparatus and the patients. The rods, which were flexible and jointed, could be detached and directed by the patients or Mesmer's assistants towards specific areas of the body requiring treatment, usually those affected by symptoms attributed to conditions such as **hysteria** or nervous disorders.

Furthermore, in many descriptions of the Baquet, a series of ropes or cords attached to the tub were extended outwards, which patients held or tied around their afflicted limbs. These cords and the protruding metal rods ensured that multiple patients could participate simultaneously in the therapeutic process, often forming a magnetic chain around the apparatus. The underlying principle was that the materials within the tub--particularly the iron and water--acted as an enormous capacitor, storing the invisible, universal fluid. When patients made contact, they became part of an intricate circuit, drawing the healing magnetic energy into their bodies, thereby restoring the internal fluid balance believed necessary for health.

### 2. Etymology and Historical Context (Attribution to Mesmer)

The development of the **Baquet** is inextricably linked to the professional and theoretical evolution of its inventor, Franz Anton Mesmer. Mesmer initially began his career in Vienna experimenting with mineral magnets, believing he could transfer physical magnetism to patients to cure diseases.

After arriving in Paris in 1778, facing skepticism from the medical establishment and seeking a more powerful and less orthodox therapeutic method, Mesmer transitioned from using simple mineral magnets to developing the concept of **animal magnetism**--an inherent, subtle fluid residing in all living beings. This shift necessitated a new mechanism for fluid transmission that could handle large groups and amplify the effect.

The **Baquet** emerged during this Parisian period (1778-1784) as Mesmer's practice gained immense popularity, particularly among the wealthy elite. It represented a sophisticated, communal approach to therapy, contrasting sharply with traditional, individualized medical consultations. By creating a large, imposing, and mysterious apparatus, Mesmer imbued the treatment with a sense of spectacle and scientific authority, appealing to the period's fascination with Newtonian physics and exotic natural sciences. The atmosphere surrounding the Baquet sessions--often involving dimmed lights, soft music, and highly charged emotional anticipation--was integral to its perceived effectiveness, leveraging suggestion and social dynamics alongside the alleged magnetic energy transfer.

This apparatus was crucial to Mesmer's commercial success in France. Charging exorbitant fees for access to the Baquet, Mesmer built a lucrative practice, requiring the help of assistants (known as 'societies of harmony') to manage the scores of patients seeking relief from nervous disorders and psychosomatic illnesses that conventional medicine failed to address. The widespread adoption of the Baquet among Mesmer's disciples cemented its place not just as a medical tool, but as the iconic symbol of the entire Mesmeric movement. Its existence underscores the transitional period in medicine, where early psychosomatic concepts mingled freely with pseudoscientific cosmological theories.

### 3. Theoretical Basis: Animal Magnetism

The fundamental theoretical justification for the use of the **Baquet** lay in the theory of Animal Magnetism, also known retrospectively as **Mesmerism**. Mesmer postulated that a subtle, invisible fluid permeated the universe and flowed between humans, terrestrial bodies, and celestial bodies. Health was maintained by the free and balanced flow of this fluid within the human body. Illness, particularly those manifesting as nervous symptoms or **hysteria**, was believed to result from blockages or uneven distribution of this magnetic fluid. Therefore, the goal of Mesmeric treatment was to restore this equilibrium.

The **Baquet** was designed as the ultimate conduit and reservoir for this fluid. Mesmer claimed he could consciously gather and manipulate this animal magnetic fluid, charging inanimate objects--like the water and iron filings inside the tub--with curative power. The iron rods protruding from the Baquet served as antennae, allowing the highly concentrated magnetic fluid accumulated within the tub to be precisely directed onto the patient. When patients touched the metal rods or held the

connecting ropes, they were thought to be completing a magnetic circuit, drawing the fluid into their system and forcing the removal of the blockages causing disease.

This conceptual framework positioned Mesmer not just as a healer, but as a facilitator controlling an essential natural force. The treatment methodology emphasized passive acceptance by the patient, who merely needed to connect with the apparatus to absorb the necessary magnetic charge. This belief system was particularly influential because it offered a comprehensive, albeit scientifically unverifiable, explanation for various physical and psychological ailments, grounding the seemingly magical healing process in a pseudo-scientific cosmological model popular at the time. The fluid theory provided a powerful narrative that justified the elaborate setup and the dramatic therapeutic outcomes observed.

#### 4. Operational Use and Therapeutic Procedure

The operational use of the **Baquet** involved highly choreographed group sessions designed to maximize atmospheric influence and suggestibility. Patients, often numbering twenty or more, would gather in Mesmer's lavishly decorated treatment rooms in Paris, which were deliberately designed to heighten sensory input: mirrored walls, heavy curtains, soft lighting, and pervasive, often unsettling, music played on instruments like the glass armonica. Patients would sit in a circle around the Baquet, connecting themselves to the apparatus via the iron rods or ropes, forming a "magnetic chain."

The therapeutic process was aimed at inducing a critical physical reaction known as the **crisis**. Mesmer and his assistants (often young, attractive men) would move among the patients, making "passes"--sweeping hand movements close to the patient's body without touching them--or applying direct pressure to the patient's abdomen or affected areas, often using the iron rods taken from the **Baquet**. These actions were intended to direct the magnetic fluid and precipitate the crisis. This crisis varied widely, ranging from intense weeping, trembling, emotional outbursts, uncontrollable laughter, or, most typically, violent convulsions, which were often observed to spread contagiously among the group.

Mesmer viewed this convulsive crisis as the necessary and beneficial expulsion of the harmful blockages. Once a patient entered this state, they were often moved to a separate padded "crisis room" where they could thrash and recover under supervision. The entire procedure was characterized by high emotional intensity and communal energy, suggesting that much of the observed effect was psychological, resulting from potent suggestion, expectation, and socio-emotional contagion, rather than the transfer of a physical magnetic fluid. The **Baquet** thus functioned less as a literal energy source and more as a powerful psychological focal point for collective belief and dramatic release.

## 5. Societal Impact and Performance Context

The introduction of the **Baquet** and Mesmerism into Parisian society represented a profound social and cultural phenomenon. In the years immediately preceding the French Revolution, the movement attracted considerable patronage from the French nobility and intellectual elite who were disillusioned with the often brutal and ineffective treatments of conventional 18th-century medicine. The **Baquet** sessions offered a fascinating blend of scientific modernity and exotic performance, satisfying the period's thirst for novelty and spectacular cures. The communal, emotionally charged atmosphere was a significant departure from the dry formality of traditional medical practice.

The success of the **Baquet** can be attributed, in large part, to the masterly stagecraft employed by Mesmer. The environment was meticulously controlled to enhance the power of suggestion: the dimly lit room, the mysterious apparatus, the silent, purposeful movements of the magnetizers, and the anticipation created by the testimonials of fellow patients all contributed to an overwhelming psychological experience. This theatricality transformed the treatment room into a venue for collective emotional release, particularly appealing to women suffering from vague diagnoses of "nerves" or **hysteria**, who were often denied legitimate medical attention.

Consequently, the **Baquet** became a controversial symbol. For followers, it represented a revolutionary cure based on natural laws; for detractors, it symbolized charlatanism, suggestive manipulation, and moral corruption. Mesmer's refusal to allow traditional scientific scrutiny of his methods--insisting that only those initiated into the theory of animal magnetism could understand it--further fueled the debate. The wide social reach and significant financial profits generated by the Baquet ensured that Mesmerism became a major topic of public discussion, influencing everything from contemporary drama to philosophical discourse on the nature of mind and body.

## 6. Official Investigation and Criticism

The immense public controversy and the challenge Mesmerism posed to established medical and academic authorities eventually prompted official intervention. In 1784, King Louis XVI established two royal commissions in Paris to investigate the claims of **animal magnetism** and the efficacy of the **Baquet** treatment. These commissions included some of the most prominent scientists and physicians of the era, notably the chemist Antoine Lavoisier, the physician Joseph-Ignace Guillotin, and the American statesman and scientist Benjamin Franklin, who was residing in Paris.

The commissions adopted a rigorously empirical approach, designed to isolate the purported magnetic fluid from the effects of imagination and expectation. In controlled experiments, they tested whether subjects could sense the magnetic fluid when they believed they were being magnetized versus when they were actually being magnetized (or vice versa), often using an

uncharged **Baquet** or a magnetizer working behind a screen. Crucially, the commissions focused on the operation of the **Baquet** itself, conducting blind trials where patients were exposed to charged and uncharged objects. The findings were definitive: the supposed magnetic fluid could not be physically detected, and all effects, including the curative crises, could be entirely attributed to imitation, expectation, and the powerful influence of the imagination (suggestion).

The official reports concluded that the theory of **animal magnetism** was baseless and that the Baquet had no physical therapeutic power. They acknowledged that the emotional and psychological effects were real but warned that the dramatic crises induced by the treatment were potentially dangerous and morally corrupting. This damning verdict effectively discredited Mesmer in the eyes of the French scientific establishment, leading to the decline of his centralized practice, though Mesmerism continued to exist through decentralized disciples who focused more heavily on the power of suggestion, leading eventually toward the development of hypnotism.

## 7. Legacy and Modern Interpretation

Although the **Baquet** disappeared from medical practice following the 1784 commissions, its legacy is highly significant in the history of psychology and medicine. The royal investigations, particularly those led by Franklin, are often cited as landmark moments in the history of scientific methodology, representing one of the earliest systematic applications of blind experimental controls to medical claims. The conclusions drawn--that the effects were due to suggestion--provided crucial early insight into the profound psychosomatic connections and the power of the placebo effect, long before these concepts were formalized.

The **Baquet**, as the physical manifestation of Mesmer's group therapy, helped pave the way for later explorations into altered states of consciousness. Many of Mesmer's followers moved away from the fluid theory and the apparatus, focusing instead on the ability to induce the "magnetic sleep" or trance state--a practice that evolved directly into modern hypnotism (coined by James Braid in the 1840s). Thus, the initial attempts to harness the mysterious energy of the **Baquet** unintentionally revealed the power of psychological induction and suggestion, laying foundational groundwork for fields such as dynamic psychiatry and clinical hypnosis.

In contemporary cultural and academic study, the **Baquet** remains an enduring symbol of pseudoscience and theatrical medical quackery, yet it is also recognized as an important historical artifact illustrating the complex interplay between science, belief, and performance in 18th-century medical history. It highlights how societal anxieties and the limitations of contemporary medical knowledge can create a fertile ground for unorthodox treatments that leverage the power of expectation and collective emotional experience.

## Further Reading

[Wikipedia: Franz Mesmer](#)

[Wikipedia: Animal magnetism \(Mesmerism\)](#)

[Wikipedia: Hysteria](#)

[Wikipedia: Benjamin Franklin and the Mesmer investigation](#)

[Wikipedia: Hypnosis](#)

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