

## *The Role of Sufi Practice Zikr-e-Qalbi in Countering Sorcery*

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**Abstract:**

*Sorcery or kaala jadu<sup>1</sup> in the local language is a debatable yet broadly discussed topic in many areas of Pakistan. Numerous curative practices have been adopted to counter its effects. Despite known for causing problems in personal lives yet sorcery related practices along with the curative methods are not explicitly discussed by the people in Pakistan due to interplay social and cultural factors. The present research focuses on exploring the association of sorcery with the Sufi practice of Zikr-e-Qalbi as a healing technique that could be used as a way to ward off negative effects of sorcery. The Sufi practices and other related rituals are not uncommon in Pakistan because spiritual problems are highly acknowledged as well as accepted. An anthropological study had been carried out in Dar-ul-Irfan Chakwal in 2015-2016. The data was primarily collected through in depth interviews via snowball and purposive sampling method. The research findings suggest that Zikr-e-Qalbi acts as a subtle positive energy with curative benefits and it could be adopted as one of the healing techniques for sorcery. The study also assists in exploring the Sufi healing process besides uncovering the effects of sorcery that are projected in physical, mental and spiritual forms in a victim's life.*

**Keywords:** Zikr-e-Qalbi, Sufi meditation, Sorcery, Sufi healing, Zikr.

### **1. Introduction**

The concept of sorcery has traveled through time and space. In the pharaonic Egypt, magic known as heka was considered as one of the forces that had practical effects<sup>2</sup>. The respectful users of such magical powers were

the priests who presumably used these powers to protect the pharaoh<sup>3</sup>. Even though sorcery is linked to magic but the intentions are to harm a particular person<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, it is different than magic or witchcraft owing the strategic differences in practice, use and effects.

Moro further asserts: “Most anthropologists see connections between witchcraft, sorcery, and social tensions, erupting from conflicts inherent in social organization or in response to modernity and social change”. In light of this statement, the aim of sorcery can be deduced as disruption of the normal functioning of a person. The act stems from various emotions, primarily including envy and jealousy which could be linked to social differences. Social differences are widespread across Pakistan which explains the high prevalence of sorcery and its curative practices.

In contrast to the Sufi practices, the act of sorcery is a tabooed concept and not encouraged by the Islamic beliefs therefore, the sorcerers perform these activities in a disguised form. A local newspaper in Pakistan had also reviewed this phenomenon and it was found that some people go to local animal zoo to collect the nails of lions/bears, excretions or spines of certain animals because those remnants are involved in the act of sorcery<sup>5</sup>. The following advertisements have been published in a local newspaper that promotes sorcery related services:



Figure 1- Sorcery services advertisements in a Pakistani newspaper<sup>6</sup>

The Sufi practices, on the contrary, are openly practiced even if not accepted by all. However, not many studies have been conducted in Pakistan that bridge the gap between Sufi healing practices and daily life

problems. In order to examine the curative aspects of Sufi healing methods, the present research focuses primarily on examining the role of Zikr-e-Qalbi to ward off the evil effects of sorcery. To counter the evil effects of sorcery, various healing practices like *dam* (the concept in which verses from Quran are blown on the affected individual through breath), amulets and other relevant antidotal methods are used. Zikr-e-Qalbi.e., remembrance by heart, could be used as a curative method that focuses on gaining the subtle energy of the Divine which cures the victim simultaneously. These curative practices aim at healing the illnesses of the body along with the soul of the victim<sup>7</sup>.

The term of Zikr in the Sufi ideology refers to repeatedly invoking the name of God<sup>8</sup>. Zikr-e-Qalbi (or Zikr with heart) is a method of Zikr which is carried out within the heart (through breathing) and is believed cannot be perceived even by the recording angels<sup>9</sup>. In simple words, it is a spiritual meditational practice in which the person is not only mentally involved but the whole body is also engrossed in it. From an emic perspective, this study establishes that sorcery being an intangible problem could be healed with an intangible healing practice i.e., Zikr-e-Qalbi.

## 2. Literature review

Gillies and Evans-Pritchard have defined sorcery as “the magic that is illicit or is considered immoral”<sup>10</sup>. The authors have further talked about the ‘bad medicines’ that could be used to induce the magic and they regard the practice as a learned behavior. This point has also been validated by Stein and Stein<sup>11</sup> who imply that sorcery is used for illegal and anti-social means in which the malicious power resides in the medicines that are used on the victim. Spell is used as a way to wake up this power and it could disrupt the life and happiness of someone.

Furthermore, Stein and Stein have asserted that the victim's hair, nail clippings, excretions and food remains etc. are also used in the process. Consequently, the victim starts to develop ailments (physical or mental) that are mostly undetectable by the doctors<sup>12</sup>. Without having a physical trace of the problem, the victim's life is constantly eroded because the ailment is acting on a spiritual level. These ailments could range from acute effects to accidents, tragedies, body paralysis and even death<sup>13</sup>.

Ndzovu further states that the negative effects induced by sorcery could be personal, physical or mental and everyone faces the effects differently depending on the motive behind sorcery. These attacks are generally controlled by the sorcerer from a distance and the sorcery related services are 'bought' by the envious attacker<sup>14</sup>. It acts as a process because envious attacker goes to a sorcerer and gets the spell bound food in exchange for money. It is then consumed by the victim who then starts experiencing the ailments with time<sup>15</sup>.

Sorcery has become a commodity in Pakistan and the sorcerer is often disguised as a fortune teller<sup>16</sup> or a person who claims to use Quranic verses<sup>1718</sup> to attract consumer. It is because of the fact that the Islamic religion explicitly prohibits the act of sorcery as implied by Ndzovu.

Conversely, the Sufi healing practices are openly practiced because they are considered as holy. The use of different names of God and particularly The Greatest name of God (Ism Allah al-a'zam) could be used in the Sufi healing method to attain material i.e., healing and protection<sup>19</sup>. According to Rahman: "Sufi spiritual healing is neither a magic nor a mysterious process but is in fact very natural instinct with which every human being is born with but fails to actualize this potential power"<sup>20</sup>. Moreover, Kiymaz<sup>21</sup> has also presented the framework of the Sufi practices that could also be used for healing purposes.

Kiyamaz states that according to the Sufi belief, there are five elements that form the human body: water, air, earth ether and fire. Air is the breath that reaches ether and breath is an important factor in healing in addition to ascending the stages of soul. With the breath, the barakah (or the blessings) are transferred from a spiritual leader (Sheikh/Sheikh) to heal the patient. The Sufi beliefs regard Allah as the true healer in which the Sheikh acts as a mediator between Allah and the patient<sup>22</sup>. Moreover, the healing of heart or soul is the major focus in this healing strategy that aims at removing the diseases from the core. In order to carry out this healing, Zikr is used as a way to cleanse the heart because it nourishes the soul<sup>23</sup>.

Hughes in his book ‘A Dictionary of Islam’ suggests that Zikr is “The religious ceremony or act of devotion, which is practiced by the various religious orders of Faqirs, or Dervishes.” Additionally, he states that there are two main types of Zikr named as Zikr Jali and Zikr Khafi in which the first type refers to the practices that are performed out loud while the second type entails the practices that are carried out in a low voice (or practicing mentally) respectively<sup>24</sup>. In practicing Zikr-e-Qalbi, an individual should imagine that the word ‘Allah’ is going in with every inhaled breath and the word ‘Hoo’ emerges with each exhaled breath. Not only should ‘Hoo’ be exhaled with the breath, but also it should strike the Heart’<sup>25</sup>.

### **3. Methodology**

The data for this qualitative research was primarily collected using interview method (structured and semi-structured). Due to the cultural barriers, only sorcery-affected female respondents were approached who were using Zikr-e-Qalbi as a healing method. The sampling was carried out in two steps. The first step concerned selection of a locale that best suited the study purpose. Dar-ul-Irfan, a centre known for its Zikr-e-Qalbi Sufi practice was chosen. Secondly, snowball sampling and purposive sampling

methods were employed as only sorcery affectees/victims were included in the study. In this way, the victims who had been either the most critical or the most successful recovery cases of sorcery were approached. In total, of 25 women were interviewed for the study; their ages ranged from 18 to 65 years at the time.

Furthermore, telephonic interview (though seldom), photography, focus group discussions (FGD), field jottings, participant observation and informal conversations were also used for the data collection. The entire research was completed in six and a half months' time period (30th October 2016- 22nd May, 2016) in the locale Dar-ul-Irfan, Munara (Chakwal). Additionally, a few visits were made prior to the actual date to seek permission for research and to gain preliminary information about the Sufi practice.

#### **4. Research Findings**

The research findings suggest that sorcery harms the soul as well as the human body and it could be countered via Zikr-e-Qalbi. As believed by respondents, there are additional methods used in the healing process among which amulets and naqsh (amulets to be used in drinking water) are noteworthy. The victim receives amulets based on preliminary diagnosis which is carried out by the Sheikh of Silsila Naqshbandia Awaisia Hazrat Ameer Muhammad Akram Awan<sup>26</sup>. It help in expediting the recovery process. It is advised not to seek assistance from other spiritual methods in order to recover rapidly. The sorcery affected individual does not necessarily have to be the follower of the Sufi practice. However, zikr is advised to accelerate healing as it is believed to acts as a cleanser for the spirit.

#### 4.1 Sorcery, Human Body and Soul

A widely pervasive belief is the link between human body and soul where the latter is also connected to the spiritual realm. According to the Sufi philosophy, the human soul and body have been merged together with the subtle heart. It is also believed that the human soul is susceptible to malicious attacks if it is weak but it could be made stronger with constant Sufi zikr and meditation which helps in strengthening and nourishing the soul<sup>27</sup>. Our research contends that an inversely proportional relation between impact of sorcery and strength of the soul; the stronger the soul the lesser the impact and vice versa. According to Sufi order under study, the spirit or soul is not vulnerable to malicious attacks if a person prays five times a day and abstains from the wrongful deeds. All of the activities must be carried out within the limits of religion that would eventually help in strengthening the spirit.

In case of an infliction, zikr is prescribed for healing. The two aspects of healing process include systematic and regular use of amulets and zikr performance. Both help in eradicating the negative effects of sorcery by strengthening the soul. Upon constantly following the method prescribed by the Sheikh, the individual can regain strength and continue the daily routine life. Some of the respondents stated that the sorcery effects initiated as physical problems augment with time. One of the respondents who had suicidal ideation believed that an unknown entity/voice insisted her to jump into the river. The suicidal ideation stemmed from two apparent reasons i.e., weakening of soul due to a personal suffering and the malicious power telling her to commit suicide. By constantly using naqsh and doing zikr, her symptoms started to subside and helped her to regain her strength. She also mentioned that she is now able to recite Quran easily which was not the case

prior to this treatment because of the same voice cautioning to stay away from religious activities.

Another respondent (aged 55) stated that she used to suffer from severe headaches and vomiting which would intensify during Zikr-e-Qalbi. She also experienced tingling sensations and burning in specific part of the body that would subside but recur without any cause. Additionally she had digestive issues. The doctors were unable to diagnose her physical ailments. However, her symptoms started to ward off as she increased her zikr meditation time.

A similar problem was confronted by a mother of two children (aged 40). Despite feeling unwell, all of her medical tests came clear. In addition to physical problems, the victims also started experiencing paranormal activities around the house. She and her family believed this to be an issue related to i.e., sorcery. Someone referred her to the locale under study. She was new to this type of meditation. Even though her ailment continued to persist, the intensity of paranormal activities lowered. These accounts establish that zikr meditation helps the victims in regaining their physical strength and allows the victim to carry out their religious activities that they were unable to execute prior to the Sufi treatment.

Sorcery damages the body and soul if left untreated for a longer period of time. The data findings also implied that if the victim remains untreated, the repercussion could be extremely adverse and may even lead to death. Therefore, the physical manifestations of sorcery must always be carefully diagnosed by the spiritual leader, i.e., and healing prescription must be followed. A respondent from Jaswal<sup>28</sup> region said: *“I feel sensation in my feet (especially toes) and this feeling intensifies. My feet start to heat up when it happens. This sensation then moves to my head causing it to spin intensely. I am unable to concentrate on anything when this happens”*. She



came to the locale for the first time and was there to get treatment. She like other patients, was given naqsh and advised regular Sufi mediation by the Sheikh.

Another female (29 years old) shared somewhat similar experience. She said: *“There are specific hours of the day in which I experience severe stomachache. It intensifies during the evening and decreases by the night. Starting from the stomach shifts to my spine. The doctors have not been able to diagnose. Nothing is medically wrong with me. I have been to several doctors who have not been able to diagnose the issue. It is definitely something else!”* (referring to sorcery). She further mentioned that her husband did not believe in ghosts or spirits until he saw the house walls stained in blood. They also found a burnt shirt of their son in the dustbin. Living as a nuclear family, such incidents were found shocking. She reported having recovered from physical ailments through Zikr-e-Qalbi.

It is interesting to note that the physical ailment is treated as such until a paranormal or supernatural activity is experienced. The latter is taken as an indication to sorcery. Without it, most of the people consider the physical issues as medical in nature. Moreover, a failure in diagnosis of ailment by medical practitioner and/or clear medical results despite physical ailment is also perceived as a sorcery caused affliction. For instance, a sorcery affected woman (Aged 40) informed about suffering from severe digestive problems and blood in stool. However, her medical test results did not show any ailment. In her case, the sorcery affects were also projected as the mental issues whereby the victim occasionally behaved abnormally.

The research findings are also drawn from data collected through focus group discussions (FGD's) as well as informal discussions with the victim's family members. Both helped gain an access to information that may not be explicitly shared by the victims. Some victims were reluctant to

share their experiences because, as mentioned earlier in the text, sorcery and the related effects are considered as a taboo and people are not very comfortable in openly discussing these personal issues. However, in FGD several such cases were reported that the participant has not personally experienced but has knowledge of. For instance, one of the respondents and a regular visitor at Dar ul Irfan, in a FGD narrated a case: *“I have personally seen a girl here who could not communicate with anyone like a normal individual. She used to hit the walls and floors with much force because of the evil forces inside her. To be honest, she looked like a person who could never be cured. But to my surprise, her symptoms lost severity with time although it took her a lot of time to regain her true self. Trust me, I have witnessed this entire case personally! When the healing process begins, the demonic (or evil) forces try to stop that individual and they hurt the victim from the inside leading them to behave in a bizarre way.”*

In the extreme cases, the victims lose their sense of reality and are completely under the influence of evil powers. One thing that needs to be clarified here that at Dar ul Irfan, is that the sorcery-affected individual is treated differently than the person with psychological problems. The sorcery affects and other ailments are directly observed by the spiritual leader via spiritual knowledge namely Kashaf and Wajdan. Within the Sufi perspectives, Kashaf and Wajdan refer to the unveiling of spiritual world or the spiritual knowledge. Thus, the sorcery related issues would have their manifestation in the spiritual realm and they are treated differently. This diagnosis is only carried out by the sheikh who then writes the amulets in accordance with the illness. If it is spiritual in nature, it is treated accordingly. For example, a successful case was that of a girl who suffered from such spiritual issue. During a telephonic interview she informed about the effects of sorcery on her daughter. Her case further deteriorated due to

spirit possession. She was successfully treated by amulets, naqsh and Zikr-e-Qalbi for her spiritual problems, however, the psychological ones continued to persist for which she was recommended to seek psychological assistance. Following is her verbatim:

*“My daughter was 13 years old at the time when her symptoms became more obvious. She used to have intense unexplainable energy with which she could push away even adult family members. She behaved and talked like a 2 to 3 years old toddler. I was hopeless at that time because the psychologists and other doctors from overseas had given their final statements. They declared that she will never be normal. However, I did not lose hope. With the spiritual power of Zikr-e-Qalbi and constant guidance of our Sheikh (Ameer Muhammad Akram Awan), she came back to normal life. Now, no one will ever believe what she has gone through in the past and she is living a normal life”.*

Every individual was treated differently but three things that remained common were the use of naqsh, amulets and Zikr-e-Qalbi because these were believed to facilitate the healing process. Also it is worthwhile to note the three indicators/signs aiding identification of sorcery, these include: medical practitioners are unable to execute proper diagnosis of a physical ailment; medical tests coming clear despite acute suffering; signs of paranormal activity; and abnormal behaviour of the victim.

## **4.2 Curative Role of Zikr-e-Qalbi**

Zikr-e-Qalbi allows the individual in regaining this spiritual strength in the form of subtle energy (good or protective energy) and it directly addresses the spiritual problem. In the cases where the sorcerer's attacks are stronger or the victim's soul is weak, the victim is asked to take amulets in addition to performing the Zikr-e-Qalbi. It is believed that this Sufi meditation uses the Divine energy which travels through the heart of the

spiritual leader to the hearts of those who practice it. It acts as a positive energy that allows the individual to cleanse their soul.

One of the signs of an acute case is when the victim's situation first becomes worst and then gradually improves. In some of the cases, the victims with adverse effects of sorcery started shouting or lose control over themselves because the malicious powers inhibited them from performing the Sufi meditation. During the zikr, many sorcery-effected individuals abstain from performing zikr because it troubles the evil spirits and evil forces. They move away from the room where zikr is being carried out. Moreover, according to the Sufi beliefs, heart is considered as the controlling part of the whole body and the Divine Power (Allah) resides in it<sup>29</sup>. Therefore, Zikr-e-Qalbi is imperative to cleanse the heart which leads an individual to achieve higher levels of the Divine cognition<sup>30</sup>. Eventually when through extensive and continued zikr despite the initial ordeal heart is purged, the victim returns to normalcy. Thereafter, the recitation of zikr leads directly to further improvement.

Other significant factors that contributed to speedy recovery of the sorcery victims were the constancy and consistence. If the individuals took their amulets regularly and performed the Sufi meditation with more frequency, their spiritual defense power to fight against the sorcery became stronger and vice versa. The road to healing was constant practice of Zikr-e-Qalbi. One of the successful cases also shared her experience by stating: "I wanted to recite Quran but something was stopping me from opening my mouth whenever I wanted to offer my prayers. This issue has been completely resolved via constant Zikr and I can now perform my farz<sup>31</sup> prayers. It was not possible for me to say Allah's name let alone the prayers. I am content now and I hope that no one ever undergoes the same experience as I have, because it is traumatic".

Our interlocutors emphasized on spiritual guidance being crucial in the healing process because it helps in dealing with the malicious acts that are being carried out by a sorcerer or the attacker. It is basically a fight between two dissimilar energies in which one is negative i.e., sorcery and it has to be countered by a positive force of Zikr-e-Qalbi. This spiritual strength could be polished and fortified through the constant Sufi meditation but it is not possible to be executed without a spiritual leader who acts as a mediator between the Divine power and the victim.

According to the respondents, sorcery effects are treated differently than the other issues because during the time of research, there were individuals with other ailments who were taking naqsh or doing zikr to heal themselves. People do relate all of their problems to sorcery which is not the actual case<sup>32</sup> because sometimes, the issue is psychological in nature. Each type of illness is treated via zikr because of the multifaceted benefits of the meditation nonetheless, sorcery issues are nevermixed with the other issues. The time frame involved in healing varies from victim to victim depending upon the severity of their case. Regaining the spiritual strength could also be time consuming depending on the adverse impact of sorcery thereby making this treatment method as slightly long term. In other words, the stronger sorcery attack would have to be countered with a longer meditation of Zikr-e-Qalbi.

During the research, people came to the locale for the following reasons:

- To cure sorcery effects
- To gain spiritual knowledge and to stay spiritually connected to the Sheikh
- Physical or health related problems
- Mental problems (depression or psychological issues)

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- To find the answers to meaning of life
  - Possession, evil spirits or demonic problems

## 5. Conclusion

The focus of research was to find the association of Zikr-e-Qalbi meditation as a curative method for sorcery. The present study has explored the phenomenon within the context of Pakistan where both sorcery and Sufi healing methods are recognized. In light of the responses that were gathered from successfully healed cases and other relevant data, it was found that Zikr-e-Qalbi could be quite helpful in curing the effects of sorcery that are physical, mental and spiritual. The sorcery related effects could be latent or unambiguous depending on the severity of spells and it disrupts the normal functioning of life. Without having any medical root cause of the ailments, the victims also start experiencing supernatural activities in their houses which allows them to think of the other side of the problem.

From the medical pluralistic point of view, it is possible to use more than one medical treatment methods that could help in speeding up the healing process. This Sufi meditation helps the affected individual to cleanse themselves from within that eventually helps in regaining the physical strength. The functioning of body and spirit is intertwined and if the spirit is impacted, the body starts developing ailments. Similarly, the attack of a sorcerer is carried out on the spiritual as well as physical level for which Zikr-e-Qalbi has been found as an effective treatment.

According to the research data, it was also apparent that people practice Zikr-e-Qalbi to protect themselves and to attain a meaning in life because it is known for nourishing the human soul or spirit. With the guidance and usage of amulets provided by the spiritual leader (i.e., Sheikh), the healing process could be supplemented. Lastly, the research also suggests that Zikr-e-Qalbi provides the individual with the subtle power in

the form of positive energy that spiritually strengthens an individual and allows him/her to be invincible against the negative evil forces.

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