

SPIRITUAL HEALING: A STUDY OF MODERN SUFI REFLEXOLOGY THERAPY IN INDONESIA

Mohammad Rindu Fajar Islamy
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia
E-mail: fajarislam2000@upi.edu

Yedi Purwanto
Institut Teknologi Bandung, Indonesia
E-mail: yedi@fsrd.itb.ac.id

Usup Romli
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia
E-mail: usupromli@upi.edu

Alwan Husni Ramdani
Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia
E-mail: alwanhusni@upi.edu

Abstract: There have been advances achieved in modern medicine but traditional treatment methods using certain spiritual approached have become increasingly popular in many parts of the world. Certain Sufi practices, among others, is used in medical treatment to support the healing process. Based on a case study on the practice of Sufi therapy conducted by Akang Syamsudin in the Limbangan Garut area, West Java, Indonesia this article attempts to explore the conversion process and dynamics of the development of Sufi healing. Employing a qualitative approach and Miles and Huberman landscape approach, and supported with interviews, observations, and documentation the research finds that Syamsudin's Sufi therapy method combines physical and spiritual principles. Syamsudin's therapeutic approach is based on the following seven factors, are: 1) belief that every disease has a cure; 2) balance and moderation are directly proportional to physical health; 3) spiritual factors dominate over physical factors; 4) the importance of blood circulation; 5) the efficacy of positive suggestion; 6) belief and submission to God's will; 7) the effectiveness of patience and consistency. The research implications open a new paradigm in the field of non-invasive treatments. This article suggests that modern medical treatment should be complemented with spiritual therapy in order to achieve more positive healing outcomes for patients.

Keywords: Spiritual Healing; Medicine; Sufi Healing; Sufism; Indonesia.

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Introduction

Research studies related to Sufism and Sufi practices have been carried out by many Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. Within the scope of modernity, the study of some aspects of Sufism encouraged western intellectuals to study Sufi concepts and incorporate them into new forms of spirituality.¹ The American scholar Joseph E.B. Lumbard analyzed the Sufi teachings of the classic Muslim philosopher, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (1058–1111).² Furthermore, Harvard professor Robert Landau Ames explored the role of the public intellectual and the ethics of knowledge presented in *The Scale of Knowledge (Mizān al-Ma'rifah)* by Safi Ali Shah (1835–1898).³ The Australian scholar Milad Milani examined the teachings of the Naqshbandi Order.⁴ In the wake of modern secularism and

¹ Najia Mukhtar, "Using Love to Fathom Religious Difference – Contemporary Formats of Sufi Poetry in Pakistan," *Contemporary South Asia* 23, no. 1 (2015): 26-44; Amidu Olalekan Sanni, "Muslim Communities of Grace: The Sufi Brotherhoods in Islamic Religious Life," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 32, no. 4 (2012): 580-582; Manami Ueno, "Sufism and Sufi Orders in Compulsory Religious Education in Turkey," *Turkish Studies* 19, no. 3 (2018): 381-399. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2018.1438194>; Prina Werbner, "The Abstraction of Love: Personal Emotion and Mystical Spirituality in the Life Narrative of a Sufi Devotee," *Culture and Religion* 18, no. 2 (2017): 165-180. <http://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2017.1326961>.

² Joseph E.B. Lumbard, *Aḥmad al-Ghazālī, Remembrance, and the Metaphysics of Love* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2016).

³ Robert Landau Ames, "Weighing Knowledge Humanity, Modernity, and Ṣafī 'Alī Shāh's *Mizān al-Ma'rifah*," *Die Welt des Islams* 7 (2018): 165-194.

⁴ Milad Milani and Adam Possamai, "Sufism, Spirituality and Consumerism: The Case Study of the Nimatullahiya and Naqshbandiya Sufi Orders in Australia," *Contemporary Islam* 10 (2015): 1-19.

consumerism, the level of religiosity and spirituality in society has significantly declined, which makes the emergence of Sufism urgent.⁵

Sufi therapy has become increasingly popular in the last two decades where Sufi healing approaches have been introduced in medical therapy.⁶ In Malaysia, researchers have documented the effectiveness of Sufi healing methods in the treatment of drug addiction. A study involving 19 drug addicts undergoing 12 spiritual healing sessions internalized religious values and spiritual teachings, which eroded the influence of drugs and supported the rehabilitation process. The Sufi healing therapy (SHT) model helped to build the participants' self-involvement and agency in drug addiction interventions.⁷ The UK study conducted by Denis Haviland focused on the traditions and practices of spiritual medicine that have been introduced since the 1980s. At least about 7,000 therapists are involved in spiritual medicine.⁸ Karim Mitha, a contemporary scientist, concludes that Islamic practices such as remembrance (*dhikr*) can be overlaid with psychological principles of mindfulness and self-efficacy and reveal the intersection of spirituality and mental health.⁹ The same idea was conveyed by Amber Haque, namely that spiritually-oriented interventions accompanied by Sufi therapy can be designed into treatment units, aligned with elements of cognition, behavioral tendencies, and human spirituality.¹⁰ In the author's view, the role of Sufism in removing impurities from the heart contributes significantly to maintaining the body's immunity from some forms of physical illness.

⁵ Blain Auer, "The Origins and Evolution of Sufi Communities in South Asia Revisited," *Die Welt des Islams* 8 (2019): 30-49; A. Kars, "What Is 'Negative Theology'? Lessons from the Encounter of Two Sufis," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 86, no. 1 (2018): 181-211.

⁶ Mark C. Thompson, "The Impact of Globalization on Saudi Male Millennials' Identity Narratives," *Asian Affairs* 50, no. 3 (2019): 323-343.

⁷ Che Zarrina Sa'ari, "Critical Review of Sufi Healing Therapy in Drug Addiction Treatment," *Journal of Critical Reviews* 7, no. 5 (2020): 1155-1160.

⁸ Denis Haviland, "Current Position of Spiritual Healing in the UK," *Holistic Medicine* 1, no. 4 (1986): 271-275. <https://doi.org/10.3109/13561828609037831>.

⁹ Karim Mitha, "Sufism and Healing," *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 21, no. 3 (2019): 194-205. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19349637.2018.1464423>.

¹⁰ Amber Haque and Hooman Keshavarzi, "Integrating Indigenous Healing Methods in Therapy: Muslim Beliefs and Practices," *International Journal of Culture and Mental Health* 7, no. 3 (2014): 297-314. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17542863.2013.794249>.

In Indonesia, Sufi therapy is deeply rooted in Muslim society. Sufi therapy cannot be separated from Sufi ritual practices that are in harmony with the cultural traditions of Indonesia. In the village of Bulungkulon Kudus, Atika Ulfia has studied the Jalmah Foundation and its treatments to the patients suffering from schizophrenia. This is a type of spiritual neuroscience treatment to support the healing process.¹¹ In Pekalongan, the teachings of the Tarekat Qadiri-Naqshbandi has measurable positive effect on the emotional and spiritual intelligence of the congregation.¹² The Manajemen Qolbu (roughly translated in English as the “management of heart”) founded by Abdullah Gymnastiar, a famous preacher from Bandung, uses Sufism teachings in shaping the behavior of the younger generation. This, of course, further emphasizes the great interest of modern society to use Sufi healing methods as an alternative to modern medicine. This spiritual therapy relies on the values of reconnecting to one’s spiritual nature, regaining one’s inner balance, and drawing new energy from it.¹³ Muhammad Mahfuz al-Tarmasi, a prominent Muslim scholar from Pacitan East Java, wrote a treatise on Sufism entitled *Bughyat al-Adhkiyā’ fī al-Baḥṡ ‘an al-Karamāt al-Awliyā’* which describes the community’s need for spiritual teachings and practices that are in harmony with the local culture.¹⁴ The nature of the Indonesian people, who are generally very concerned with preserving their religious identity and moral values, has prompted local scholars to study the treasures of classic Sufi scholarship and make them available to the public.¹⁵

¹¹ Atika Ulfia Adlina and Ummi Nadhifah, “Sufi Healing dan Neurosains Spiritual bagi Pasien Skizofrenia di Yayasan Jalmah Sehat Desa Bulungkulon, Kudus,” *Esoterik: Jurnal Akhlak dan Tasawuf* 5, no. 1 (2019): 165-179. DOI: 10.21043/esoterik.v5i1.5810.

¹² Imam Kanafi, “Sufi Practices and the Emotional and Spiritual Quotient (ESQ),” *Jurnal Penelitian* 8, no. 1 (2011). <https://doi.org/10.28918/jupe.v8i1.43>.

¹³ Lubna Gul and Syeda Farhana Jehangir, “Effects of Mindfulness and Sufi Meditation on Anxiety and Mental Health of Females,” *Pakistan Journal of Psychological Research* 34, no. 3 (2019): 583-599.

¹⁴ Ade Fakih Kurniawan, Noorhaidi Hasan, and Achmad Zainal Arifin, “Wali and Karama: A Discourse and Authority Contestation in al-Tarmasi’s *Bughyat al-Adhkiyā’*,” *al-Jam’ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 57, no. 2 (2019): 287-328.

¹⁵ Biyanto, “The Typology of Muhammadiyah Sufism: Tracing Its Figures’ Thoughts and Exemplary Lives,” *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 7, no. 2 (2017): 221-249; Tommy Christomy, “Shaṭṭariyah Tradition in West Java: The Case of Pamijahan,” *Studia Islamika* 8, no. 2 (2001): 55-82; Machasin, “Bediuzzaman

The growing trend of Sufi healing methods has received some attention from Muslim and Western scholars. According to Van Dierendonck, several studies on the relationship between subjective well-being and spirituality found that people with spiritual experiences have normal levels of well-being and tend to have more positive feelings. Subjective well-being is influenced by many factors including spirituality. Koenig, McCullough, and Larson reviewed 100 published and unpublished studies which reported a positive relationship between religiosity and well-being, happiness, joy, fulfillment, pleasure, and satisfaction.¹⁶ In general, Sufi culture in Indonesia tends to relate the practice of *dhikr* with increased piety and religious awareness. *Dhikr* sessions are carried out regularly in Sufi circles and follow strict procedures. The practice of *dhikr* reconnects a person to God, reestablishes human equilibrium, and makes heart feels at comfort. This is in line with the opinion stating that *dhikr* also has a therapeutic effect in individuals who suffer distress through their illness. Haryanto explained several therapeutic aspects of *dhikr* which is able to reduce various common physical and mental disorders.¹⁷ The Egyptian scholar Sheikh Ali Jum'ah stated that *dhikr* is the key to the spiritual journey to Allah and able to cleanse the heart from forgetfulness, hypocrisy, arrogance, and envy. Only a pure heart can experience a connection with Allah. According to Levin, the common reason to visit a Sufi healer is to overcome certain social and psychological problems.¹⁸ Tomenson added that these stressors often linked to social barriers, lack of resources, and low education level.¹⁹

Akang Reflexology Massage is located in Limbangan, Garut Regency. The therapeutic method used by Akang Limbangan Garut is

Said Nursi and The Sufi Tradition," *al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 43, no. 1 (2005): 1-21; Saiful Umam, "The Guardian of the Integral Vision of Islamic Practice: The Naqshbandi Sufi Order in Indonesia," *Studia Islamika* 13, no. 2 (2006): 263-291.

¹⁶ Fuad Hamsyah and Subandi, "Dzikir and Happiness: A Mental Health Study on An Indonesian Muslim Sufi Group," *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 19, no. 1 (2017): 80-94. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19349637.2016.1193404>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Tahmina Iqbal and Mazhar Farid, "Sufi Practices as the Cause of Spiritual, Mental and Physical Healing at Chishti Shrines in Pakistan," *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 20, no. 10 (2017): 943-953. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2017.1372736>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

unique and it differs from other Sufi therapy methods. According to his testimony, Akang has undergone his own spiritual journey and was gifted with the knowledge of the Sufi reflexology therapy. It implies that Akang's knowledge is not obtained from academic study or medical training. In fact, one of his patients was a medical doctor employed at a major hospital in Indonesia. It shows us how modern medicine has certain limits despite its technological advances. The efficacy of a simple traditional therapy method, by massaging a specific part of the body, is in some cases more effective than the most sophisticated medical equipment. Considering this phenomenon, this article aims at constructing a new paradigm for medical treatment. Modern treatment methods should be supported by spiritual treatment methods to re-establish the missing link between healer and the source of all energy, i.e. God. Healing is considered to be more than a purely mechanical process but it involves the healer being gifted with the ability to heal their patients and pass along their gift to those in need of it. Akang's Sufi reflexology therapy is expected to inspire traditional therapy activists in various parts of the world.

Garut is a popular center of Sufi learning in Indonesia. According to Rohmana, the history of Islam in Southeast Asia cannot be separated from the Nusantara Islamic intellectual network that has introduced and transmitted many works in Indonesia.²⁰ Many prominent local figures did not only shape the intellectual debate in the region but also influenced other parts of the Muslim worlds such as Central Asia.²¹ The research problems that are attempted to be uncovered in this study are centered on two essential points, namely examining the method applied in Akang's Sufi therapy and exploring the theoretical principles involved in this process. Akang's unique biographical profile and its location in Limbangan Garut prompted the author to explore the nature of Sufi healing therapy and produce findings that can be useful for everyone interested in the link between Sufism and medicine.

²⁰ Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia: Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern Ulama in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Honolulu: ASAA-Allen & Unwin and University of Hawaii Press, 2004).

²¹ Jajang A. Rohmana, "Sastra Sufistik Melayu dan Sunda di Nusantara: Mempertemukan Hamzah Fansuri dan Haji Hasan Mustapa," *IBDA: Jurnal Kajian Islam dan Budaya* 13, no. 1 (2015): 1-27.

Biography of Akang Limbangan

Akang Syamsudin bin Tatang Sopandi, also known as Akang Limbangan, was born approximately 40 years ago. His home is located in Cikendal Village, Leuwigoong Village, Limbangan Garut, West Java. The Sufi reflexology therapy is a treatment method that combines medical concepts and spiritual values contained in Sufi teachings. According to Akang Limbangan, he conceives this idea after receiving an inspiration from his learning that—according to Islamic tradition—*every disease has a cure*, even within oneself. This teaching has encouraged Akang to learn more about nature and God as he believes that the sole source of salvation is intimacy with God. According to Akang, we must apply the principle of balance in life, even concerning our health. The main cause of illness is an unbalanced lifestyle, an imbalanced mind. Therefore, he concludes that any form of therapy should involve steps to restore balance in body, heart, and soul.

Limbangan is a well-known spiritual center in the area where people come to seek blessings (*tabarruk*). It is, therefore, likely that there is a connection between Akang's therapy and the spiritual energy concentrated in this place. Akang believes in the concept of blessing (*baraka*) and is aware of the local culture of visiting the shrines in Limbangan. According to Jajang A. Rohmana, this tradition cannot be separated from the Islamic intellectual tradition in the archipelago.²² Among the famous Sufi scholars in Limbangan such as Sheikh Rahmat Suci Godog, King Kiang Santang (son of King Siliwangi), Sheikh Sunan Pancer Limbangan (great-great-grandson of King Siliwangi), Sheikh Sunan Haruman or Sheikh Ja'far Siddiq Cibiuk, and Papak Cinunuk Wanaraja (Raden Wangsa Muhammad), who are believed to have special *karāmah* in the view of their followers.

Akang's skills and expertise in Sufi reflexology treatment cannot be separated from the influence of a spiritual teacher or *murshid*. Akang is reportedly the descendant of Sufis and had several *murshids* guiding him on his spiritual journey. Some of them are from his hometown in Leuwigoong, and some other are from other areas in

²² Jajang A Rohmana, "Sastra Sufistik Sunda dan Peneguhan Identitas Islam Lokal: Kontribusi Dangding Haji Hasan Mustapa (1852-1930)," in Ustadi Hamsah et. al (eds.), *Cultural Studies di PTAI: Teori dan Praktek* (Yogyakarta: Laboratorium Religi dan Budaya Lokal, 2014), 22-51.

Banten. According to the author's research, there is a code of ethics that must be strictly followed by a person like Akang who is not permitted to reveal his identity. However, he tells that he learned from his *murshid* how to dive into the spiritual realm and start climbing the ladder leading up to knowing Allah in his heart (*ma'rifat Allah*) and the science of purifying the heart. Another role of the *murshid* is to set the disciple on the path and direct the purpose of his journey focusing on this life as a door to the eternal life.

Akang is grateful for the directions he received from his *murshid*, which benefit himself, his family, and the people he meets. One day, his *murshid* gave Akang a reflexology massage tool in the form of piece of carved wood and said, "Take this with you; one day it will be useful." Akang remembered, "At that time, I was confused and didn't know the meaning behind it all." However, a few years later, his *murshid* asked him to become a healer and he started practicing Sufi reflexology therapy. His spiritual journey lasted for 12 years, from 2002 to 2014. According to Akang, when someone draws nearer to God and goes sincerely through each stage, God will give him or her special knowledge. This kind of knowledge is called *ladunni* knowledge meaning knowledge that is received through the heart. Akang emphasized that it took him 12 years to advance in his spiritual journey but only three months to learn reflexology. However, the success of his treatment method cannot be separated from God.



The picture of Akang's reflexology massage tool



The picture of Akang treating a patient

Akang's life story further strengthens the conviction that Sufi therapy is strongly connected with Sufi teachings and practice. According to 'Alī Jum'ah, the role of the *murshid* is essential in the spiritual journey to Allah as it cannot be pursued alone. According to Sufi tradition, the main pillars of the journey to God are the spiritual guide (*murshid*), the method (*manhaj*), and the seeker (*sālik*). The role of the *murshid* is to assist the seeker in finding his or her path in accordance with his or her capability.²³ *Dbiker* and repentance are the doors that open the way to the spiritual journey.²⁴ The phenomenon of receiving inner knowledge reminds of the Qur'ānic story narrated in Surah al-Kahf where the Prophet Musa is instructed by Khidr. Although *karāmah* and the sainthood of the *awliyā'* are debatable and not recognized within Islamic orthodoxy, the role of the spiritual guide is certainly not a concept alien to Islam.²⁵

Akang Syamsudin's Sufi Reflexology Therapy

Akang Limbangan's treatment center is open every day from 07.30 a.m. until 16.00 p.m. and closed on Fridays. According to Akang, Sufi reflexology therapy is suitable for patients who had a stroke or suffer from kidney, heart, liver, and gallbladder diseases, cysts, cancer, and other chronic illnesses. Akang Syamsudin's reflexology therapy is similar to general reflexology and focuses on the patient's hands and feet. His treatment focuses most on the nerve points located on the patient's feet. The human foot is one of the nerve centers of the body. Akang's patients come from various geographical and social backgrounds. Patients from the nearest area come from Jakarta, Java, Bandung, and Cianjur. Each treatment takes about 20 to 30 minutes. During the therapy session, he encourages his patients to remain positive and avoid negative thoughts to support the healing process. After the treatment, they must not allow their

²³ 'Alī Jum'ah, *al-Tariq ilā Allah* (Cairo: al-Wabil al-Ṣayyib, 2008).

²⁴ Khālid b. Nāṣir al-Uthaybī, *al-Tariqa al-Shādzihiyya 'Arq wa Naqd* (Saudi Arabia: Maktabat al-Rushd, 2011); 'Abd al-Rahmān al-Wakīl, *Hādhibi Hija al-Ṣūfiyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1984); Muḥammad b. Jamīl Zaynū, *al-Ṣūfiyya fī Mizān al-Kitāb wa al-Sunnah* (Makkat al-Mukarramah: Dār al-Muḥammadi, 2000).

²⁵ Sa'īd 'Abd al-'Azīm and Muḥammad Jamīl Ghāzī, *al-Ṣūfiyya al-Wajh al-Akbar: al-Ṣūfiyya Tariq al-Hawiyya* (Mesir Iskandariyyah: Dār al-Īmān, 2007); Aḥmad b. 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Qashīr, *'Aqīdat al-Ṣūfiyya: Waḥdat al-Wujūd al-Khafiyya* (Saudi Arabia: Maktabat al-Rushd, 2003); 'Abd Allah b. Dajīn al-Sahli, *al-Turuq al-Ṣūfiyya: Nash'atubā wa 'Aqīdubā wa Athāruhā* (Saudi Arabia: Dār Kunūz Ishbiliyya, 2005).

feet to become wet for approximately four hours. The healing process requires time and patience and cannot be instantly acquired. After all, healing is a gift from Allah and cannot be demanded at will.

After observing some of his therapy sessions, it is obvious that his treatment involves both physical and psychological aspects. Once the session ended, Akang gives the patients advice words of encouragement and he also prays for them. Akang's therapy involves not only a horizontal and physical healer-patient relationship but also a vertical spiritual relationship pointing upwards to God. Modern medicine is just the beginning to understand that human health and sickness is a holistic phenomenon that includes the physical, mental, and emotional aspects of human experiences. The teachings preserved in the Qur'an stress the importance of guarding and protecting the heart from negative and destructive emotions.

Reflexology in Medical Review

Reflexology massage is an ancient Asian healing method. According to Embong, this kind of massage was already known in ancient Egypt; however, its origins were in ancient China and date back 5,000 years in the 14th century, reflexology was known as "zone therapy" in Europe.²⁶ According to William Fitzgerald (1872–1942), the father of modern reflexology, it was a popular treatment in Native American cultures.²⁷ Reflexology has recently regained its popularity for its measurable benefits. Reflexology massage can help reduce pain through muscle relaxation and also helps the mind to relax.²⁸ According to the health expert Ausanee Wanchai, reflexology can be used to reduce breast cancer symptoms and side effects of drug use.²⁹

²⁶ Nurul Haswani Embong, Yee Chang Soh, Long Chiau Ming, and Tin Wui Wong, "Revisiting Reflexology: Concept, Evidence, Current Practice, and Practitioner Training" *Journal of Traditional and Complementary Medicine* 5, no. 4 (2015), 197-206. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jtcme.2015.08.008>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Moordiningsih, "Terapi Pijat Oriental: Budaya Harmonisasi Fisik dan Psikis," *BioPsychology Improving the Quality of Life* (2009): 1-5.

²⁹ Ausanee Wanchai and Jane M. Armer, "A Systematic Review Association of Reflexology in Managing Symptoms and Side Effects of Breast Cancer Treatment: Reflexology & Breast Cancer," *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice* 38, no. November 2019 (2020): 101074. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ctcp.2019.101074>.

It has also been proven to relieve anxiety and shorten the duration of labor.³⁰

Health experts across the globe have identified such benefits of reflexology as improving children's welfare in maintaining homeostasis;³¹ reducing bleeding and pain after childbirth;³² reducing anxiety and improving sleep quality for people living with cancer;³³ relieving pain in burn patients;³⁴ reducing extubation time following heart surgery;³⁵ preventing neonatal jaundice;³⁶ reducing pain in postoperative patients;³⁷ reducing acute coronary syndrome;³⁸ relieving pain after C-section;³⁹ and maintaining body balance.⁴⁰

³⁰ Ilana Levy et al., "The Effectiveness of Foot Reflexology in Reducing Anxiety and Duration of Labor in Primiparas: An Open-Label Randomized Controlled Trial," *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice* 38, no. June (2020): 101085. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ctcp.2019.101085>.

³¹ Nimet Karatas and Aysegul Isler Dalgic, "Effects of Reflexology on Child Health: A Systematic Review," *Complementary Therapies in Medicine* 50, no. October 2019 (2020).

³² Neda Sharifi et al., "The Effect of Foot Reflexology in the Fourth Stage of Labor on Postpartum Hemorrhage and After Pain: Study Protocol for a Randomized Controlled Trial," *Advances in Integrative Medicine*, no. 2019 (2020).

³³ İsmail Toygar et al., "Effect of Reflexology on Anxiety and Sleep of Informal Cancer Caregiver: Randomized Controlled Trial," *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice* 39, no. February (2020).

³⁴ Fahimeh Davodabady et al., "Randomized Controlled Trial of the Foot Reflexology on Pain and Anxiety Severity during Dressing Change in Burn Patients," *Burns* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.burns.2020.06.035>.

³⁵ Atefeh Allahbakhshian et al., "The Effects of Foot Reflexology on Agitation and Extubation Time in Male Patients Following Coronary Artery Bypass Surgery: A Randomized Controlled Clinical Trial," *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice* 40, no. September 2019 (2020): 101201. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ctcp.2020.101201>.

³⁶ Mahdi Basiri Moghadam et al., "Effects of Foot Reflexology on Neonatal Jaundice: A Randomized Sham-Controlled Trial," *European Journal of Integrative Medicine* 38, no. November 2019 (2020).

³⁷ Naglaa F.A. Youssef and Asmaa Diab A. Hassan, "The Effect of Hand and Foot Massage on Alleviating Pain and Anxiety of Abdominal Post-Operative Patients at a University Hospital: A Randomized Control Trial," *IOSR Journal of Nursing and Health Science* 06, no. 03 (2017): 56-65.

³⁸ Zohre Rahmani et al., "Effect of Hand Reflexology on Anxiety and Physiological Variables among Patients Hospitalized in the Cardiac Care Unit: A Randomized Placebo Controlled Clinical Trial," *Journal of Nursing Education and Practice* 8, no. 4 (2017): 35.

³⁹ Eva Yunitasari, Irna Nursanti, and Giri Widakdo, "The Effectiveness of Hand Massage, Foot Massage and Combination on Pain Intensity of Post Sectio Caesarea," *IMPACT: International Journal of Research in Applied, Natural and Social Sciences* 6, no. 9 (2018): 39-50.

Reflexology treatment has become increasingly popular in Malaysia, Thailand, Australia, Indonesia, and the United Kingdom. More people have started to consider the advantages of traditional treatment methods which are deemed less invasive and safer than modern medical treatment methods which rely heavily on chemical drugs with harmful side effects. The research study conducted by Embong et al. examined the efficacy of foot reflexology, including minimizing several dangerous diseases in vital organs.⁴¹

The Intersection between Belief and Medicine

Akang Syamsudin is a religious therapist who spends most of his time either meditating, praying or helping those in need. The researcher observes that Akang refuses to ask for payment when he saw that his patient was very ill and could not afford the treatment. In his view, being kind and generous shows our gratitude for the blessings that Allah has given us. In his belief, the blessings that are accompanied by gratitude will add blessings in life, as stated in the Qur'ān in Surah Ibrāhīm verse 7. It can be concluded that the therapeutic method used by Akang contains a strong religious aspect as he frequently reminds his patients to be patient and never lose hope in God's mercy. His own struggle with liver disease and his consistent practice of *dhikr* and prayer has moved his heart to bring his patients closer to Allah while administering his reflexology therapy.

From several interviews conducted with informants, they were very enthusiastic about choosing Akang treatment compared to medical healing at the doctor. According to them, the healing process at Akang prioritized spirituality so that patients had positive suggestions and believed in healing, as expressed by IHC and RNS:

“I have had gout pain with knee pain since 2019, then I tried to go to the doctor several times, but the results were not satisfactory. Then, there was a brother who informed you about alternative therapy, at first there was a little doubt, but by looking at the therapeutic process, your therapy is very different from the others. The therapy uses the media of prayer and *dhikr*. Therefore, I believe and feel it is suitable”.⁴²

⁴⁰ Nurul Haswani Embong et al., “Perspectives on Reflexology: A Qualitative Approach,” *Journal of Traditional and Complementary Medicine* 7, no. 3 (2017): 327-331.

⁴¹ Embong et al., “Revisiting Reflexology”.

⁴² Interview with Irham Hasan Cahyadi, October 20, 2020.

“I have complaints of gallstones, hard stomach, nausea, vomiting, stomach disease, hard right side of stomach. After going to the hospital and getting an X-ray, the doctor suggested surgery. However, I prefer to take another alternative, namely the Akang Limbangan therapy, because I think it is safer and more calming for the soul. Akang’s therapy has another influence, especially on my emotional and psychological condition. His advice always motivates me to be closer to religion”.⁴³

When exploring Akang’s therapeutic method, the researcher learned that his approach to healing is closely and intimately connected with his belief. First, there is the Islamic belief that there is a cure for every disease, which goes back to a tradition narrated by the Prophet Muhammad, who said, “Every disease has a cure.” In the field of psychology, this statement would be categorized as a positive suggestion. Building on Freud’s theory of hypnotic suggestion in therapy, Berberich found a connection between verbal and nonverbal suggestions and positive encouragement for patient recovery.⁴⁴ Rossi et al. conveyed the same opinion and observed that positive suggestions to a patient could reduce damage to brain memory.⁴⁵ Ibn Hajar al-Asqalānī, a classic Muslim scholar and author of *Commentary on the Grant of the Creator (Sharḥ Faṭḥ al-Bārī)*, has explained the meaning of the ḥadīth “every disease has a cure.” If the effect of the disease is stronger than the drug in its prescribed dosage, a more potent drug is needed to counter the effects of the disease. The Hypnotherapy method is used in order to produce positive suggestions. This method seems to have developed in the medical field. However, its practical application also extends to motivation in the field of education.⁴⁶

⁴³ Interview with Rani Nuraini Setiawan, October 20, 2020.

⁴⁴ F. Ralph Berberich, “Attending to Suggestion and Trance in the Pediatric History and Physical Examination: A Case Study,” *American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis* 54, no. 1 (2011): 5-15.

⁴⁵ Ernest L. Rossi and Kathryn L. Rossi, “What Is a Suggestion? The Neuroscience of Implicit Processing Heuristics in Therapeutic Hypnosis and Psychotherapy,” *American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis* 49, no. 4 (2007): 267–281.

⁴⁶ Reva Berman Brown, “Bridging Knowing and Learning: A Suggestion for Accounting Education,” *Accounting Education* 12, no. 4 (2003): 393-403; Phillip G. Clark, “What Would a Theory of Interprofessional Education Look like? Some Suggestions for Developing a Theoretical Framework for Teamwork Training,” *Journal of Interprofessional Care* 20, no. 6 (2006): 577-589.

Second, balance is the key to good health. Therefore, a person's inner spiritual condition must be in harmony with their physical condition, according to the saying, "A healthy mind lives in a healthy body". According to Akang, the onset of the disease is caused by "exceeding limit" of certain substances in the body. The body's mechanism is designed in such a way that its organs function properly if they work in harmony with each other. When one organ exceeds the natural limit, either positively or negatively, it can cause a harmful effect on the whole body. Similarly, in the realm of religion, any act of transgressing the limit of what is deemed normal and healthy is strictly prohibited, even in worship.⁴⁷ According to Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, Islam encourages people to observe a healthy balance in everything. Therefore, any form of excessiveness is harmful to the individual and to society at large. The excessive consumption of a substance can damage one's health. Likewise, the excessive submission to an ideology can result in radicalism and terrorism.⁴⁸

Following the narrative of Akang Limbangan:

"Healing comes from Allah, we only have to seek. Balance is a principle in happiness, as well as health. Many diseases arise due to limitations in consuming something. Must be sure that everything has a cure, according to the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. Positive suggestions are very important in the healing process".⁴⁹

Third, the contribution of spiritual factors to the patient's healing process seems to be more significant than the physical factors. Spiritual strength contributes to 70 percent of therapeutics, as compared to 30 percent of physical strength. In Akang's experience as a Sufi healer, the patient's spiritual strength and connection with God become the key factors to their recovery. The closer the patient's heart is to Allah and the stronger their prayer and trust in Allah (*tawakkal*) are, the faster their healing process will be. Akang's view aligns with that of the Indonesian scholar and preacher, Rd. Abdullah bin Nuh. Nuh states, "There are two kinds of power which are spirit

⁴⁷ Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, *al-Ṣaḥwa al-Islāmiyya bayn al-Ikhtilāf al-Masbrū' wa al-Tafarruq al-Madhmūm* (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2001); Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, *Fiqh al-Wasaṭiyya al-Islāmiyya wa al-Tajdid: Ma'ālim wa Manārāt* (Cairo: Maktabah Wahbah, 2009).

⁴⁸ Akh Muzakki, "Islamic Radicalism in Southeast Asia: With Special Reference to the Alleged Terrorist Organization, Jamā'ah Islāmiyah," *al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 42, no. 1 (2008): 61–87.

⁴⁹ Interview with Akang Syamsudin, October 13, 2020.

and matter. These two strengths are necessary for success. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for an expressive power to be sufficient to achieve superb results.”

Nuh gives an example of the Battle of Badr in the second year of the Hijrah where the Muslim armies were able to defeat their Meccan enemies who were far superior in number and military strength. 313 Muslims were facing more than 1,000 heavily armed enemy forces. Nevertheless, the battle ended in a victory for Islam. He argues that the Muslims were connected to spiritual power. Therefore, according to Nuh, this principle can be applied to maintaining one's health. Nuh's opinion is pertinent to contemporary research done by some Western scientists focusing on the importance of religiosity aspect in patients' health recovery. A patient who deals with a strong enemy in the form of a devastating illness and is attacked with shattering disease will be able to achieve victory and defeat the disease by accessing positive spiritual energies.⁵⁰

Fourth, blood vessels have a crucial role in draining the disease from the body and preventing its congestion in certain parts of the body. Akang recommends that blood circulation should be maintained as well as possible. The reflex therapy method is more focused on returning the blood circulation to a normal level. Akang believes that blood is the entry point for many diseases. To support this, research studies conducted in Iran showed that the blood type can affect susceptibility and resistance to disease. Generally, non-O blood types are more susceptible to disease.⁵¹ Further, South African studies showed that the red blood cell membrane has a function as a home for many surface antigens that can affect the course of an incoming disease. This is because the red blood cell membrane will act as a receptor for pathogens to provide a stimulus to immune responses in the human body.⁵² Therefore, Akang Limbangan's Sufi

⁵⁰ Simon Lasair, “Reconciliation Through Narrative: Toward a Theology of Spiritual Care in Public Health Care,” *Practical Theology* 10, no. 2 (2017): 160–173; Valerie Michaelson et al., “Religious Involvement and Self-Perceived Spiritual Health: A Quantitative Study of Canadian Children with Disabilities,” *Journal of Disability and Religion* 24, no. 4 (2020): 371–392. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2020.1743222>

⁵¹ Omolbanin Amjadi et al., “Blood Groups: In Health and Diseases,” *Research in Molecular Medicine* 3, no. 4 (2015): 1–9.

⁵² Glenda M. Davison, Heather L. Hendrickse, and Tandi E. Matsha, “Membrane Influence Human Immunodeficiency Virus Infection?,” *Cells* 845, no. 9 (2020): 1–11.

reflexology therapy, which focuses on improving blood circulation, supports this scientific research.

Fifth, positive suggestion plays an essential role in the healing process. Islam encourages Muslims to develop and maintain a positive attitude to life. A ḥadīth explains that Allah will always appear to His servant in the way the servant thinks of Him. Therefore, if the believer expects only positive things from Allah, Allah will cause positive things to happen. If the patients have a strong and positive belief that they will be healed, God willing, they will heal. Researchers in Hungary empirically proved the relationship between positive suggestions and patient recovery, where the patient's psychological factors were directly proportional to the recovery risk. The stronger and more positive the patient's psychological state is, the faster the healing process will be completed.⁵³

Sixth, medical treatment is a human effort. It implies that the success of human's efforts and their failure depend not merely on the will of Allah but they also need human's endeavors. Therefore, praying for recovery from an illness is an essential part of every therapy. Akang always encourages his patients to think positively and focus on their energy away from the illness and toward the healing process. In Islam, prayer has an undeniable effect on the outcome. A ḥadīth says, "Prayer is the weapon of the believer." In other words, prayer is a powerful means to dispel all kinds of dangers and disasters because the outcome is in the hands of Allah. The Prophets often used this "weapon" in seemingly hopeless situations. As another example, the prayer of the Prophet Musa was answered by God when splitting the ocean before him and drowning the Pharaoh and his army. Disease and illness are part of this world; however, the worldly material is only a part of the whole world as there a spiritual world connects to it and whose powers must not be underestimated.⁵⁴

Seventh, patience and persistence are very significant aspects of the healing process. Akang Limbangan's understanding of healing

⁵³ Adrienn K. Szilágyi et al., "Effectiveness of Psychological Support Based on Positive Suggestion with the Ventilated Patient," *European Journal of Mental Health* 22, no. 4 (2007): 149-170.

⁵⁴ Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Sha'rawī, "al-Ghayb" (Cairo: Maktabat al-Sha'rawī al-Islāmiyya, 1998); Muṣṭafā al-'Adawī, *Mafātīḥ al-Fiqh fī al-Dīn* (Jeddah: Maktabah Mājid 'Asīrī, 2000); Lovemore Togarasei, "Christian Theology of Life, Death and Healing in an Era of Antiretroviral Therapy: Reflections on the Responses of Some Botswana Churches," *African Journal of AIDS Research* 9, no. 4 (2011): 429-435.

includes that illness is not necessarily a negative condition but it can even be positive experience. The presence of the disease will help patients to be more aware of God's blessings and be more thankful for what God has given them. There is a narration from Ali Zainal Abidin, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who reminded the people that health and illness are both pleasures. When we receive the blessing of health, we can enjoy Allah's sustenance and freely carry out our acts of obedience. When we fall sick and endure it patiently, many of our past sins would be obliterated. Akang is certain that there is no disease in this world that cannot be cured; if Allah wills, then no power can prevent the healing. We as humans are only required to try our best and whatever the result, we leave it to Allah. As stated in the Qur'an, every illness must be faced with patience and in good faith. In Surah al-Anbiya' verse, 35 Allah says, "And We give you trials with evil and good but as a test (*fitna*)."⁵⁵ According to Ibn Kathir, this verse implies that Allah will test humans with two tests; first with pleasure to see who will be grateful and then with calamity to see who will be patient. Patience and persistence are essential components, not only in medical treatment but also in all aspects of life.⁵⁵

Concluding Remarks

Akang Limbangan's Sufi reflexology therapy is an example of a traditional treatment model that supports the healing process. This method incorporates the spiritual values contained in the teachings of Islam. Akang believes that success in curing a patient's illness depends on a treatment process that combines horizontal and vertical principles in the form of physical and spiritual elements. The complete absence of the vertical principle in modern medical treatment affects the patients' recovery rates. Akang Limbangan's therapeutic approach is based on the following factors are 1) the belief that every disease has a cure; 2) balance and moderation are directly proportional to physical health; 3) spiritual factors dominate over physical factors; 4) the importance of blood circulation; 5) the

⁵⁵ Kris Kimbark, Michelle L. Peters, and Tim Richardson, "Effectiveness of the Student Success Course on Persistence, Retention, Academic Achievement, and Student Engagement," *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 41, no. 2 (2017): 124-138; J. William Moore and Suzy Holmes, "The Effects of Verbally Controlled Success and Failure Conditions of Persistent Behavior," *Journal of Experimental Education* 43, no. 1 (1974): 70-74.

efficacy of positive suggestion; 6) belief and submission to God's will; and 7) the effectiveness of patience and consistency.

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