

WHIRLING DANCE AS A SUFI HEALING METHOD: A Phenomenological Study of the Sufi Dance Community in Surakarta

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Abstract: This study aimed to explain the dynamics of Sufi healing through Sufi dance. Using the qualitative approach through the phenomenology of religion, the data of the present study was collected by interviews, observations, and visual materials. The research sample consisted of five members of a Sufi dance group in Surakarta, who found relief from their physical and psychological ailments through the movements performed in the whirling dance training. The healing process of physical and psychological issues through the Sufi dance can be seen in the aspects of catharsis, breath management and regulation, cognitive restructuring, habituation mechanisms, self-control, and muscle stretching. However, the expression of these aspects in differed in each case. In addition, this study also found that ablution and prayer and the altered state of consciousness during the performance of the dance had an impact on the healing process. Therefore, Sufi dance should be included as an alternative healing method.

Keywords: Physical and Psychological Disorders; Sufi Healing; Sufi Dance; Whirling Dance.

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Introduction

Considering the harmful side effects of modern medical treatment methods and the everchanging trends of modern psychotherapy,¹ alternative approaches related to religious practices like prayer and meditation have emerged. An example of this recent development in alternative therapy in Islam is *dbiker* therapy.² *Dbiker* practice is varied across Muslim cultures, one of which is performed in the form of Sufi dance. The origin of the Sufi dance or whirling dance can be traced back to the Persian mystic Jalaluddin al-Rumi (1207–1273). This dance (known in Turkish as *sema*, from the Arabic *samāʾ*) is meant to express one's love for God. When his teacher Shams al-Dīn al-Tabrīzī (1185-1248) had passed away, Mevlana Rumi danced in circles with his students as an expression of his grief and sorrow.

The movement of the whirling dance is to rotate from right to left (counterclockwise) using the left foot as support. This consistent rotating motion can transport the whirling dance performer into a state of active meditation. Moreover, during the whirling motion the performer repeats the recitation of *dbiker* and is accompanied by rhythmic music or chanting. In the context of transpersonal psychology, meditation is an activity that focuses on an object, such as repeated words and breathing patterns. Therefore, Sufi dance is a type of healing method using forms of Sufi exercise.

During its development, there have been several Sufi dance communities throughout Indonesia. In addition to being a form of *dbiker*, Sufi dance is also a form of entertainment in religious events. The Sufi dance community can be found in various locations in Indonesia, one of which is in Surakarta; for example, the al-Kabbani

¹ Michael Linden and Marie Luise Schermuly-Haupt, "Definition, Assessment and Rate of Psychotherapy Side Effects", *World Psychiatry* 13, no. 3 (2014), 306–9. DOI: 10.1002/wps.20153.

² Hanik Endang Nihayati et al., "An Effect of Breath *Dbiker* on the Stress Level of Patients with Pulmonary Tuberculosis," *Indian Journal of Public Health Research and Development* 10, no. 8 (2019): 2648–2653. DOI:10.5958/0976-5506.2019.02268.x; Olivia Dwi Kumala, Yogi Kusprayogi, and Fuad Nashori, "Efektivitas Pelatihan Dzikir dalam Meningkatkan Ketenangan Jiwa pada Lansia Penderita Hipertensi," *Psymphatic: Jurnal Ilmiah Psikologi* 4, no. 1 (2017): 55–66. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15575/psy.v4i1.1260>; Sekar Ayu Aryani, "Healthy-Minded Religious Phenomenon in Shalawatan: A Study on the Three Majelis Shalawat in Java," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 7, no. 1 (2017): 1–30. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v7i1.1-30>.

Sufi Dance community which is part of the Zhauwiyah Kartasura Dhikr Community and Kotamasa'i Community of Sufi Dance (Sufi Dance Community for Sufi and Psychotherapy Students) included in the Sufi and Psychotherapy study program of IAIN Surakarta. Five individuals who are members of the two communities shared that they were experiencing certain physical and psychological problems which eased and gradually diminished when they started to perform the Sufi dance regularly. For example, AN (initials) used to experience episodes of fear and anxiety in worship as well as back pain; STS (initials) often experienced headaches and did not respond well to their medical treatment; AFA (initials) suffered from ulcers and also did not benefit much from the prescribed medication; RAZ (initials) used to experience profound sadness over the death of their grandmother and had low blood pressure; ASA (initials) often experienced fatigue and back pain due to work exhaustion. All informants felt that they were able to recover from their physical and psychological ailments through the Sufi dance.

So far, many studies have been examined the aspects of the whirling dance.³ However, these various studies focused on the technique and significance of the dance movements and the clothes

³ Ayu Kristina, "Tari Sufi dan Penguatan Pemahaman Keagamaan Moderat Kaum Muda Muslim (Studi Kasus Tari Sufi Karanganyar, Jawa Tengah)", *Sosial Budaya* 16, no. 2 (2019), 137-145. DOI: 10.24014/sb.v16i2.7036; Dadang Dwi Septiyan and Rista Dewi Opsantini, "Dimensi Mistik Musik Sufi Kelompok Kesenian Sufi Multikultural Kota Pekalongan", *Jurnal Pendidikan dan Kajian Seni* 3, no. 1 (2018), 65-77; Razqan Anadh Mahendar, "Makna Simbolik Gerakan Tarian Sufi Turki Jalaludin Rumi (1203-1273M): Analisis Semiotika Charles Sander Pierce", *Jurnal CMES: Jurnal Studi Timur Tengah* 7, no. 1 (2014), 23-29; Mega Nurvinta, "Eksistensi Tari Sufi pada Komunitas Al-Fairouz di Kota Medan", *Gesture: Jurnal Seni Tari* 5, no. 1 (2016), 85-98; Ninik Wijayanti, "Kesenian Tari Sufi: Studi Nilai Budaya dan Potensinya sebagai Sumber Pembelajaran Antropologi di MAN 1 Magetan", *Gulawentah: Jurnal Studi Sosial* 4, no. 2 (2019), 102-113; Nurul Alieya Binti Zakaria et al., "As-Sama' Dhikr Dance: An Analysis Based on the Views of Islamic Scholars", *International Journal of Civil Engineering and Technology (IJCIET)* 9, no. 8 (2018), 1132-1139; Nurgül Kılınc, "Mevlevi Sema Ritual Outfits and Their Mystical Meanings", *e-Journal of New World Sciences Academy* 6, no. 4 (2011), 809-28; Ikrame Selkani, "The Whirling Dervishes: An Old Heritage Recognized at Last", *Annals of Social Sciences & Management Studies* 1, no. 4 (2018), 1-3; Safran Rusmalla and Setya Widyawati, "Koreografi Tari Sufi Komunitas Dzikir Zhauwiyah Kecamatan Kartosuro Kabupaten Sukoharjo", *Greget: Jurnal Pengetahuan dan Penciptaan Tari* 18, no. 2 (2019), 171-9; Tala Azizi Koutanaei, "A Comparative Study on the Relationship between Spiral Forms in Sufi Spiral Dance (*Sama*) and Persian Islamic Paintings", *Journal of Islamic Studies and Culture* 3, no. 1 (2015), 113-8

worn by the performers, as well as its cultural and artistic perspectives. These studies related to Sufi dance have discussed its healing effect; however, they have not explained the dynamics of the healing process involved. Therefore, examining the dynamics of the healing process of Sufi dance for individuals experiencing physical and psychological imbalances from a scientific perspective may close this existing gap.

This study used a qualitative approach through phenomenology of religion as a research method that explores the deepest meaning and experience of individual consciousness related to ritual experiences of worship. The data collection techniques use interviews, observation, and visual techniques (i.e., photos and video recordings). There were several criteria for the selection of informants in this study. First, they had to be proficient in Sufi dance with evidence of information from their teachers or peers. Second, the informants had to be over 17 years old. At this age, individuals can communicate well and have a good understanding of abstract matters (especially those related to religion), so that subjects can convey their experiences fluently. Third, the subjects of the Sufi dance had to have experienced either psychological or physical issues but failed to treat them through conventional methods before discovering Sufi dance.

The research involved five informants, consisting of two men and three women. AN (initial), a 31-year-old man, has been actively engaging in whirling dance since 2007. Initially, he experienced complaints of severe anxiety regarding personal salvation and back pain. AFA (initial), a 23-year-old woman, had gastritis which decreased in intensity after regularly practicing whirling dance since 2017. RAZ (initial), a 20-year-old woman, dealt with profound sadness and grief initially but found improvement in her mental state through frequent whirling dance sessions. ASA (initial), a 28-year-old man, experienced reduced fatigue and back pain after regularly engaging in whirling dance since 2016. STS (initial), a 23-year-old woman, began actively participating in whirling dance since 2014. Initially, she frequently experienced headaches and low blood pressure, but after engaging in whirling dance regularly, her condition gradually improved. Interviews and observations were conducted multiple times for each informant throughout 2020, documenting their experiences and the effects of whirling dance on their physical and mental well-being.

Therapeutic Elements in Sufi Healing

The Sufi healing method touches the physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects of human health and is more comprehensive than other healing methods. The Sufi approach is a spiritual approach that encourages individuals to acknowledge their current state, while encouraging closeness to Allah by surrendering to Him in love, thereby finding true happiness. In the context of Sufi healing restoring one's health also includes restoring one's physical, psychological, and emotional balance.⁴

Sufi healing emerged as in recognition of the positive impact of Sufi practices on the individual's health and well-being, including its beneficial effects for specific ailments. Foremost, the Sufi approach emphasizes the importance of restoring a healthy emotional, physical, and spiritual state to support any ongoing healing process.⁵ Sufi healing uses religious rituals in Islam as healing techniques, for example prayer, fasting, and *dhikr* as well as other activities such as the whirling dance.

There are six therapeutic principles contained in religious healing methods, namely catharsis, management and regulation of breath, reconstruction of cognition, habituation mechanisms, self-control, and body movements,⁶ which are reflected in Sufi dance. Catharsis is an effort where individuals become aware of the content of their subconscious mind and learn how to express it and release it. Every individual is caught in an inner dialogue and has thoughts that they cannot express. In addition, individuals also have past experiences that they do not want to acknowledge because they might be painful and disappointing, which are repressed into the subconscious. Thus, the subconscious has the potential to cause disturbances, both physical and psychological, if the condition is not corrected. Thus, individuals are encouraged to become aware of their subconscious ideas and express them so that they can be dealt with and resolved, thus achieving inner peace.

⁴ Muhammad Amin Syukur, "Sufi Healing: Terapi dalam Literatur Tasawuf?", *Walisono: Jurnal Penelitian Sosial Keagamaan* 20, no. 2 (2012), 391-412. <https://doi.org/10.21580/ws.2012.20.2.205>.

⁵ Syamsul Bakri and Ahmad Saifuddin, *Sufi Healing: Integrasi Tasawuf dan Psikologi Dalam Penyembuhan Psikis dan Fisik* (Depok: Rajagrafindo Persada, 2019), 97-100.

⁶ Ahmad Saifuddin, *Psikologi Agama: Implementasi Psikologi untuk Memahami Perilaku Beragama* (Jakarta: Kencana, 2019), 258-72.

Every ritual of worship, Sufi dance included, also contains elements of managing and regulating breath. This breath management and regulation can have an impact on individuals' physical and psychological health. When individuals regulate and manage their breathing properly, their heart rate and blood flow are more regular, as excessive blood flow to the brain should be avoided. In addition, the management and regulation of breathing also help individuals to produce alpha brain waves, thereby creating a sensation of relaxation and comfort.⁷ Therefore, the management and regulation of breath can also have an impact on an individual's psychological condition, especially in reducing stress and anxiety.⁸

One of the causes of physical and psychological disorders is the presence of irrational thoughts and beliefs. Irrational thoughts and beliefs are recurring thinking patterns that are not supported and validated by the logical mind; however, they can be powerful enough to cause worry and anxiety. Such a prolonged nervous state stimulates certain organs excessively, which can lead to physical disorders, for example dizziness and nausea. Therefore, these irrational thoughts and beliefs must be replaced with rational thoughts and beliefs to restore the inner balance. Such mechanism is known as cognitive restructuring⁹ which also occurs in religious rituals, one of which is the Sufi dance. For example, in the form of *dhikr* by reciting the names of God so that individual's thoughts and beliefs can transform to become more positive.

Rituals of worship, especially Sufi dance, are performed regularly. This means that there is an aspect of habituation, as this regular practice will have a leveling effect on pre-existing physical and psychological disorders. When individuals perform rituals of worship, including the Sufi dance, increased self-awareness and self-control will emerge. This is because the ritual of worship will become part of the

⁷ Andrea Zaccaro, et al., "How Breath-Control Can Change Your Life: A Systematic Review on Psycho-Physiological Correlates of Slow Breathing", *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 12 (2018), 1-16. DOI: 10.3389/fnhum.2018.00353.

⁸ Valentina Perciavalle et al., "The Role of Deep Breathing on Stress", *Neurological Sciences* 38, no. 3 (2017), 451-8. DOI: 10.1007/s10072-016-2790-8.

⁹ David A. Clark, "Cognitive Restructuring", in *The Wiley Handbook of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy*, ed. by Stefan G. Hofmann (Hoboken, New Jersey, United States: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2014), 1-21; Aisha Hamdan, "Cognitive Restructuring: An Islamic Perspective", *Journal of Muslim Mental Health* 3, no. 1 (2008), 99-116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15564900802035268>.

performer's new identity and lessen their focus on negative behaviors. One of the causes of physical and psychological disorders is the inability of individuals to control themselves. Therefore, self-control can help individuals heal and avoid physical and psychological disorders.¹⁰ On the other hand, the specific body movements performed in rituals of worship can be therapeutic because they are able to stretch muscles and improve blood circulation. In addition, each movement has a meaning that is internalized by the performer, thus influencing their thinking patterns.

Sufi Dance Communities in Surakarta and Sufi Dance Procedures

There are many Sufi dance communities spread across Indonesia, including those in Surakarta. Some examples of the Sufi dance communities in Surakarta is the al-Kabbani Sufi Dance and Kotamasa'i. The al-Kabbani Sufi Dance Community was formed in 2007. This community was inspired by Syekh Hisyam Al-Kabbani who used a Sufi dance accompanied by *selawat* music. This community is part of the Dzikir Zhauwiyah Community in Kartasura.¹¹ The Kotamasa'i (Sufi Dance Community of Sufism and Psychotherapy Students) was formed under the umbrella of the Student Association of the Department of Sufism and Psychotherapy (*Himpunan Mahasiswa Jurusan Tasawuf dan Psikoterapi*) IAIN Surakarta. This community was originally formed as part of a work program of HMJ TP, which was practicing Sufi dance, executed by the Social and Cultural Division on Friday, October 26, 2018. Several students from various departments or study programs became interested in the Sufi dance training and eventually formed a joint Sufi dance study group under the name Kotamasa'i short for Komunitas Tari Sufi Mahasiswa Tasawuf dan

¹⁰ Tracy T.L. Cheung, et al., "Why are People with High Self-control Happier? The Effect of Trait Self-control on Happiness as Mediated by Regulatory Focus", *Frontiers in Psychology* 5, no. 722 (2014), 1–6. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00722; Adriel Boals, Michelle R. VanDellen, and Jonathan B. Banks, "The Relationship between Self-control and Health: The Mediating Effect of Avoidant Coping", *Psychology & Health* 26, no. 8 (2011), 1049–62. DOI: 10.1080/08870446.2010.529139; Martin S. Hagger, et al., "Self-control and Health-related Behaviour: The Role of Implicit Self-control, Trait Self-control, and Lay Beliefs in Self-control", *British Journal of Health Psychology* 24, no. 4 (2019), 764–86. DOI: 10.1111/bjhp.12378.

¹¹ The results of the first interview with AN on January 28, 2020.

Psikoterapi or Sufi Dance Community of Sufism and Psychotherapy Students.

The form and movements of the whirling dance is the same practiced in all the Sufi dance communities. For example, the dance is always performed through rotating from left to right or counterclockwise. However, there are differences in the words of *dhikr* and supplications according to the *tariqa* adhered to by the community and the *murshid* of that community. The whirling dance includes several stages. In the preparation stage, individuals should first take allegiance to the *murshid*. This pledge creates a high level of commitment. Furthermore, the individual performs *wudu'* or ablution first, followed by performing the *salat syukur* (prayer of gratitude) and the *doa tawasul* (supplication seeking intercession) before changing into the Sufi dance costume which has been kissed with the mouth and placed on the eye and between the eyes or forehead while reading *basmalah* and *salawat*.

The second stage is reached when the Sufi dance commences, where the performer steps on the big toe of the left foot with the big toe of the right foot, crosses their arms across their chest, with the right hand over the left. Then the dancer does a 90-degree bow as a gesture of greeting and salutation. Upon resuming their upright position, the dancer begins to rotate from left to right with the support of the left foot. Upon completing each 360-degree rotation they recite a *dhikr* formula. After three rounds, the hands begin to lower, and the thumbs and index fingers of the left and right hands attached to each other to form a symbol of love or heart towards the vital area. After three rounds, the hand is pulled up like a blossom with the right palm positioned upwards and the left palm downwards. Sufi dancers carry out this series of movements continuously while reciting *dhikr* and supplications. At the end of the performance, the dancer crosses their arms over their chest, with the right hand over the left, and bows down as a sign of respect to the Shaykh while reciting the “Hu” *dhikr*. In the ritual context of whirling dance, men and women typically perform the dance separately, occupying distinct spaces. It is customary for female dancers to occupy a separate area from their male counterparts while engaging in the dance simultaneously.

As mentioned earlier, there are similarities and differences between the Sufi dance as performed by both dance groups in

Surakarta. Both follow the same direction of movement, namely from right to left; however, there are differences depending on the specific practice established by their Shaykh and the practice established in their *tarekat*.

The whirling dance performed by the al-Kabbani Sufi Dance community holds tightly to the stages and *adab* established by the Naqshbandi Al-Haqqani *tarekat*. For example, the dancers must wear a white costume,¹² while others permit colored ones. Another difference is the specific *dhiker* formula recited during the performance. The Al-Kabbani Sufi Dance group is part of the Naqshbandi al-Haqqani *dhiker* congregation and uses the “Hu” formula,¹³ while other groups use “Allah” or other words like the *Asmaul Husna* and *selawat*.¹⁴ Further, the characteristic of the Sufi dance in Surakarta is the musical accompaniment, which is not only *selawat* music but is also accompanied by Javanese music accompaniment or the gamelan.

Various religious messages related to Sufi dance can be found in the book *Mathnawi* written by Mevlana Rumi. In this book, Rumi explains the origin of the rotating movements in the whirling dance and their meaning. This circular movement then becomes a means of practicing mental concentration, a form of meditation, and mental forging for a *salik* to achieve affinity to God.

Synthesis of Themes in Sufi Dancer

Many themes emerged during each interview with the informants or Sufi dancers. Those themes can be synthesized into three episodes: before, during, and after performing the whirling dance.

First Episode: Preparation for the Whirling Dance

This first episode focuses on the condition of the informants before they started regularly performing the Sufi dance, and the procedure they followed when preparing themselves for the performance. Before they decided to take up Sufi dance, the informants reported that they used to suffer from physical or psychological conditions; however, their conditions could not be

¹² Rusmalla and Widyawati, “Koreografi Tari Sufi Komunitas Dzikir Zhauwiyah Kecamatan Kartosuro Kabupaten Sukoharjo”, 176.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 173–4.

¹⁴ Kristina, “Tari Sufi dan Penguatan Pemahaman Keagamaan Moderat Kaum Muda Muslim”, 141.

successfully treated through medication. For example, AN (initials) used to experience fear and anxiety in worship and back pain; STS (initials) suffered from frequent headaches; AFA (initials) had been suffering from stomach ulcers; RAZ (initials) had been affected by deep sadness after the death of his grandmother and had low blood pressure; ASA (initials) had been experiencing back pain from work exhaustion.

Concerning the procedure completed before each dance practice, the five informants performed *wudu'* (ablution) and *salat* (prayer), the obligatory prayer and the supererogatory sunnah prayers to be in a state of ritual purity and intention to perform an act of religious significance. Some informants also decided to offer their pledge of allegiance (*bay'ah*) to their Shaykh beforehand, as the whirling dance is an integral part of their *tarekat* practice. This pledge reflects the disciple's commitment to their spiritual training and their strong emotional bond with their *murshid*. Apart from performing ablution and performing their prayers, the five informants also chanted the *tawasul* supplication, before kissing their Sufi dance costumes and reciting *basmalah* and *salawat*. The last part of this preparation procedure is donning the Sufi dance costume. There are several parts of the whirling Sufi outfits. The long hat used by the dancer is called *Sikke*. The *Sikke* is a symbol of a tombstone which implies the place of return for humans. The inner shirt worn by whirling dancers is called *Hirqa*. This *Hirqa* is usually white as a symbol of the color of the shroud, which is the cloth that wraps humans when they die. This *Hirqa* is then covered by a kind of short jacket whose lower part is tied at the waist using a binder. The lower part of the costume is called *Tennur*, which is a kind of wide, circular skirt that brings out the beauty when the dancers dance. There are other costume accessories, for example the shirt cover which is usually black, symbolizing the separation of the ego when meeting God. Other equipment is a kind of cloth used for belts and turbans. Although the general color of whirling dance clothes is white, there are whirling dance clothes that come in other colors. For example, white is used by the Bektash Sufi order; red is commonly used by the Badaviya Sufi order from Egypt; green is used by the Gadriya and Khisti Sufi orders in India; yellow is often used by the Naqshbandiyah Sufi order; and brick red is used by the Khisti Sufi order.

Second Episode: Performing the Whirling Dance

In this episode, it was observed that the informants reported similar experiences and feelings during the performance but also differed in some aspects, twelve of which are briefly described below.

First, becoming aware of their own sins and transgressions encouraged the informants to admit their failings, ask for forgiveness, and better themselves. Informants AN, STS, AFA, and ASA reported these kinds of thoughts.¹⁵

Second, breath regulation played an important role in following the rhythm of the dance and achieve a calm, relaxed, and focused state. This aspect was highlighted by informants AN, STS, RAZ¹⁶, and ASA¹⁷ who controlled their breathing by saying “Allah” when exhaling and “Hu” when inhaling deeply.¹⁸

Third, following the rhythm of the heartbeat helped the dancers keep in tune with the rhythm and synchronize their movements, as reported by RAZ.¹⁹

Fourth, all the informants did *dhikr* throughout the performance, with the intention to transform the dance into a medium of expression and become a manifestation of their inner state. The informants AN²⁰ and STS²¹ shared that they were reciting “Allah” and connecting it with “Hu” during the performance, so as to be in constant remembrance of Allah, which was highlighted by all the informants as a key aspect.

Fifth, the informants agreed that being a Sufi dancer had become part of their new identity and prevented them from committing sins. This theme was highlighted by AN,²² who mentioned that his teacher also reminded him to avoid any kind of negative behavior.

Sixth, concentration played an important role in maintaining their balance and flow of movements during the whirling dance. Their mind had to be clear and focused at all times, which was achieved

¹⁵ Interview with AN on January 28, 2020; Interview with STS on July 22, 2020; Interview with AFA on November 3, 2020; Interview with ASA on August 5, 2020.

¹⁶ Interview with RAZ on July 28, 2020.

¹⁷ Interview with ASA on August 5, 2020.

¹⁸ Interview with STS on on July 22, 2020; Interview with AN on January 14, 2020.

¹⁹ Interview with RAZ on July 28, 2020.

²⁰ Interview with AN on January 14, 2020.

²¹ Interview with STS on July 22, 2020.

²² Interview with AN on September 17, 2020.

through the constant *dhikr* and remembrance of Allah. All the informants felt the dance was a highly beneficial exercise to improve their concentration.

Seventh, remembering or inviting teachers and parents to attend and observe the dance performance, as reported by AN,²³ STS,²⁴ and ASA.²⁵

Eighth, the Sufi dance was a medium for *dhikr* to feel closer to Allah, as mentioned by STS.²⁶

Ninth, some informants experienced more clarity and a more positive attitude to deal with their own problems. Negative attitudes like helplessness, confusion and self-blame were replaced by fortitude, insightfulness, and self-acceptance, as reported by AFA,²⁷ STS,²⁸ and RAZ.²⁹

Tenth, an attitude of resignation emerged when dancing, especially in the case of ASA. This submission is related to the problems faced and the provisions of Allah. ASA assessed that getting into trouble or pleasure is a part of their destiny set by Allah and that ASA must accept it. If he was to indulge himself, ASA would want to reject all of his problems. However, he can't even refuse the problems. Thus, ASA finally realized that any problems should be accepted with peace.³⁰

Eleventh, giving off emotions during the dancing process was reported by AFA,³¹ who released her flow of emotions by imagining herself talking to God. The same state of opening up was described by RAZ³² and STS.³³

Twelfth, some experiences cannot be expressed, as related by AFA³⁴ who felt safe when she was talking to Allah³⁵ while her

²³ Interview with AN on January 14, 2020.

²⁴ Interview with STS on July 22, 2020.

²⁵ Interview with ASA on August 5, 2020.

²⁶ Interview with STS on July 22, 2020.

²⁷ Interview with AFA on July 28, 2020.

²⁸ Interview with STS on October 2, 2020.

²⁹ Interview with RAZ on October 14, 2020.

³⁰ Interview with ASA on October 8, 2020.

³¹ Interview with AFA on July 28, 2020.

³² Interview with RAZ on February 7, 2020.

³³ Interview with STS on July 22, 2020.

³⁴ Interview with AFA on July 28, 2020.

³⁵ Interview with RAZ on July 28, 2020.

conscious mind was filled with remembrance of Allah, and the *dhikr* was surrounding her.

Third Episode: After performing the Whirling Dance

The third episode focuses on the positive effects of the performance: feeling comfortable and relaxed, gaining self-awareness and self-control, mastering one's emotions, and restoring one's physical and psychological balance. The benefits were reported by all the informants.

Process of Physical and Psychic Healing

The analysis of the physical and psychological healing process achieved through the Sufi dance is based on Ahmad Saifuddin's opinion that prayer and ritual worship have six therapeutic elements: catharsis, self-control, breathing control, muscle stretching, habituation, and cognitive restructuring.³⁶ However, this study found other therapeutic elements present and active in the whirling dance. For example, hydrotherapy in the form of *wuḍū'* and *salat* before performing a Sufi dance, as well as altered states of consciousness (ASC).

Hydrotherapy in Sufi Dance

Before dancing, Sufi dancers must perform *wuḍū'* (ablution) by washing the exposed limbs. *Wuḍū'* can reduce emotional pressure and thus increase the feeling of relaxation and comfort. The next impact of a proper and correct *wuḍū'* can help reduce stress, anxiety, and susceptibility to depression.³⁷

Taking *wuḍū'* can be understood as a form of hydrotherapy. The effect of the water depends on its temperature which should be moderate, neither too cold nor too hot, in order to have antidepressant and analgesic effects. In addition, *wuḍū'* is done by washing the face, washing the hands up to the elbows, rubbing part of the head, and washing the feet. Islam recommends repeating each of these steps three times. Every washing has an element of exerting

³⁶ Saifuddin, *Psikologi Agama*, 258–272.

³⁷ Mohd Anuar Awang Idris, Muhammad Nubli Abdul Wahab, and Nora Yusma Mohamed Yusoff, "The Significant Effect of Wudu' and Zikr in the Controlling of Emotional Pressure Using Biofeedback Emwave Technique", *International Journal of Psychological and Behavioral Sciences* 11, no. 4 (2017), 828-34.

gentle pressure on the limbs like a light massage, which causes the individual to feel refreshed and relaxed.

Sufi Dance as a Cathartic Effort

Catharsis is an ancient Greek concept described by Aristotle, which was later developed and implemented by the Austrian neurologist and psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) as a form of therapy in psychodynamics. Catharsis is a process of releasing emotions in a person.³⁸ Therefore, catharsis is often referred to as cleansing from the state of consciousness and individual emotions.³⁹ Catharsis takes place by being fully aware of the contents of the unconscious.

The unconscious contains things that cannot be well expressed, bad or negative experiences, failures, and events that one does not necessarily want to remember.⁴⁰ However, when the negative contents of the unconscious mind are not acknowledged and corrected, they will have the potential to cause psychological disorders like anxiety and sleeplessness. As for psychological disorders, it often leads to physical disorders. Thus, catharsis enables individuals to become aware of their inner experiences and question their validity, thus diminishing their negative effects.

In the context of the Sufi dance, catharsis occurs in several forms. For example, the informants opened themselves to their own negative emotions and acknowledged them before their self, their Shaykh, and finally Allah. This powerful emotional experience often caused them to burst into tears. Another form of catharsis experienced by the informants was an awareness of their past sins and mistakes for which they had to ask for forgiveness to be freed of them and leaving them behind.

³⁸ Mohammad Aqil Baihaqi, Dian Siti Nurjanah, and Medina Chodijah, "Analog *Shocking Therapy* sebagai Metode Katarsis terhadap Ketenangan Jiwa pada Karyawan", *Syifa al-Qulub* 4, no. 2 (2020), 1–10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15575/saq.v4i2.7572>.

³⁹ Bence Nanay, "Catharsis and Vicarious Fear", *European Journal of Philosophy* 26, no. 4 (2018), 1371-80. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12325>.

⁴⁰ Michela Balconi, et al., "Conscious, Pre-Conscious and Unconscious Mechanisms in Emotional Behaviour: Some Applications to the Mindfulness Approach with Wearable Devices", *Applied Sciences (Switzerland)* 7, no. 12 (2017), 1–14. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/app7121280>.

In Islamic psychology, past sins are one of the causes of mental disorders.⁴¹ As for Albert Ellis, sin threatens mental and mental happiness. In fact, sin or guilt from sin is considered as the cause of a person experiencing “masochistic self-sacrifice”.⁴² In addition, Ellis also considers the concept of sin to be a direct or indirect cause of neurotic disorders.⁴³ People often do not want to be aware of their sins because if they are, it will cause the presence of feelings of guilt. On the other hand, harboring sins in the unconscious mind also has a negative impact on mental health because, at any time, sins in the unconscious can appear and cause anxiety. Therefore, when feelings of guilt, shame, and sadness arise, the Sufi dancers manage them to correct their behavior and ask for forgiveness. Such mechanisms reduce their susceptibility to psychological disorders.

Regulated Breathing Brings Serenity

One of the therapeutic elements is regulation of breathing. Breathing plays an important role in creating a relaxed and comfortable condition for an individual.⁴⁴ Even so, breath control must be done properly and correctly by inhaling deeply and exhaling slowly over an extended period of time and regularly. When individuals regulate their breathing, it will provide a proportionate supply of oxygen to the brain. In addition, regulated breathing also helps maintain the consistency of the work of the heart and reduces

⁴¹ Abdul Mujib, *Teori Kepribadian: Perspektif Psikologi Islam* (Depok: RajaGrafindo Persada, 2017), 334-336.

⁴² P.J. Watson, Ronald J. Morris, and Ralph W. Hood Jr., “Sin and Self-Functioning, Part 3: The Psychology and Ideology of Irrational Beliefs”, *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 16, no. 4 (1988), 348-361. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009164718801600406>.

⁴³ P.J. Watson, Ronald J. Morris, and Ralph W. Hood Jr., “Sin and Self-Functioning, Part 1: Grace, Guilt and Self-Consciousness”, *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 16, no. 3 (1988), 254-269. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009164718801600305>.

⁴⁴ Xiao Ma, et al., “The Effect of Diaphragmatic Breathing on Attention, Negative Affect and Stress in Healthy Adults”, *Frontiers in Psychology* 8 (2017), 1–12. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00874; Sri Ayatina Hayati, Anwar Sutoyo, and Awalya, “Effectiveness Deep Breathing and Progressive Muscle Relaxation Training (PMRT) Techniques to Reduce Anxiety in Pregnant Woman Pre-Birth”, *Jurnal Bimbingan Konseling* 7, no. 1 (2018), 48-54. DOI: 10.15294/JUBK.V7I1.22489; Domianus Namuwali, Fery Agusman Motuho Mendrofa, and Meidiana Dwidiyanti, “Deep Breathing Relaxation Techniques Improve Emotional Control on Tuberculosis Patients”, *International Journal of Public Health Science (IJPHS)* 5, no. 3 (2016), 325-328.

high blood pressure. Therefore, breathing control is one of the relaxation techniques.

Regulated breathing is also an important element of the whirling dance which is performed in a counterclockwise, circular motion over an extended period of time. This activity requires good breathing so that the Sufi dancer can maintain the complex series of exact movements over a long time. However, the method used to regulate the breath varied between the informants, who either took a deep breath while saying “Hu” and exhaling slowly or saying “Allah” or saying “Hu” when exhaling. In addition, some informants chose to adjust their breath according to the rhythm of the heart while dancing.

Concentration as a Meditative Element

Concentration is also an important aspect of the healing process in Sufi dance. This is because the whirling dance requires the full concentration of the performer. When the informants were not fully concentrated, they would tire easily and their movements become shaky. The informants retained their focus by remembering their teacher and doing *dhikr* throughout the performance, assisted by the musical accompaniment.

From the purely scientific perspective, increased concentration caused the informants to activate the Alpha brain waves which encourage the secretion of the hormones norepinephrine, serotonin, beta-endorphin, and dopamine associated with decreased blood pressure leading to reduced stress and increased immunity levels.⁴⁵ Apart from that, the musical accompaniment also helped the informants to concentrate deeply during the Sufi dance and enter a meditative state which helped reduce negative emotions and anxiety.⁴⁶ This had the effect that the physical disorders experienced by the informants were also reduced, such as gastritis, dizziness, and fatigue. On the other hand, the musical accompaniment during the Sufi dance

⁴⁵ Munazilah and Nida Ul Hasanat, “Program Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction untuk Menurunkan Kecemasan pada Individu dengan Penyakit Jantung Koroner”, *Gadjah Mada Journal of Professional Psychology (GamaJPP)* 4, no. 1 (2018), 22–32. DOI: 10.22146/gamajpp.45346.

⁴⁶ Cynthia Vieira Sanches Sampaio, Manuela Garcia Lima, and Ana Marice Ladeia, “Meditation, Health and Scientific Investigations: Review of the Literature”, *Journal of Religion and Health* 56, no. 2 (2017), 411–427. DOI: 10.1007/s10943-016-0211-1.

process also helped the informants to create a sense of comfort and safety within themselves.

Cognitive Restructuring

One of the causes of psychological disorders is the presence of irrational thoughts and beliefs which create cognitive distortions. One form of irrational thoughts and beliefs is believing that something bad has happened or will surely happen. In addition, irrational thoughts and beliefs are often highly negative ideas about something, thus causing pessimism, anxiety, and depression.⁴⁷

The informants reported experiencing irrational thoughts and beliefs; for instance, interpreting a problem negatively, feeling unable to find a solution, blaming someone for their situation, or thinking that an injustice has occurred. These irrational thoughts and beliefs caused the informants to feel anxious and restless.

However, the Sufi dance practice encouraged the informants to become aware of their irrational thoughts and beliefs, question them, and replace them with rational thoughts and beliefs. This process is called cognitive restructuring. During the dance, the informants remembered God by performing *dhikr*. Their remembrance of God led them to understand and acknowledge that God has absolute power and will, which caused them to change their beliefs and surrender to Him. Their new perspective on life made the informants realize that every problem has a solution, that they were seeing things too pessimistically, thus reducing their stress and anxiety levels. Further, they observed that the symptoms of their physical disorders gradually diminished in the course of their dance practice. In their case, their physical ailments were caused by prolonged stress which can cause stomach ulcers (gastritis), dizziness, and fatigue.

Submission to God

Individuals can experience psychological disorders because they are unwilling to accept their situation. However, we cannot control all the problems we are facing in life, and some problems are out of our

⁴⁷ K. Robert Bridges and Richard J. Harnish, "Role of Irrational Beliefs in Depression and Anxiety: A Review", *Health* 2, no. 8 (2010), 862-77. DOI: 10.4236/health.2010.28130; Edward C. Chang and Will B. Bridewell, "Irrational Beliefs, Optimism, Pessimism, and Psychological Distress: A Preliminary Examination of Differential Effects in a College Population", *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 54, no. 2 (1998), 137-42.

control and involve other parties. Individuals who think that they can control everything or ought to be able to control everything show a low level of submission to God. Their failure to control certain events in their life may cause psychological disturbances. Conversely, if the individual has a high level of submission to God, it will help them achieve serenity and prevent them from developing psychological disorders.⁴⁸

When the informants performed the whirling dance, they focused on Allah and did *dhikir*. This focused attitude and constant remembrance of Allah encouraged them to relinquish their ego and submit to Allah, which also meant leaving their problems to Allah who would, in due course, provide the best solution. In the end, the stress and other negative emotions that resided in the informants disappeared and they achieved a complete peace of mind.

Improved Self-Control

Every individual has an internal drive to act and achieve certain goals. To some extent, this urge is normal because it functions to sustain life. However, if the urge leads to negative behavior it will cause the individual to become corrupted. Therefore, individuals must be aware of the role of the ego and its dangers, so that they can exercise more self-control and regulate their behavior. Thus, self-control can help individuals achieve mental health⁴⁹ and cure psychological disorders.

The informants reported that they were increasingly aware of their ego when performing the Sufi dance because they were able to think deeply, reflect, and recognize their past errors and misjudgments. Their awareness of their past sins made them determined not to repeat them in the present or in the future. In addition, their newly acquired identity as a Sufi dancer and the spiritual training accompanying it also helped the informants avoid any negative behavior. Their higher level of self-control was also due to their Shaykh's image being present in their mind while performing during the whirling dance. This meant that the informants became

⁴⁸ Andrea D. Clements and Anna V. Ermakova, "Surrender to God and Stress: A Possible Link Between Religiosity and Health", *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 4, no. 2 (2012), 93-107. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025109>.

⁴⁹ Boals, VanDellen, and Banks, "The Relationship between Self-control and Health", 1049-1062.

less susceptible to developing stress, anxiety, and other psychological disorders.

Body Movement and Muscle Stretching

Sufi dance involves regular and consistent movements, namely counterclockwise rotating movements at a consistent speed. During the whirling dance, the informants opened their hands. Before and after performing the Sufi dance, the informants bowed 90 degrees as a sign of respect to their teacher and Shaykh. These movements helped stretch their muscles, which causes the blood vessels to widen, resulting in improved blood circulation. This improved and constant oxygen supply to the brain creates a sense of relaxation and comfort. In addition, the dance exercise is physically demanding and causes perspiration, which rids the body of toxins and relieves physical symptoms like dizziness and fatigue.

Positive Reinforcement and Habituation

As explained above, the Sufi dance has many observable benefits, such as helping the informants to recover from their physical and psychological ailments. In addition, their general well-being is improved through increased relaxation and ease. This positive effect of the whirling dance practice acts as positive reinforcement for the informants, who are motivated to continue with their dance practice. Positive reinforcement helps individuals to stay committed to their newly established routines.⁵⁰

This positive reinforcement led to the informants continue with their dance practice and attend their training regularly. A person who does a whirling dance and gets a positive impact on his or her body and mental state will be encouraged to do it again next time in order to get an even greater positive impact. This kind of mechanism is called positive reinforcement. This routine or consistency in performing the whirling dance meant that the related benefits became more pronounced and observable over time, and the informants were able to recover from their physical and psychological problems and restore their overall balance and health.

⁵⁰ Alan Baron and Mark Galizio, "Positive and Negative Reinforcement: Should the Distinction be Preserved?", *Behavior Analyst* 28, no. 2 (2005), 85-98. DOI: 10.1007/BF03392107.

Altered State of Consciousness (ASC) Experience

Sufi dance is a religious exercise, rather than merely an artistic expression like other dances. As a meditative ritual, it requires deep concentration. Therefore, the whirling dance has the potential to cause informants to achieve an Altered State of Consciousness (ASC), fundamentally changing their feelings, perceptions, and thoughts in a positive way. ASC takes many forms, such as meditation, mystical experiences, and hallucinations. In some forms, ASC can help individuals achieve mental health as it generates feelings of pleasure, satisfaction, calm, and other positive emotions, their body releasing hormones that support positive emotions and reducing those hormones that support negative emotions. These changes can help individuals to restore their mental health and general well-being.

When the informants performed the Sufi dance, their awareness was expanding from the limited physical world into the vast expanse of the other world. This change in consciousness helped them to look beyond their immediate surroundings and focus on their inner self, reaching out towards Allah.

The informants experienced different forms of ASC. For example, they felt that Allah was indeed present, a tangible presence close to them, and they responded by speaking to Him in their heart. One informant shared a feeling of complete ease and serenity that cannot be described in words. Another informant reacted with a sudden urge to weep and cry, overwhelmed by a flood of emotions, which released all their inner tension and culminated in a deep sense of unburdening and relief. In this way they managed to rid themselves of all their negative emotions and thoughts, experiencing great physical decompression as a result.

Sufi Dance as a New Healing Trend

Based on the results of this study, it can be established that Sufi dance can create therapeutic effects that are healing and healthy, both from a medical and psychological perspective. Thus, Sufi dance can become a new trend in the world of holistic therapy. Unfortunately, the whirling dance is often seen as a traditional form of artful entertainment,⁵¹ rather than a meaningful and deeply spiritual experience. Thus, it is important to highlight its therapeutic value.

⁵¹ Wijayanti, "Kesenian Tari Sufi: Studi Nilai Budaya dan Potensinya Sebagai Sumber Pembelajaran Antropologi di MAN 1 Magetan", 102–13.

Sufi dance can be used as an alternative healing method that affects physical as well as psychological disorders. This is especially relevant today where an increasing number of people seek alternative treatment methods to avoid the harmful side effects of modern psychotherapy and drug therapy.⁵² When learning to perform the whirling dance, the worst that might happen is a short spell of dizziness; however, this will soon disappear once the person learns to regulate their breathing and increase their concentration and mental focus.

In addition, apart from serving as a cathartic medium, Sufi dance is also a way to remember God and draw closer to Him.⁵³ This means that Sufi dance is not only a healing medium but also a form of mental and spiritual enhancement. It also combines the art of the graceful movement of the body with the movement of the heart, thus combining physical exercise with spiritual exercise,⁵⁴ which would be welcomed by many who are experiencing spiritual dearth.

On the other hand, people who do not attempt the whirling dance themselves will be rewarded and entertained by merely watching others perform it due to its high aesthetic value. Seeing the image of the whirling dervish in front of their eyes will bestow meanings of great mystical significance to them, and the enrapturing and graceful dance movements can also cause the observer to feel closer to God by remembering Him. Therefore, even by merely watching the whirling dance being performed a fraction of this spiritual experience is sure to be transferred to the audience.

Further, there is musical accompaniment in the Sufi dance. Various studies show that music has a positive impact on mental

⁵² I. Ralph Edwards and Jeffrey K. Aronson, "Adverse Drug Reactions: Definitions, Diagnosis, and Management", *The Lancet: Sultan Qaboos University Medical Journal* 356, no. 9237 (2000), 1255–9.

⁵³ Keren Harel, Johanna Czamanski-Cohen, and Nataly Turjeman, "The Spiritual Experience of Sufi Whirling Dervishes: Rising Above the Separation and Duality of This World", *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 75 (2021), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2021.101831>; Esra Çizmeçi, "Sufi Ceremonies in Private and Public", in *Performing Religion in Public*, ed. by C.M. Chambers, S.W. du Toit, and J. Edelman (London, United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁵⁴ Nuraini A. Manan, "Seni ala Sufi dalam Pendekatan Diri kepada Tuhan dan Implikasinya dalam Psikoterapi Islam", *Jurnal Substantia* 14, no. 2 (2012), 251–62; Robert Langer, "Transfer Processes within Sufi Rituals: An Example from Istanbul", *European Journal of Turkish Studies: Social Sciences on Contemporary Turkey* 13, no. 13 (2011), 1–18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejts.4584>.

health. Harmonious music and regular rhythms are known to regulate the heartbeat and reduce psychological tension.⁵⁵ Apart from helping a Sufi dancer or someone who performs a Sufi dance to maintain the rhythm of the dance, the music can also be enjoyed by the witnessing audience and exert its calming effects.

As a final point, every Sufi dance movement has its own significance, for example remembering death, our own mortality, and the shortness of our life. The rotating movement and the billowing of the dancer's robe transport the performer as well as the audience into another dimension, indicating that there is life after death.⁵⁶ This awakened sensibility to the greater meaning of life can motivate people to call themselves to order, assert more self-control, and regain their inner balance.

Concluding Remarks

Based on the aforementioned observations and findings it can be concluded that Sufi dance has therapeutic elements in the form of catharsis, self-control, breathing control, muscle stretching, habituation, and cognitive restructuring. However, the effect of each therapeutic element given to the informants varied, depending on their respective state and receptivity. In addition, there are other factors involved, such as the benefits of performing *wudu'* and *salat* before each performance and the effect of ASC. These additional elements supported the healing process of the informants suffering from different physical and psychological disorders.

This study uses a qualitative approach to reveal the therapeutic effects of Sufi dance; however, without examining these effects in more detail. Therefore, future research work can investigate the role

⁵⁵ Janne Brammer Damsgaard and Anita Jensen, "Music Activities and Mental Health Recovery: Service Users' Perspectives Presented in the CHIME Framework", *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 12 (2021), 1–14; Lavinia Rebecchini, "Music, Mental Health, aSind Immunity", *Brain, Behavior, & Immunity - Health* 18, no. 2021 (2021), 100374. DOI: 10.1016/j.bbih.2021.100374; Tasha L. Golden et al., "The Use of Music in the Treatment and Management of Serious Mental Illness: A Global Scoping Review of the Literature", *Frontiers in Psychology* 12, no. Article 649840 (2021), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.649840>; Tasha L. Golden et al., "The State of Music-Based Interventions for Mental Illness: Thought Leaders on Barriers, Opportunities, and the Value of Interdisciplinarity Tasha", *Community Mental Health Journal* 58, no. 3 (2021), 1-12. DOI: 10.1007/s10597-021-00843-4.

⁵⁶ Kılınc, "Mevlevi Sema Ritual Outfits and Their Mystical Meanings", 809–28.

of Sufi dance in treating specific psychological and physical disorders through other approaches, for example through quantitative methods, to measure its level of effectiveness in each case. It is also acknowledged that the whirling dance requires a high level of preparation, commitment, effort, and guidance before it can be performed satisfactorily and reveal its true power. Thus, this practice—and the unlocking of its many bodily and spiritual benefits—is only meant for those few who are willing to surrender themselves unto God, be moved by Him, and learn to move through Him.

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