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# SUFI HEALING IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ISLAMIC CULTURE

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## Abstract

Sufism, as the largest mystical and ethical movement in Islam, had the widest influence on all spheres of life in Islamic society, including traditional medicine. For more than a thousand years, the healing that Sufis practiced has been one of the main forms of medical assistance offered to the population in the Islamic world. In this study, Sufi medicine is considered as a traditional system of healing that has specific features (transnational and synthetic, a combination of religious and medical practices, the active use of psychotherapeutic techniques). The significant influence of the Sufi worldview on the philosophy of the great thinkers and naturalists of the Islamic Renaissance (Abu Ali Ibn Sina, Jabir ibn Hayyan, Al-Biruni) is also highlighted.

*Keywords:* philosophy, holistic, Islamic Golden Age, epistemology, khanqah

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## 1. Introduction

Having arisen in the first centuries of the existence of Islam, by the 11<sup>th</sup> century the mystical movement of Sufism had already spread its influence to all regions of Islamic civilization (Middle East, Maghreb, Central Asia, southwest of Europe). Being a complex and multilevel phenomenon, Sufism had a significant impact on all aspects of the life of Islamic society [1, 2], including traditional medicine. Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the system of medicine created in the mainstream of Sufism was one of the main forms of medical assistance to the population in the Muslim regions of the world. Along with this, the philosophy of Sufism and the accumulated experience of traditional medicine have influenced the great scientists and naturalists of Islamic civilization (Abu Ali Ibn Sina, Jabir ibn Hayyan, Al-Biruni) [3]. Despite existing studies on the spiritual aspects of Islamic mysticism [4; 5; S. Nardella, *Falsafah and Tasawwuf in the Islamicate Civilization: Ghazali and Suhrawardi on the epistemological value of mystical experience*, [https://www.academia.edu/31626670/Falsafah\\_and\\_Tasawwuf\\_in\\_the\\_Islamate\\_Civilization\\_Ghazali\\_and\\_Suhrawardi\\_on\\_the\\_epistemological\\_value\\_of\\_mystical\\_experience](https://www.academia.edu/31626670/Falsafah_and_Tasawwuf_in_the_Islamate_Civilization_Ghazali_and_Suhrawardi_on_the_epistemological_value_of_mystical_experience), 4, accessed on 23.01.2020], the practical

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forms of implementing the ideas of Sufism, including Sufi medicine, have not been sufficiently studied. In the modern world, medical issues are very important in human life. Therefore, Sufi medicine, despite its ancient traditions and scale of influence, is of interest not only to historians and philosophers, but also to a wide range of readers. At the same time, Sufi medicine remains one of the least studied systems of traditional medicine.

The system of Sufi medicine has a feature that distinguishes it from local schools of traditional medicine (Indian, Chinese, Tibetan). Since Sufism is a movement of the one of the world religions of Islam, the defining feature of this medical tradition is its transnational character. Sufi medicine has absorbed the medical experience of local traditions that have ever existed in the Islamic culture. Especially the medical traditions of Persia, India, Ancient Greece, Roman and Byzantine medicine had a strong influence on the theory and practice of Sufi medicine. At the same time, syncretism inherent in Sufi medicine is still combined with the preservation of the vivid specificity of national schools of Sufi medicine (India, Uzbekistan, Iran, etc.). When studying the phenomenon of Sufi medicine, it is necessary to consider the closed nature of medical teaching (from Murshid to Murid) and the variety of medical practices within various Sufi communities (tariqas) [6].

## **2. Literature review**

The study discusses the refraction of the spiritual and ethical ideas of Sufism in the system of Sufi medicine and philosophy of naturalists of the Islamic Golden Age. Of fundamental importance to us are the works of scientific naturalists and theorists of Sufism in the 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries [7-12] and contemporary Sufi authors [13], including practicing healers [14, 15]. To clarify the general patterns of the development of Sufism, classical works of major Western scholars are used [4, 5, 16-18]. The work of Soviet orientologists contributed to the disclosure of the influence of social processes on the theory and practice of Sufism [19-21]. The drawback of these works is the limited understanding of the phenomenon of Sufism by the Marxist materialistic approach, based on which, the main prerequisite for the activities of Sufis was the social inequality of Islamic society in the Middle Ages. Post-Soviet studies of Sufism for the first time made it possible to objectively consider various aspects of the development of Sufism in the countries of the former USSR [3, 22, 23]. A number of theological aspects of Islamic philosophy are examined with the help of the works of modern scholars of the Muslim world [[https://www.academia.edu/31626670/Falsafah\\_and\\_Tasawwuf\\_in\\_the\\_Islamic\\_Civilization\\_Ghazali\\_and\\_Suhrawardi\\_on\\_the\\_epistemological\\_value\\_of\\_mystical\\_experience](https://www.academia.edu/31626670/Falsafah_and_Tasawwuf_in_the_Islamic_Civilization_Ghazali_and_Suhrawardi_on_the_epistemological_value_of_mystical_experience); 24; 25].

### **3. Spiritual practices of Sufi healing**

The social aspect of Sufi teaching involves serving people, the optimal form of which, according to Islamic ethics, is healing the sick and afflicted. Due to the preservation of folk traditions and a characteristic ritual component, Sufi medicine has always been one of the most popular forms of the so-called 'traditional' Islam. It should be noted that in the traditional consciousness, Sufis have always been perceived primarily as healers (*tabibs* in Uzbekistan, *hakims* in the Middle East, *ishanas* of the Middle Volga and Ural regions) [22, p. 21]. Based on the religious principle of absolute faith in God (*tawakkul*), prayer was recognized as the main mean for healing the sick. For this reason, in Sufi medicine, conducting spiritual rituals almost always dominated the use of rational methods of treatment.

The most common medical practices of a religious nature included reading the verses of the Koran, invocations, healing using ordination and breath, exorcism. Based on the dogma of the healing effect of the Quran, the Sufis were actively engaged in the compilation of healing prayer formulas based on the Quranic text. According to Islamic teaching, the Sufis considered the sound harmony of the holy text to be an important healing factor in the recitation of the Quran (multiple repetitions of special verses and names (attributes) of God). According to the Sufis, the sound vibration of the Quranic text corresponded to the original natural rhythms of the universe and accelerated the healing process of the body. A prerequisite for successful treatment was the work of Sufis with the patient's mind. Since the appearance of the disease was interpreted as the will of Allah, the tasks of Sufi healers included educating the patient regarding the spiritual motivation for treatment and maximum concentration on the actions of a medical nature [14]. In addition, the patient and his relatives were advised to accompany the treatment process with the performance of good deeds and intensive alms.

It is worth noting that the combination of spiritual practices with methods of hypnotic influence, widely used by Sufis, was a form of traditional psychotherapy, which was extremely popular in conditions of inaccessibility of professional medical care [23, p. 34].

### **4. Medical practices of Sufi healing**

Along with this, many healers actively used and developed means and methods of traditional medicine. Sufis have achieved great success in the pharmacology, dietetics and aromatherapy, based on the deep knowledge of the rich flora and fauna of the East. For example, among the dosage forms used by the *tabibs* of Central Asia, there were multicomponent pills, powders, syrups, ointments (*marham*), medicinal drinks (*gulob*, *arak*), medicinal oils (camphor, infused with rose petals, scorpions), fragrant waters [26]. It is noteworthy that the process of obtaining the healing essence the Sufi interpreted as extracting its

spiritual essence from the plant, which led to a ban on the use of alcohol, which, according to Sufis, kills the spirit of the plant [14, p. 148-149].

The arsenal of Sufi remedies included dozens of animal fat types (including camel, bear and groundhog) [26]. Much of the knowledge of folk and Persian herbal medicine used by Sufis formed the basis of the main medical textbook of the Middle Ages 'The Canon of Medicine' by Ibn Sina and the pharmacopeia by prominent scientists Abumansur al-Bukhori, Hakim Maysari and Abu Reihan Al-Biruni [10, p. 10-11; 27]. The main basis for the preparation of many medicinal products was the medicinal plants mentioned in the Quran and Hadith: black cumin, aloe and henna.

In therapy, original complexes of breathing practices, therapeutic exercises and massage (based on imitation of animal movements) were actively used. Sufis paid special attention to breathing as a manifestation of the Divine Spirit and a connecting link between God and people - there were special respiratory complexes for warriors, the elderly and people suffering from various diseases. The peculiarity of the therapeutic Sufi gymnastics was a balanced synthesis of motor activity with static positions and elements of dynamic meditation. Importance was even given to the balanced walking of a person, perceived by the Sufis as the optimal form of physiotherapy exercises. According to the prominent theorist of Sufism of the 11<sup>th</sup> century Al-Hujwiri, the correctness of the walk reflects the spiritual thoughts and mental state of a person [27]. The psychotherapeutic practices of Sufis (auto-training, art therapy, dream analysis) have been significantly developed and their study significantly enriched Western psychology of the 20<sup>th</sup> century [13, p. 11].

## 5. Sufi medicine - a system of traditions and organization of treatment

In accordance with the Persian concept *mizadzh* ('nature'), Sufis recognized the proportional relationship of the four primary elements (earth, fire, water and air) and four states (heat, cold, humidity and dryness) in the body and the world around as one of the main health factors. Similar concepts were spread throughout the ancient world. In the Muslim world, Ibn Sina developed the concept *mizadzh* in the famous 'Canon of Medicine' and 'Medical Poem' [8, p. 135-145; 28].

The doctrine of *mizadzh* was extrapolated to all aspects of Sufi medicine: pharmacology, dietetics, gymnastics, principles of adaptation of human physiology to natural, daily and age cycles. In the treatment of a number of diseases, in order to restore the metabolic balance, the heating and cooling effects of products on the acceleration and deceleration of metabolism were used. When choosing treatment tactics, much attention was paid to the type of human body, gender, age and other individual factors. The advantage of Sufi medicine in comparison with the scientific medicine of modern time was the successful prevention and treatment of psychosomatic diseases. At the same time, surgical treatment of patients was rare, which is natural for the prescientific period in the history of medicine. Only individual healers

performed certain surgical interventions (removing foreign bodies, cataracts, stone cutting, opening purulent foci, bloodletting). Charlatans also acted in the medical services market, for a considerable fee offering a cure for all ailments, as the famous doctor Abū Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī reported [29].

Starting from the 9<sup>th</sup> century, *khanqahs* (from Persian *khan*, ‘home, refuge’) became centres of Sufi charity and medicine [30], also known as *tekije* (from Arabic ‘dervishes’ hostel, hospital for the poor) - Sufi monasteries whose purpose was “to serve the poor and Sufis” [31]. Some *khanqahs* were large charitable complexes, including free hotels, shelters, hospitals (a gift of *al-adzhaz*), a pool and a spring [32]. There were also *khanqahs* for women, in relation to which the term *ribat* is often used. During the heyday of Sufism, the number of *khanqahs* in large cities of the Islamic world reached several dozen. The monasteries were financed by state subsidies, funds from the city authorities and private donations, a significant part of which were contributions from craft corporations whose members were members of the respective Sufi brotherhood [17, p. 273; 30, p. 15].

The central rituals of the Sufi monastery were *dhikr* (remembrance) [30] and *sama* (hearing) - meetings, accompanied by continuous prayers, many hours of collective singing of sacred music and special rhythmic movements [5]. The sacred nature of these practices, which one can attribute to the ancient forms of art therapy, attracted sick people to participate in them, the most severe of which were brought to *khanqahs* by relatives [12, p. 615]. Among the people, it was also believed that the very stay in the territory of Sufi monasteries had healing properties.

Being the most popular form of traditional Islam, Sufism, as a complex and multileveled phenomenon, had a significant impact on the concepts and practice of the Islamic science of the Golden Age [32]. One of the key problems of medieval science was the degree to which the scientific and religious approach to knowledge was compatible with the reality [Sharif Kaf Al-Ghazal, *The Influence of Islamic Philosophy and Ethics on The Development of Medicine During the Islamic Renaissance*, [https://www.academia.edu/15111731/The\\_Influence\\_of\\_Islamic\\_Philosophy\\_and\\_Ethics\\_on\\_The\\_Development\\_of\\_Medicine\\_During\\_the\\_Islamic\\_Renaissance](https://www.academia.edu/15111731/The_Influence_of_Islamic_Philosophy_and_Ethics_on_The_Development_of_Medicine_During_the_Islamic_Renaissance), 3, accessed on 23.01.2020]. While the adherents of orthodox theology of the *mutakallim* identified philosophy and science with heresy, the Sufis believed that any means of cognition was a form of approach to the main goal of Sufism - knowledge of God (Persian *magrifat*) [18, p. 268; 20, p. 16]. The universalism and openness of Sufism contributed to the spread of this worldview among the scientific elite of the Islamic world [3].

As far back as the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the great chemist and alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan (721-776) became a follower of Sufi teachings. His achievements include the discovery of distillation processes, technologies for the production of acids, alcohol and many others. The epistemological and ethical concepts of Sufism had a great influence on the formation of the philosophy of the ‘prince of doctors’ Abu Ali Ibn Sina (980-1037) [33]. A valuable source about the Sufi contacts of Ibn Sina is his correspondence with Sheikh Abusa’id Abolkhayr

(967-1049), including questions about Metaphysics and the relationship between the soul and the body. It should be noted that it was Abusa'id Abolkhayr who introduced the principle of service to the poor into the practice of Sufi brotherhoods, believing that the love of God is realized only through caring for neighbours [16, p. 246]. Some scholars consider Ibn Sina as the theorist of Sufism, whose ideas were expressed in his later works, less known outside the Islamic world ('Remarks and Admonitions', 'The Improvement of Human Reason: Exhibited in the Life of Hai Ebn Yokdhan') [4; 7, p. 47-48; 9; 34]. The philosophical analysis of the intuitive method of cognition is combined in these works with the substantiation of the thesis on the complementarity of religious and philosophical methods of cognition [M.F. Eshkevari, *The Impact of Islam on European Civilization*, <http://alhassanain.org/english/?com=book&id=823>, 10, accessed on 23.01.2020].

The influence of cognitive concepts of Sufism was reflected in the scientific heritage of Ibn Sina's colleague at the House of Wisdom - the encyclopaedic scientist Abu Rayhan Biruni (973-1048) [24, p. 405; 35]. Numerous works of Al-Biruni (more than 100 works that played a huge role in the development of Astronomy, Mathematics, Geography and History, including the major work 'Book on the Pharmacopoeia of Medicine') were much ahead of their time in terms of the objectivity of scientific analysis [21, p. 45]. In addition, Al-Biruni for the first time substantiated the need for a strict separation of religious, scientific and ordinary forms of knowledge. Among thinkers who, to varying degrees, experienced the influence of Sufism, Ibn Rushd (one of the authors of the theory of the duality of truth - the truth of reason and the truth of faith) should be noted [32], as well as the physician and philosopher Ibn Tufail [11, p. 147-148] and many others.

Thus, the appeal of the peripatetic scholars of the Islamic Golden Age to Sufism contributed to the fruitful synthesis of science and religion in the era of the Eastern Middle Ages. The influence of Sufi ideas about medicine extended to both 'traditional' Islam (the practical and magical components of Sufi medicine) and the intellectual elite of Islamic society, which was influenced by the rational and philosophical component of Sufi teaching. Despite the intensified persecution of Sufism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by a number of political and religious regimes, there is now a revival of interest in the Sufi heritage and its medical component both in the Islamic world and beyond.

## 6. Conclusions

The tradition of Sufi healing, existing for over a thousand years, is an integral part of the sociocultural heritage of Islamic civilization. Sufi medicine is characterized by ancient history, development within the framework of a certain religious and cultural tradition, the use of traditional medicine and a holistic approach to human health.

Within the framework of the holistic approach, relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and also shared by Sufis, health is understood as a state of harmony of the

spiritual, physical, mental and environmental principles in the human body. It is worth recalling that Constitution of the World Health Organization defined health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not just the absence of disease or infirmity” by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century [36].

Specific features of the Sufi tradition of medicine include its transnational and synthetic nature and the predominance of the spiritual component in the medical practices. An unconditional merit of Sufi medicine is the preservation and further development of the rich experience of traditional medicine in the Islamic region. At the same time, the universal epistemology of Sufism [[https://www.academia.edu/31626670/Falsafah\\_and\\_Tasawwuf\\_in\\_the\\_Islamica\\_te\\_Civilization\\_Ghazali\\_and\\_Suhrawardi\\_on\\_the\\_epistemological\\_value\\_of\\_my\\_stical\\_experience](https://www.academia.edu/31626670/Falsafah_and_Tasawwuf_in_the_Islamica_te_Civilization_Ghazali_and_Suhrawardi_on_the_epistemological_value_of_my_stical_experience), 4] was a powerful impetus for the work of the great thinkers of the Islamic Golden Age. Thus, during the Eastern Middle Ages, Sufism as a unique combination of ancient traditions and openness to knowledge was one of the incentives for the development of Islamic and world civilization.

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