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Sihr (Sorcery) in Sweden: The Potential Dark Side of Rites of Passage

Abstract This article describes the principles of *sihr* (sorcery) from an Islamic perspective, starting with discussion of how to become a sorcerer and how to perform sorcery with the help of satanic djinns and amulets. Then, *ruqya*, practices for countering sorcery with the aid of the Qur'an and Sunna, are exemplified in detail. Next, the article analyzes how these practices can be interpreted by means of ritual studies models and identifies the four components that are essential for a successful cure. Finally, the concepts of the sorcerer as a "counter-Muslim" and "the (negative) Other" are discussed.

The rise of the Islamic orthodox reformism movement from the mid-eighteenth century (followed by fundamentalist Salafi movements) resulted in an increase in internal criticism of Sufi and Islamic folk practices (e.g., the use of amulets, adoration of Muslim saints, and most of the ecstatic rituals). In its footsteps, theologians such as al Wahhab and the medieval ibn Taymiyah have escalated in importance as authoritative sources, complementing the Qur'an and the Sunna in defining contemporary orthodox Sunni Islam (Sirriyeh 1999). Analogous to the surge in performance of the Roman Catholic practice of exorcism during the Christian Reformation period in Germany (Roper 2001), this reform movement has revitalized the use of *ruqya* in the Muslim world to illustrate the efficacy of one's theological standpoints in contrast to the Muslim Other.

Despite the significant increase in the Muslim population of Europe in recent decades, only a few scholarly works have ap-

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peared on *ruqya* and *sihr* in Europe.[1] Even more striking is the fact that, with the exceptions of Khedimellah (2007), Muslim Eneborg (2012), Oparin (2020), and Suhr (2019), no detailed academic descriptions of the actual performance of *ruqya* in Europe have been published. In addressing this lacuna, the primary aim of this article is to describe, from the perspective of my informants, (1) how one becomes a *sahir* ("sorcerer"); (2) how a *sahir* performs *sihr*; and (3) how to counter *sihr* ritually with *ruqya*. A secondary aim is (4) to analyze the conclusions which may be drawn if the informants' reports of the concepts of *sihr* and *ruqya* are interpreted as narratives of ritual attacks intended to lower a societal members' status, that is, a negative rite of passage.[2]

The material on which this study is based primarily consists of interviews exploring my two informants' practical experiences of *ruqya* and *sihr*.[3] This is augmented by the theological sources for their knowledge about *sihr* – the Qur'an, the hadiths, and the medieval Sunni authority Ibn Taymiyah – which both often quote. Neither of my two informants is active on the Internet.

As part of my field work, I interviewed and followed three *raqis* (performers of *ruqya*) and three *marabouts* (West African Sufi healers) in Stockholm. The two informants who are the focus of this article have been given the pseudonyms "Didan" and "Abdul."[4] Didan is a professional *raqi* with 17 years of full-time experience of the practice. Abdul is one of the main North

1 Published studies on *ruqya* in Europe include those on Bangladeshi Muslims in east London (Dein, Alexander and Napier, 2008; Eneborg, 2012); on Muslims in France (Khedimellah, 2007); on Muslims in the Netherlands (Hoffer, 1992); on Central Asian Muslims in Russia (Oparin, 2020); on Somali Muslims in Finland (Mölsä, Hjelde and Tiilikainen, 2010); on Muslims in Denmark (Suhr 2019) and on Somali Muslims in Sweden (Johnsdotter et al., 2011). Unpublished PhD studies on *ruqya* include Bououne (2005) and Cherak (2007).

2 In this article, the general descriptions of rite of passage rituals, liminality, and *communitas* are based upon Turner's work (1995).
3 According to my informants' descriptions, *sihr* is closer to Evans-Pritchard's (1976) concept of "sorcery" than to "witchcraft". "Witchcraft" better corresponds to their concepts of *ayn* (the evil eye) and *hasad* (envy), both of which originate from inherent negative emanations and not from ritual practices or the use of djinns; furthermore, *sihr* is also a male practice while *ayn* and *hasad* are most often found among females. This statement differs from the findings of Rosander (1991, 230, 237), whose female Moroccan informants claim that *sihr* (which in her case studies more often involves the use of curses and poison than the manipulations of djinns) only afflicts men but, like *ayn* and *hasad*, is performed by evil females. However, in the context of, for instance, my earlier fieldwork among West African Sufi *marabouts*, *sihr* better translates as esoteric knowledge (Marlow 2013, 191). With this in mind, it is important to understand that Didan's and Abdul's views are just two voices among several that document how *sihr* and other Islamic matters are perceived among contemporary Swedish Muslims.
4 An important reason not to disclose their real names is that several of the practices they describe are prohibited by law in Sweden.

African liaisons for *ruqya* (outside the mosques) in Stockholm. He is a shop owner and not a *raqi* himself. Nevertheless, he has had about 30 years of experience in assisting various *raqis* with their *ruqya*. Abdul explained that he became more religious when he moved to Sweden than he had been in his youth. I had known Abdul for five years before he introduced me to Didan. Didan has only lived in Sweden for a few years and supports himself mainly as a *raqi*. Both are practicing Sunni Muslims of North-West African Arabic descent.[5]

Didan, my main informant, classifies the afflictions of humans as physical, psychological, those caused by djinns,[6] and those caused by *sihr*. He explains that *ruqya* translates as recitations – in this case, of the Qur'an, extracts from certain hadiths, and of *dua* (supplications). I have described Didan's explanations of why djinns sometimes voluntarily possess people out of love or revenge, and how he counters this with *ruqya*, in an earlier article (Marlow 2023), while this article examines *sihr*, the category of human afflictions involving involuntary possession by djinns.

In ritual studies, a common analytical (functionalistic) approach to sorcery is to view it from the ritual actors' perspectives. The (positive) effects of sorcery as a ritual might be seen (either from the clients' or the sorcerers' perspectives) as a means of achieving positive social transformation, catharsis, empowerment, or other forms of increased agency for the actors; however, the analysis of sorcery in this article is from the alternative perspective of the (ritually non-active) victim. From the victim's perspective (based upon my informants' indirect descriptions), an attack of sorcery could be perceived as an external, sinister attempt to transform the victim's existing social state into a much worse one in a negative rite of passage.

5 Didan's training as a r*aqi* is further explained in Marlow 2023.

6 The use of Arabic terms in this paper reflects how Abdul translated them into Swedish during the interviews. For instance, djinn (s.), djinns (pl.) and the Qur'an were used according to the Swedish pronunciations. However, *shayatin*, *sihr*, *sahir*, Iblis, etc., were most often not translated into Swedish at all.

How to become a *sahir*, according to Abdul

Abdul explained to me that the *sahir* (who is always male in my informants' descriptions) performs his *sihr* with the help of assisting *shayatin* (the "satanic" djinns). According to my informants, the djinns are organized, like humans, in tribes, and have either a religion (like Islam, Judaism etc.) or are followers of Iblis (Satan). If a Muslim would like to become a *sahir* and retain

dedicated *shayatin* in his service, he must make a (Doctor Faustus-like) pact with one of the tribal lords of the *shayatin*, according to Abdul, who continued by asserting that the reason why someone might wish to become a *sahir* is because he worships money or power more than God. Indeed, before he can acquire the powers of *sihr*, he first has to become a *kafir* (someone who denies God). Abdul stressed that, by becoming a *kafir* – and serving both Iblis (Satan) and the tribal lord of the *shayatin* – the *sahir* exposes himself to great personal danger and is unable to return to the divine protection of Islam.

Next, Abdul related that the *shayatin* try to verify the *sahir*'s commitment thoroughly in order to be assured that he is not just testing their capabilities. For example, they might ask him to tear out pages from the Qur'an and place them in, or under, the soles of his shoes to desecrate them. Often, they will demand that he live in isolation for several days, sometimes up to forty, in the wilderness, a graveyard, or an unclean place like a dump, without performing *wudu* (cleansing with water after exposing oneself to ritual impurity, e.g., going to the bathroom).

They then request offerings as payment for their services, according to Abdul, usually in the form of a black animal. Here, he stressed, it is of the utmost importance that the *sahir* does not utter God's name (i.e., by saying the *Basmala* formula) when slaughtering the animal; instead, he should say the name of the tribal lord of the *shayatin* with whom he intends to make the pact. Otherwise, the *shayatin* will not be able to consume the offering. Abdul explained that, although the sacrifice is part of a partnership between the *sahir* and the tribal lord, the *sahir* is not allowed to consume any of it.

After the sacrifice, Abdul claimed, the tribal lord of the *shayatin* appears before the *sahir*. If he is not convinced that the potential *sahir* is fully committed and has become a *kafir*, he will frighten him by taking on the shape of a fearsome monster. This usually scares the potential *sahir* into taking the final step. If the tribal lord is assured of the sincerity of the pact, however, he will take on the shape of an ordinary man and they then draw up a contract on paper stipulating which *sihr* the *sahir* will be able to perform. After the contract is signed, the *sahir* receives four to six servants from among the weaker *shayatin*. The tribal lord also instructs the *sahir* in how to command his new servants and which *talasim* (satanic incantations) should be used when performing different kinds of *sihr*.

Abdul clarified that a strong *shaytan* – a *marid* (a rebel against God) or an *ifrit*[7] – is usually included in the deal to make sure that the weaker *shayatin* always obey the orders of the *sahir*. He explained that the most powerful category of *shayatin* is the *marid*. They are very stubborn and seldom surrender to the *raqi*. They do not care if they are hurt during the *ruqya* and are even willing to die for Iblis. In Abdul's experience, one can recognize them early in the process of *ruqya* from their habit of cursing and exclaiming that Iblis is greater than God. An *ifrit* is also a very strong djinn, although they are slightly weaker than a *marid*. Miming how a Muslim worships God, Abdul explained that if all the *shayatin* revolt against him, the *sahir* can perform *dua* and *sujud* (prostration) to the tribal lord of the *shayatin*; the tribal lord will then punish the disobedient *shayatin* in person in order to honor the pact.

The different kinds of *sihr* and how they work

When the informants use the term *sihr*, it may refer both to the action (sorcery) and to the medium (the charm or poison). The most common reasons for performing *sihr*, in Didan's experience, are love, hatred, and to separate a husband and wife – that is, to disturb social relations. He further explained that the usual media used in *sihr* are either poison (in the victim's food or beverages) or a written instruction (an order from the *sahir* to the *shayatin*) that is either buried in the ground, thrown into the sea, hung in a tree, or hidden on a mountain top or other remote location. The common trait of all these media is that the *sahir* can inflict harm on a victim independent of time and space.

Didan states that in Sweden, *sihr* is less common than possession by djinn. In secular countries like Sweden and France, he claimed, people not only tend to believe less in God but also less in Iblis. This general disbelief makes them less inclined to request the services of a *sahir* than in more religious countries, both Islamic and Christian.[8] He reports that, unlike possession by djinns who are enamored of their victims, which are most often women, *sihr* affects both genders equally.[9]

The following account is based upon Didan's description of how a *sahir* might practice *sihr*. The easiest way for a *sahir* to harm by means of *sihr* is first to poison the intended victim. For

7 In the Qur'an (27: 39), the *ifrit* is mentioned as a strong djinn.
8 However, among Bangladeshi Muslims in East London, it seems to be the other way around. *Sihr* was diagnosed in 68% of cases by the *raqi* in the study carried out by Muslim Eneborg (2012, 9). This contradicts the earlier study by Dein et al. (2008, 50, n.5), where *sihr* is a less commonly used explanation than djinn possession.
9 This is also the case in East London (Muslim Eneborg 2012, 10).

instance, if a spurned wife asks the *sahir* to perform love-related or hate-related *sihr* against her husband, he will first ask her if she has access to the kitchen. If she does, he will prepare *sihr* in the form of food, which is the most efficient medium; if not, he will make liquid *sihr* – which could be sprayed on his food, on his plate, or in his glass.

The *sihr* (medium) is prepared from unclean substances, like menstrual blood, feces, urine, or refuse, although what makes the *sihr* potent is that the *sahir* reads *talasim* over it. Thereafter, the wife will mix it in her husband's favorite food. If she does not cook for him, she can spray the liquid *sihr* medium on his plate or his food before he eats. The purpose of using the poisonous medium is to lower the victim's resistance to the attacks of the *shayatin* that come later.

What happens next depends upon whether or not the husband is a practicing Muslim. If he is not, Didan explained, he will have a low level of divine protection and the *shayatin* can enter and possess him as soon as he begins to feel ill due to ingesting the *sihr* medium. However, if he is a practicing Muslim, Didan claimed, he is under the protection of Islam. Therefore, the *shayatin* will not be able to enter immediately.[10] The tactical purpose of the *sihr* medium is to make him weak, not only in body but, first and foremost, in belief. If he starts to neglect his daily prayers and does not read the Qur'an because he feels ill, the level of his divine protection will be lowered. Only then, Didan stated, will the *shayatin* be able to enter him. An alternative tactic, according to Didan, is for the *shayatin* to stay close to him and try to tempt him to commit sins – such as watching improper movies, flirting with women, or smoking – by utilizing the satanic tactic of *waswasa* (evil whispering). Didan here made a comparison with a thief who observes the front door of someone's home every day; the day the resident forgets to lock the door, the thief is able to enter without effort.

The most common symptoms of *sihr*, according to Didan, are sudden, inexplicable pains or outbursts of anger, or if the feet or hands are extremely hot in the winter or cold in the summer.[11] Furthermore, he also claimed that if one cannot stop thinking about another person (with whom one has not previously been in love), this is a symptom of love *sihr*.

10 Rosander's (1991, 230) female Moroccan informants claims, similarly, that "the morally strong person has a protective shield that keeps evil out."

11 Didan's description of abnormal body temperature follows the North-West African tradition inspired by the sanguine and phlegmatic humors of galenic medicine (Greenwood 1981, 224, 226).

How Didan cures afflictions caused by *sihr*

Didan stated that if one is struck by *sihr* and cannot detect and destroy the *sihr* medium, a *ruqya* is needed to cast out the possessing *shayatin*. The analytical stages of a *ruqya* against *sihr* are mostly the same as those deployed in cases of possession by djinns: (1) Didan is first engaged by the victim's kin and friends, and he prepares himself by increasing his *iman* (faith). (2) He scans the victim's room in order to detect and then remove all non-Islamic artifacts. (3) He interviews the victim and the attending kin and friends to find out if they have observed any well-known symptoms of possession or *sihr*. (4) He runs a test with some Qur'anic verses to see how the djinns react. (5) The *ruqya* begins and he narrows down his selection of verses, continuously repeating those that show the best effect. (6) He also attacks the djinns with blessed water in a plastic garden sprayer.[12] (7) The djinns appear and talk to Didan. (8) The djinns either die or leave the body. On rare occasions it may also be necessary to physically strike the body part where the *shayatin* dwell with a small stick (*siwak*) to convince them to leave the possessed body. (9) He closes the non-religious and immoral opening (where the djinns once entered) of the victim after the djinns have been evicted (Marlow 2023, 9-13).

Didan explained that the choice of procedure differs significantly depending upon whether the *sihr* has been digested or not. Instead of spraying the blessed water on the hands, feet, or face of the possessed victim (stage 6 in the description above), he will spray it directly at the perceived source of the *sihr*, the stomach. Olive oil that has been sanctified with Qur'anic verses might also be rubbed on the affected belly.

Another remedy used by Didan in connection with *sihr* that has been ingested is *esiffra*. In *esiffra*, extreme quantities of sanctified water are imbibed in order to make the client vomit up the *sihr*. It is believed that the longer the *sihr* has been in the stomach, the more firmly it is lodged, and the longer the cure will take to dissolve it. Based upon Didan's experience, if it is discovered at an early stage, one or two sessions of *esiffra* are usually enough to remove it. If the *sihr* cannot be expelled in this fashion, he uses a purgative potion made from blessed water and leaves from a senna bush from Mecca in order to achieve the desired result. Didan claimed that this liquid is recommended as a laxative in the Sunna.

12 This is an example of a modern innovation. Other *raqi* traditionally sprinkle water from a glass or bottle and sometimes spray the sanctified water from their mouths.

Didan related that the *shayatin*, like some humans, often only pretend to be strong but are in fact weak. Those *shayatin* will surrender much more quickly than the stronger ones. Usually, Didan stated, the weaker *shayatin* have been forced to possess the victim by a *sahir* but when *sihr* is involved the *sahir* often places a strong *shaytan* outside the body as a guard to prevent the weak ones escaping by threatening to kill them if they disobey their *sahir*. Should that happen, Didan informs them that if they do not leave the body voluntarily, they will die. If the *shayatin* leave voluntarily, there might be a chance for them to escape, and they will not be going against God's will, according to Didan. Sometimes, he said, they succeed in escaping, but sometimes they are killed by the guarding *shaytan* when trying.

An average session of *ruqya* performed by Didan can vary between one and seven hours depending upon whether or not the possessed individual loses consciousness when struggling with the djinns – a not uncommon outcome if *sihr* is involved. Then the *raqi* has to wait until the victim has regained consciousness. Didan claimed that when *sihr* is involved it is often also the case that the whole family is afflicted.

Didan's last resort – Qur'anic injections

If there are no other methods available, Didan will make a *sihr* antidote that is injected with a syringe into the bloodstream of the possessed victim. He did not disclose the exact ingredients of the antidote beyond saying that Qur'anic verses are read over it. This modern method was invented by Didan's principal teacher, who was educated both as a physician and a *raqi* in his and Didan's native country in North-West Africa. It was inspired by a hadith found in Bukhari "The Prophet replied, 'Satan circulates in the human being as blood circulates in the body'…" (33: 254).

According to Didan, this antidote is also used in some hospitals in his native country and it immediately kills the *shayatin* when injected. He pointed out that its advantage is that even physicians who are not skilled in *ruqya* can use it with success, while stressing that the remedy always comes from the Qur'an and not from the human performer. Didan used it himself in his native country to cure his sister. One injection was enough to liberate her from years of trouble with possessing djinns, he stated.

Didan has used this method once in Sweden at one of the

major hospitals in Stockholm.[13] In this case, the friends of a Swedish-Iraqi man contacted him. He told me that the man was so violent that he was detained by the police and later placed in a psychiatric ward. After the man's friends had persuaded the psychiatrist in charge, Didan was allowed to perform *ruqya* inside the ward. The psychiatrist was present at the first occasion, when Didan performed *ruqya* for an hour, and Didan claimed that the psychiatrist was so impressed with the improvement after only one session that he allowed him to continue to visit the patient regularly. Once, when Didan was alone with the patient, he gave him an injection with the *ruqya* antidote without anybody noticing. Thereafter, according to Didan, the man became so calm and friendly that a few days later he was released and has since returned to Iraq. According to what Didan has been told by the Iraqi man's friends, his condition is still stable.

An account of cooperation between a *raqi* and a Muslim djinn and why Christian priests can perform exorcism and miracles

Didan stated that a *raqi* with good intentions can use Muslim djinns to help him perform *ruqya*; he disapproves of the practice, however, because it may lower one's degree of *tawhid* (which he defines as undivided confidence in God). "It is a door that should be closed…because it is sufficient in connection with *ruqya* to use the Qur'an and the Sunna." Nevertheless, he explained that some *raqi*, who are not *sahir*, do collaborate with Muslim djinns in order to see where the *shayatin* are hiding and how they react to the *ruqya*. A djinn is also able to listen to communication taking place between the (distant) *sahir* and his *shayatin* during the *ruqya*; although, if the *sahir* fears that the location of the *sihr* medium is revealed, he will try to relocate it.

Abdul stated that he has also been present several times when other *raqi* have cooperated with Muslim djinns, most recently when a *raqi* from Morocco visited Sweden and teamed up with a local Libyan *raqi* who was (voluntarily) possessed by a Muslim djinn. The Moroccan *raqi* recited the Qur'an and, helped by his djinn during the *ruqya*, the Libyan *raqi* reported on the *shayatin*.

In most cases, ninety percent, they said that *sihr* was involved. It was like a general practitioner: he can tell

13 Didan mentioned the name of the hospital to me.

you what kind of sickness it is, but he is not a specialist. He does not give you the proper medicine. They could tell you if it was *sihr*, what kind of djinn it was – Muslim, Christian, or Jewish – but they could not cure you. However, what they told you [their diagnosis] was correct. (Interview with Abdul)

Didan reported that he has also encountered this Libyan *raqi* in Stockholm. On that occasion, the victim suffering from *sihr* was a North-West African man. When they arrived together at the victim's home, the Libyan asked Didan to wait outside, as he wanted to try to treat him based on information he had received in advance from his djinn partner. Didan did not know then that the Libyan cooperated with a djinn, so he allowed him to enter alone. However, although the Libyan *raqi* was very self-confident, he did not manage to oust the *shayatin*. Later, Didan performed his regular practice of *ruqya* on the possessed man and the *shayatin* were cast out.

Similarly, according to my informants, Christian exorcism can be successful in casting out *shayatin*, but it is related to *sihr*, in that Iblis appoints *shayatin* to assist Christian priests in conducting the exorcisms. It is the priest's *shayatin* who make their fellow *shayatin* leave the bodies of the possessed victims. Sometimes the *shayatin* can even perform minor miracles for their priest, such as when people in wheelchairs suddenly regain the ability to walk; however, the healing does not last.[14] Iblis helps the priests because he wants to trick them into believing that they possess special powers instead of attributing all healing to God. The difference between the *sihr* of a *sahir* and this form of *sihr* is that the priest is not aware of the source of his healing abilities. Unlike the *sahir*, the priest acts in good faith. Although the priest may start to suspect the cause of his healing abilities, it may be too late because of the corrupting effect of fame and power.

Talismans and *sihr*

My informants observed that all talismans – including *hertz* (amulets) and *djadwal* (an esoteric numerical table with Islamic symbolism) – are based upon *talasim* from Iblis, describing, for instance, a *djadwal* as a coded instruction to the *shayatin* from a *sahir*. They claimed that even if a Sufi Islamic healer (like a *ma-*

14 Ibn Taymiyah (n.d., 62), one of the main theological sources of the neo-orthodox or Salafi-oriented Islamic movement (to which my informants belong, see Marlow 2023, 4), explains this phenomenon as follows: "When the family of the possessed would come to him seeking a cure, he would send a message to his demon companion and they would leave the possessed persons, as a result, the Shayk would be given many dirhams for his services."

rabout from West or North Africa, or a *pir* from Pakistan or India) shows the clients that the *djadwal* consists of Qur'anic references, their hidden *talasim* will counter the Qur'anic references and transform them into *sihr*.[15] According to them, the performers of this version of *sihr* pretend to be Muslims but if one watches them closely, they do not, for instance, perform *wudu* before entering a mosque.

I asked them if they would consider a *djadwal* that solely consisted of a verse from the Qur'an and nothing else to be *sihr*? They both expressed doubt regarding the existence of any *djadwal* or *hertz* based solely upon the Qur'an without any added names of *shayatin* or other kind of *talasim*; however, even if there were such a thing, they say it would still be useless and dangerous. Although the intent may be good, the consequence of wearing an amulet would be that the owner's allegiance would be divided between the amulet and God.

According to Didan's earlier descriptions, he has to check that there are no *hertz* or *djadwal* in the house of the possessed individual before he performs a *ruqya*. For instance, if the victim is in possession of something that they have received from someone else, it has to be removed in case it is a *hertz*. Didan explained that *ruqya* will always succeed when the possessed has *tawhid*,[16] but if they insist upon keeping something that might be a *hertz*, the outcome may be jeopardized. Either the *ruqya* will not work as well (because it will be countered or diluted by the *hertz*) or the *shayatin* possessing the individual will be able to return (because the *hertz* maintains a metaphysical entrance into the victim).

Becoming a *sahir* viewed as a negative rite of passage

The following discussion is based upon the notion of becoming a *sahir*, from a description by Abdul (see How to become a *sahir* according to Abdul), whereby it appears that the *sahir* attempts to enter into a liminal state by means of the symbolic use of filth and pollution. This description is quite close to the theory formulated by Mary Douglas (1996) wherein filth and pollution – that is, chaotic disorder (danger) – serve as symbols for matter that is outside the structural classifications of societal order (purity). Like *sihr*, disorder is both destructive of the social or-

15　As a comparison, Ibn Taymiyah (n.d., 98) states, "Most of what is recited by those preparing amulets and talismans have *Shirk* in them, even though they may recite some Qur'anic verses along with it in order to hide their statements of *Shirk*."
16　In scholarly literature, *Tawhid* is defined as a unity of a pure body and soul. Rituals of purification, for example, consists of a holistic cleansing of both the body and the soul to reach this state (Dieste 2013, 31-32).

der and has the potential to generate vast amoral power. The ultimate corporeal symbols of liminality are the waste products of the human body, such as urine, feces, hair, blood, and spittle. When the *sahir* is described as drinking his urine and eating his feces during his initiation, it can be interpreted as a way of ritually transforming his body by ingesting marginal, corporeal waste products, thereby raising his overall density of liminality.

When he is transformed into a *sahir*, the former Muslim is voluntarily separated from Muslim society to enter into the marginal stage by desecrating the Qur'an, the Sunna, and himself as a civilized person. The *sahir* turns into a "counter-Muslim" when he becomes a *kafir*. The notion that Iblis' followers behave like "counter-Muslims" is also present in the Sunna: for instance, in the suggestion that such a person eats and drinks with his left instead of his right hand (Muslim 23: 5008).

Seen as a rite of passage, the procedure that transforms a person into a *sahir* entails his leaving the divine protection of Islam (the former societal structure) forever in order to become a follower of Iblis (in a reintegration into a new societal structure that is extremely dangerous for his soul). Yet I would like to suggest an alternative interpretation: the *sahir* permanently resides in a liminal state, never to enter the stage of *communitas* or reintegrate into society. This particular interpretation is much closer to my informants' dichotomous worldview,[17] namely, that there is only one ideal structure (Islam), which is opposed by an inferior anti-structure (Iblis). One can question whether it is possible for a human to remain eternally in a liminal state. Nevertheless, if one leaves it, one ceases to be a *sahir* proper, according to the notion of a *sahir* described above.

Counter-negative rites of passage when reversing the effects of *sihr*

Based upon my informant's descriptions, four components are necessary for a successful cure: (1) *the social illness component*, that is, the victim's kin and friends engage a *raqi* because they suspect *sihr*; (2) *a willingness to engage in communitas* in that kin and friends care about the victim and want to help actively with their (social) recovery; (3) *the performance of a counter-negative rite of passage* as the *raqi* neutralizes the destructive discourse of the *sahir* and Iblis (anti-structure) with the restoring

17 This worldview is also evident in Butler (2011).

discourse of Islam (the ideal structure); and (4) *evidence of success* exhibited by a consensus among the victim's kin and friends that the cure has succeded and that the victim is reintegrated back into society.

The first component, a socially acknowledged cause for changes in the victim's behavior, is of course essential in order to choose a culturally appropriate cure. "Ritual praxis fulfills its social task only when all participants believe in its necessity and/or appropriateness" (Wulf 2008, 405). To be able to counter the effects of *sihr*, it must first be apparent to the victim's kin and friends why the victim has changed and become liminal. To reverse the effects of a negative rite of passage like *sihr*, they have to bring the victim out of the liminal state and reintegrate them into society.

The second component, the care and social support of kin and friends, can be viewed as similar to the way in which they might help someone drowning. Rather than watching the victim's struggles to survive the threat of drowning from a safe distance, they can decide to take action as a group and engage in helping the victim. Out of solidarity, they choose to join the victim in the liminal state (which can be perceived as introducing the ritual element of *communitas*) to stop the ritual effect of separation and the possibly lethal psychosomatic effects of nocebo. Driver further develops the analysis of rituals to counter social alienation and divert feelings of hostility beyond one's own society:

> The stimulation of energies hostile to an adversary is often accompanied by a rise in feelings of friendship toward members of one's own performance group… [R]itual often provides space and freedom for loving aggression within a group, while at the same time lifting up visions and symbols of universal love. (Driver 1998, 155)

The third component is to bring in (meta-) performative Islamic symbols to counter the anti-structure that the *sihr* is causing (Rappaport 2008, 124-126). Predicated on the informants' notion that there is only one structure (God's) and that the competing structure is an unstable and dangerous anti-structure (Iblis), the key to countering the structural threat is to heal it with recitations (*ruqya*) of the divine word (the Qur'an). In Islam, Iblis does not have the power to command people against their

will. Instead, he uses persuasion to tempt them to disassociate themselves from God's ideal structure through their own actions. His preferred tactic in the Qur'an is discursive: the tempting whisperings, or *waswasa*, in the ears of potential transgressors (cf., the Qur'an 7: 20, 7: 200, 8: 11, 20: 120, 41: 36). The *raqi* counters the negative possession of *sihr* by explaining to the *shayatin* that they do not have any real base (structure) from which to succeed with their destructive mission; their leader, Iblis (the anti-structure), has already lost, and the proof is to be found in the divine performative language of the Qur'an (Maarouf 2007, 122; Suhr 2019, 154-155).

The fourth component is to find clear proof that the afflicted person is no longer a victim of *sihr* and has become a member of society once more. This means that the person is again both socially predictable in his behavior and fully responsible for his actions.

The binary somatic evidence of a successful *ruqya* against *sihr*

A salient function of rites of passage is to counteract vagueness and ambiguity in initiates' states. Rites of passage are binary in nature. Either one is ill/well, liminal/reintegrated, single/married, and so on (Rappaport 2008, 89). According to my informants' descriptions, binary evidence for the cessation of the effect of the *sihr* is perceived by those participating's senses (heard, seen, or felt in the body):

(A) *auditory evidence*: the possessing *shayatin* appear during the *ruqya,* and they clearly verbally agree to leave the body of the victim so that the people attending the *ruqya* can hear it. This is where the ritual aspects of performance and performative utterances dominate the cure. The successful reintegration is often confirmed, according to my informants, by the *raqi*'s reading a shorter version of the *ruqya* to demonstrate that no *shayatin* are left in the body. This can also be interpreted as the victim's accepting the successful outcome of the ritual (Rappaport 2008, 120-124).

(B) *visible evidence*: the *sihr* medium is found and destroyed with those present as witnesses. With the visible destruction of the *sihr* medium, the victim automatically enters the stage of reintegration. If it is in the form of a written instruction, the *sihr*

medium can be burned. If it has been swallowed, it can be removed from the victim's body by means of the methods described above, either by vomiting as a result of *esiffra* or with the assistance of the laxative senna bush potion.

(C) *somatic evidence*: the *sihr* medium is removed from or neutralized in the victim's body so that the person can feel the *sihr* leaving the body. This is also performed by either making the victim vomit or using the laxative potion. The Qur'anic injection will most likely have the same effect for the victim, from feeling both the needle of the syringe and the antidote flowing into their bloodstream and neutralizing the *sihr*. This is by far the most convincing evidence for the afflicted individual that the threat of the *sihr* is over. A self-embodied experience is hard to dismiss.

> For the experiencing person, the utterance in the bodily medium is evident and undeniable…To reject a self-embodied communication amounts to rejecting one's own body…In such rituals, anyone who doubts can find physical evidence for casting doubt on one's doubt. (Thomas 2008, 338)

There is a difference between one's body as objectively observed by others and as experienced by oneself, as it is lived. "We experience actions done to our bodies as done to our very selves" (McGuire 1990, 285). When one's body becomes severely ill (i.e., unpredictable and uncontrollable), it becomes alienated from one's self-image and transforms into something "Other" (ibid., 287).

Similarly, the notion of *sihr* (the digested medium and the subsequent possession), as an intrusion of foreign matter into one's body, resembles Kristeva's psychoanalytical concept of the "abject."[18] As the dichotomous counterpart of one's self-image, the abject becomes foreign, horrifying, and repulsive. If swallowed, the natural reaction of one's mind and body is to try to regurgitate it to counter its defiling influence (Kristeva 1982, 1-3). An abject could be seen as an intrusion of the (negative) Other into one's perceived Self (one's "lived" body). To convince an afflicted "lived" body that it is restored from an external assault, the *raqi* utilizes "the somatic component of ways of knowing" (McGuire 1990, 286). If the abject is physically removed, like the *sihr* medium in my informants' descriptions, the victim's self-image is restored and the ritually originating invasion by the (negative) Other is repelled.

18 The concept of the abject is inspired by Douglas' (1966) theories of pollution.

A concluding reflection: The notion that *sahir* represents the (negative) Other

Based upon the descriptions given by my (North-West African Arabic) informants, one possible conclusion is that the *sahir* is a fictive picture of the (negative) Other; in other words, they are what I have termed the "counter-Muslim." The *sahir* might be a necessary element in constructing a Muslim group identity, a social projection to characterize the exact opposite of the informants' version of a "We." The Other as a person's opposite becomes even more convincing if it can be proven that it partners with Shaytan (the title of Iblis after his fall), the evil adversary (Butler 2011, 159, 163-165).

However, based upon my earlier fieldwork among West African *marabouts* (Islamic Sufi healers) in Sweden, there is some truth to my informants' descriptions of the practice of *sihr* (Marlow 2013 & 2015). The three *marabouts* I have interviewed reported that they conduct their esoteric work, which they label *sihr*, mainly with the help of assisting (non-Muslim) djinns. To manage these djinns, they often perform blood sacrifices (where they neither recite the *Basmala* nor participate in the subsequent meal), and they usually command the djinns by designing a *khatim* (better known as a *djadwal* in the Arabic world), a talisman, or some other form of written instruction, mainly based upon numerology, Qur'anic quotes, and the names of prophets, angels, and djinns. According to my *marabout* informants, a *khatim* is an instruction for the djinns to execute the commands of the designer, and if its design is correct, these agents are compelled to fulfill its orders (Marlow 2015, 486).

Nevertheless, not everything in my informants' description of the Other corresponds to reality. For instance, none of the *marabouts* are unclean when performing *sihr*. On the contrary, they have much higher requirements for cleanliness than the *raqi*. They always perform a new session of *wudu*, and sometimes also fast and say *dhikr* for several days before they initiate their work. Nor would they ever call themselves sorcerers, instead referring to themselves as pious Muslims. Their argument is that they only carry out their work with the help of God and the Qur'an; the success of their *sihr* (which for them does not mean sorcery but rather esoteric, higher Islamic knowledge) is predicated on God's permission (ibid.).

These contrasting perspectives of the practices of the (Mus-

lim) Other as either incorrect, sorcery, or blasphemy reflect how the evaluation of particular ritual practices can strategically be used as markers of group identity (in this case, within Islam) and to exclude competing factions (Hüsken 2007, 360). The *marabouts*' counter-polemic view of the ritual practices of my North-West African Arabic informants (and their neo-orthodox Salafi-inspirational sources) is simply that "their religious knowledge is at a less potent [and more exoteric] level" than that of the *marabouts*. Yet the *marabouts* have their own concept of what characterizes a sorcerer. For them, a sorcerer is a non-Muslim practitioner of the traditional African arts of sorcery: indeed, the historical or sometimes neighboring Other (Marlow 2013, 197-198).

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