

JÜRGEN WASIM FREMBGEN

*Völkerkundemuseum*

*Munich, Germany*

## The Scorpion in Muslim Folklore

### Abstract

In the dry zone between North Africa and South Asia scorpions have caught the imagination of nomads and sedentary people in various ways. First of all, venomous scorpions have long been considered as embodiments of evil, but also as protectors to counter the powers of other evil forces. This is reflected in beliefs, in pictorial representations of oriental art from early historic periods, and in contemporary Muslim folklore. In the mystical imagery of Islam the scorpion appears as a symbol for the dervish's power of mastering evil. On another level of meaning, the scorpion is also a metaphor for sexuality. The final part of the paper deals with the meanings and uses of scorpions in local folk medicine and magic.

**Keywords:** scorpion—evil—Sufism—sexuality—medicine—magic

WITHIN ZOOLOGY, scorpions (order *Scorpiones*) belong within the class of arachnids—which includes tarantulas—and comprise around one thousand to one thousand five hundred species, a figure which is rather small by invertebrate standards (RANKIN and WALLS 1994, 54).<sup>\*</sup> They are abundant throughout the warm, humid habitats of Africa and Asia as well as in tropical America and Australia. Some characteristic desert species in North Africa and the Middle East are, for instance, the yellowish-lightbrown *Buthus occitanus* (*'aqrab*, FIGURE 1) and the black *Androctonus* (*'aqrab al-kaḥla*, *oqurban*) in Tunisia, and *Mesobuthus eupeus*, *Androctonus crassicauda*, and the *Hemiscorpius lepturus* in Khuzistan (Southwest Iran).<sup>1</sup> These venomous creatures cause what has been called “scorpionism,” that is, poisoning by scorpion stings and related haematoid diseases.

The body of the scorpion (between two to eight inches in length) consists of three basic parts: a cephalothorax or carapace that covers the head and the bases of the legs, a broad seven-segmented abdomen of about the same length and shape as the carapace, and a five-segmented narrow “tail” or postabdomen ending in a telson (RANKIN and WALLS 1994, 54). The latter, which is not a true segment in itself, is also called the sting. Inside the claw-like telson are two paired venom glands, which are controlled by the scorpion. The scorpion has four pairs of true legs, a pair of leg-like pedipalps, which are held out in the front and end in large pincers, and chelae, which look like the claws of a lobster or crab. Therefore, in North Africa the crab is also called “scorpion of the sea” (*'aqrab al-bahr*). The pedipalps are used to catch and hold food. Between them, at the very front of the carapace, are the chelicerae; short, heavy pincers used for the final crushing and ripping of the animal prey, which consists of all sorts of creatures, such as spiders and other scorpions (!), but also small lizards, mice, and even snakes (FIGURE 2).

Scorpions are nocturnal hunters and secretive animals; for most species the day is usually spent in shallow self-dug burrows. The burrows are highlighted in the Tunisian proverb: *la tudhil yad al-firan, la talsa' al-'aqarib*—

FIGURE 1: Tunisian Scorpion (*Buthus occitanus*).

“Don’t put your hands near mice (that is, in a mouse-hole) or you will be bitten by scorpions.” The danger of being bitten is especially high in the evenings and nights of hot summer months when arachnids are more active than in other seasons. At night, people in the rural areas of the Muslim world often go barefoot to the toilet and are then particularly exposed to the danger of scorpion bites. Generally, humans are mostly bitten on the feet and the hands, especially the fingers (GESSAIN and GILLOT 1983, 166). Scorpions are also known to crawl into shoes. This is reflected in an Afghan folk story where an eagle grabs the Prophet’s shoe with its beak, flies a distance, and lets it fall to the ground.<sup>2</sup> A scorpion comes out and in this way the eagle saves Muhammad from its bite. The fact that scorpions, unlike snakes, always come back and cannot be frightened away is expressed in an Arabic proverb from Syria: *jemb al-‘aqrab la tiqrab, jemb al-haiyyi fru u nam*—“By the side of the scorpion do not come, by the side of the snake spread your bed and sleep” (JEWETT 1891–1893, 63). People are therefore always on the lookout to keep their houses free of scorpions—the careful cleaning of the corners of houses is imperative. In the past, experts (like the North African ‘Isawi dervishes) went around the cities in the evenings, lured the animals with fire, and grabbed them with tongs. In Central Asia, people also try to protect themselves with traditional felt carpets spread on the floor, because it is said that scorpions and tarantulas would not



FIGURE 2: Scorpion on Czech stamp.

step on that fabric (HARVEY 1996, 62). Village women from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in North India told me in March 1993 that, in addition to keeping goats, they successfully ward off scorpions by plastering cow dung inside their houses (floor and walls) as well as outside on a regular basis.

Certain areas of the Muslim world seem to be particularly infested by scorpions, such as Khuzistan where approximately five percent of the rural population are stung by the venomous creatures annually; another study in the tropical Bassari region of Senegal revealed that forty-four percent of the population had been stung at least once in their lifetime.<sup>3</sup> As reflected in the travel literature of the nineteenth century, the Iranian town of Kashan (situated between Tehran and Isfahan) was of particularly ill repute because of its abundance of black scorpions. George CURZON, for example, writes: “So venomous was their bite that one of the familiar forms of expressing hatred was to pray that your enemy might...be stung by a Kashani scorpion” (1892, 15).<sup>4</sup> It is little wonder that across Iran men and children often collect a scorpion, put a circle of fire around it, and watch how the creature tries to escape in vain.<sup>5</sup> The scorpion finally commits suicide and bites itself. The same has been observed in the area of Kunduz in Northern Afghanistan.<sup>6</sup>

#### SCORPIONS AS EMBODIMENTS OF EVIL

Due to its menacing appearance and dangerous poison, the scorpion has been feared since ancient times, particularly in the dry zone between North Africa and South Asia. Therefore, the Arab encyclopaedist an-Nuwairi (d. 332 CE) classified it in the zoographical part of his work as belonging to the “poisonous animals” (*dawat as-sumum*) with a deadly venom (EISENSTEIN 1991, 46, 194). In popular Muslim imagination, it is said that particularly dangerous scorpions inhabit hell. Thus, a legend mentions “a race of scorpions as big as camels with tails like steel chains, each of which contains a ton of poison, one drop of which would suffice to kill all the fishes in the ocean” (KNAPPERT 1985, 30, compare 59). An Indian variant describes scorpions living in hell having “the size of ‘mules with packsaddles,’ whose poison and the paroxysms they cause last forty years” (METCALF 1992, 171). Furthermore, the Prophet is said to have classified demons and spirits (*jinn*) into different groups—one of them appearing in the shape of scorpions and snakes (KRISS and KRISS-HEINRICH 1962, 15, 30; KNAPPERT 1985, 32). According to a *hadith*, Muhammad issued advice to kill the sinful (*fawasiq*) animal within the holy area (*haram*) of Mecca (EISENSTEIN 1991, 15). In the beliefs and practices of Muslim folk religion, the scorpion is generally associated with evil, but, following the concept of sympathetic magic, it is often also regarded in a positive sense as a protector to counter the powers of evil.<sup>7</sup> Before studying these aspects in contemporary Muslim folklore through

presenting ethnographic material, a few examples from earlier periods will help to highlight the cultural meaning and importance of the scorpion.

In ancient oriental art, we find depictions of the scorpion as a protective emblem: a proto-Harappan ivory seal from Rehman Dheri in the Pakistani Gomal valley, dated about 3200 BC, shows two scorpions flanking a frog (DURRANI 1988, 28, 222–23). Multitudes of carved scorpions were found on chlorite stone vessels from the newly-excavated culture of Jiroft (third millennium BC) in Southeast Iran. The depictions of a mythical creature whose upper body is that of a human and lower body that of a scorpion are extraordinary (PERROT 2003, 97, 106). Similarly, in ancient Mesopotamia the famous epic of *Gilgamesh* mentions the scorpion-man and scorpion-woman (DALLEY 1989, 96–8, 327). These composite creatures act as guardians of the mountain Mashu at the edge of the world. Also, a demon called Pazuzu is said to have a tail in the shape of a scorpion's sting (CATALOGUE 1977/78, No. 152). Furthermore, according to Babylonian mythology, Tiamat, the ocean and water deity that is the embodiment of evil, sends “fearless, disgusting scorpions,” together with snakes and dragons, to fight the gods (WUESSING 1994, 69). Thus, in Mesopotamian art, the scorpion is depicted as an apotropaic symbol, for instance, on a boundary stone of the fourteenth century BC alongside a cuneiform written text containing maledictions against potential trespassers (CATALOGUE 1977/78, No. 119). Likewise, the scorpion appears on the seals of that area dating back to the fourth and third millenniums BC (BRENTJES 1983, 22, 33, 49, 118).

In ancient Egypt, a number of deities, particularly Isis, Hedetet, and the scorpion goddess Selkis, were invoked in order to help against scorpion bites (KEIMER 1929, 106; SCHULZ & KOLTA 1998, 100–101). Selkis, who exacts revenge for crimes, is depicted either as a scorpion with a female head or as a woman with a scorpion crowning her head. Scorpions were also occasionally painted as funerary motifs on cartonnage mummy cases. A coffin in the Cleveland Museum of Art (Inv. No. 1914.715), dated around 50 BC–50 CE, shows scorpions as protecting animals flanking the soles of the deceased's sandals.

Depictions of scorpions on Bactrian seals belonging to the Oxus civilization as well as on Afghan bronze stamps used for pottery vessels (first millennium BC) again may indicate the protective power of the dangerous creature (BRENTJES 1983, 30). A similar meaning can be assumed for small bronze sculptures of scorpions from ancient South Arabia which might have been used as votive offerings (FIGURE 3).

In the context of Near Eastern Hellenic culture, the famous evil eye mosaic from the vestibule of the “House of the Evil Eye” in Antioch, dated in the second century CE (Hatay Archaeological Museum Antakya, Inv. No. 1024),



FIGURE 3: Apotropaic scorpion made of bronze (length 5–6 cm)/Ancient South Arabia.

shows a scorpion—as well as a snake, centipede, barking dog, and several weapons—attacking the eye. Eventually the scorpion also appears as a conventional Mithraic symbol: together with a snake and a dog, it helps the light and sun deity slay the bull.

In Buddhist tradition, it is Mara, the opponent of the Buddha, who sends venomous animals, like scorpions and snakes, against the Enlightened One to destroy him. The motif of the scorpion appears in Tibetan religious art where guardian deities, such as the ferocious red warrior Beg-tse and the goddess IHa-mo, female protector of the Buddhist doctrine, (in her form as IHa-mo dud sol-ma, a fierce manifestation), carry a scorpion-handled sword as a distinctive attribute (HELLER). In Tibetan iconography also, the Buddhist teacher Padmasambhava, in his wrathful manifestation as Guru Drag-po, holds a big scorpion in his hand (HELLER; RHIE and THURMANN 1996, No. 185). The depictions of scorpions on various Thangka paintings relate them to the realm of the hell (CATALOGUE 1977, 214, No. 248), whereas on objects of ritual use, such as horns filled with magical ingredients, they refer again to their protective power (MÜLLER 1982, 312; HELLER).

One of the terrifying and destructive deities of the Hindu pantheon is the hag-like Vṛśīkodari, “the goddess with the scorpion on her belly” (GRANOFF 1980, 77). She is identified as Bhadrakali, a fierce emanation of Parvati, who is associated with the larger groups of the Eight Camundas and the Nine Durgas. The dancing scorpion goddess was especially popular in the medieval period where her sculpture can be found in various temples, predominantly in North India (eleventh/twelfth century). It has to be added that Shiva, in his manifestation as Aghora, is adorned with a necklace of scorpions (GRANOFF 1980, 86).

To conclude this historico-cultural overview, I refer to the example of an ethnic group living in the Hindukush: in the mythology of the Kalasha, as

among other Central Asian peoples, scorpions appear as typical “underworld creatures” whose depictions are found—together with those of snakes, frogs, and millipedes—on the pillar leading to the underworld (PARKES 1991, 85).

Turning our attention to the folklore of the Muslim world, beginning with Central Asia, we come across two proverbs in the Burushaski language spoken by the Hunzokuts and Nagerkuts in the Karakoram. The comparison “like the scorpion that eats its mother” (*junghoowe imi sim juwan*) is “used to reprimand a child who does not behave properly with his parents. It is believed in Hunza that the female scorpion dies during parturition and that this is caused by its being eaten from the inside by its youngsters” (TIFFOU 1993, 121, No. 4033). Similar sayings and narratives can be found in Iran, India, and Nepal (GÖPEL 2002, 202–203; MAJUPURIA 1991, 202–203). They obviously contradict the zoological facts, but are probably based on the observation that the young larval scorpions (commonly two or three dozen) ride on their mother’s back until their first molt about a week after birth. This might have conveyed the impression that they “eat” the adult scorpion. On the other hand, the above-mentioned belief from Hunza could also reflect the observation of the well-known cannibalistic behaviour of scorpions, although adults usually devour the young and not vice versa. The scorpion also appears as an embodiment of evil in the related Hunza proverb “like a scorpion and its children” (*junghoowe ke iskimuts juwan*), which denotes a fight within the family leading to death.<sup>8</sup>

Out of fear of the poisonous animal, the Uighurs in Eastern Turkestan



FIGURE 4. Fighting scorpions in Afghanistan.

(Sinkiang) avoid pronouncing its name *chayan* and, instead, refer to it obliquely as the “yellow donkey” (*sirik eshek*); in Kashgar and Turfan the people simply call it “donkey.”<sup>9</sup> This is based on the belief that if they say *chayan* too often, the dangerous insect would enter the house. *Chayan* is used in vernacular Uighur as a swear word for somebody who pesters others through “biting them with his sting (*nashtar*),” thereby causing a lot of trouble.

Similarly, in Afghanistan, if somebody is up to something evil and behaves underhandedly, one says that he stings (*nish zadan*) like a scorpion or that he “has his sting in an upright position” (*dombak-e qarqara mekonad*), like an attacking scorpion.<sup>10</sup> Another proverbial Persian saying in Afghanistan is “you are (like) a scorpion under the floor mat” (*tu ga dom-e zir-e buria hasti*), that is, the person in question first stings like a scorpion and then quietly retreats under the mat or carpet.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, in Urdu, one reprimands somebody by saying “don’t be a scorpion!” (*bichchhu na banna*). Accordingly, an Arabic curse (which I heard in Tunisia) goes “get lost, may you be stung (by a scorpion)!” (*barr irak maldugh*). Here it can be added that in Arabic-Muslim literature, scorpions also appear as embodiments of evil spirits or demons (EISENSTEIN 1991, 224; GLADISS 1999, 151).

An individual who fleeces others, for instance, a money-lender taking interest (which is prohibited in Islam), is frequently abused in Pakistan and Afghanistan as a *sudkhor*. This term means somebody who behaves like a scorpion and literally eats others’ profits.<sup>12</sup> The same sense is expressed in the Pashto proverb *laram da banriya lah baulo nah paida keg-i* (lit. “the scorpion is begotten of the *baniya*’s urine”) which, in a pejorative sense, means that the Hindu moneylender (*baniya*) is considered to be the vilest creature on earth (GILBERTSON 1932, vol. II, 749).

There are many examples in folklore where malicious people are compared to vicious animals. Reinhold LOEFFLER records the Shi’a folk tradition in which the hated Yazid, who ordered the killing of Imam Husain and his family in Karbala, felt a terrible pain in his stomach upon his death (1988, 43). After he died, the physicians opened his abdomen for the postmortem and two or three scorpions crawled out. This belief, which aptly shows the scorpion as an embodiment of evil, is also reflected in a story I heard in Rawalpindi (Punjab/Pakistan):

After people had completed their work of digging a grave for a deceased man, many scorpions came out of the burial pit. As a result, the Mulla ordered them to dig a second grave at a different place in the cemetery. When they put the dead body into the pit, suddenly two snakes, whose heads and ends were intertwined, crawled out of the earth;<sup>13</sup> they embraced the corpse so violently that it separated into two parts. The Mulla eventually asked the deceased’s wife about

the personality of her husband and the lady confessed that she was, in fact, the sister of that man.

Another strand of folklore material deals with the acceptance that it is simply in the nature of the scorpion (and, by extension, a vile human being) to be harmful. An Urdu saying holds that “it is in the nature of the scorpion to bite” (*bichchhu ke khaslat men dang marna hai*). Similarly, the Persian proverb “the scorpion doesn’t sting out of malice, it is its nature to do so” (*nish-e ‘aqrab na az rah-e kin ast, tabiyyat-ash in ast*) is used in everyday situations if one feels hurt by somebody else.<sup>14</sup> A parable from South Asia tells of a scorpion who asks a frog to carry him across the river. In return for that service, the scorpion promises not to bite. Nevertheless, during the journey, it bites the frog and both begin to drown. Facing death, in a last word the scorpion apologizes to its victim saying: “I could not act in another way, I am just like that” (RUSHDIE 1996, 230). In a tale about the Arabian prophet Salih, it is mentioned that the king of Thamud was punished by God for destroying a mosque in such a way that the leaves of the nearby date tree turned into scorpions while the dates became snakes who both attacked the king’s men, biting and stinging them (KNAPPERT 1985, 68).

#### DERVISHES AND SCORPIONS

A well-known motif of Indian wisdom deals with the sage who crosses a river (that is, “the water of worldly reality”) and reaches the other side (that is, he overcomes worldliness), thereby attaining spiritual perfection. A North Indian folk tale, for instance, mentions a Hindu saint who was bitten several times by scorpions while crossing a river. When he reached the river bank, the people asked him why he allowed himself to be bitten and why he did not shake them off. The sage replied that it would be the *dharma* (religious obligation, order) of the scorpions to bite and that these animals would just follow their path. He would not have the right to change that or to kill the scorpions.<sup>15</sup> Such legends are not only embedded in the Hindu context, but have long since been attributed to Muslim mystics. Thus, a variant of that story was told to me in Vehari (Southern Punjab) by Rao Saghir Ahmad, who narrated that a Muslim saint was once sitting at a river bank when he was stung by a scorpion. Asked why he did not kill the poisonous insect, he replied: “It is the nature of the scorpion to bite, it is my nature not to do any evil and not to kill.” It goes without saying that the saint and the sage remained unhurt. It is said of the early Sufi Sari as-Saqati (d. 865 or later) that while teaching on the subject of *sabr* (patience), he did nothing to ward off a scorpion and allowed himself to be stung by it (GRAMLICH 1976, 85).<sup>16</sup>

While this story and its variants emphasize the ideals of following either

the *dharma* or fulfilling the notion of *sabr* resulting in non-action on the part of the holy men, there are somewhat different notions in vernacular Islam. In the case of a female Uwaysi Sufi, Funduqa of Baghdad, for instance, a scorpion appears as a mysterious and powerful guide. The legend holds: “One day a scorpion passed in front of her in an agitated manner. She followed it, and they came to a river. The scorpion stopped, confused. A fish appeared, took it on its back, brought it across and went away. Funduqa crossed the river and followed the scorpion. It came to a tree.... Beneath the tree a woman had fallen asleep, and a snake was about to kill her. The scorpion killed the snake and went back” (BALDICK 1993, 184).

Other sources emphasize that all creatures, even the most dangerous

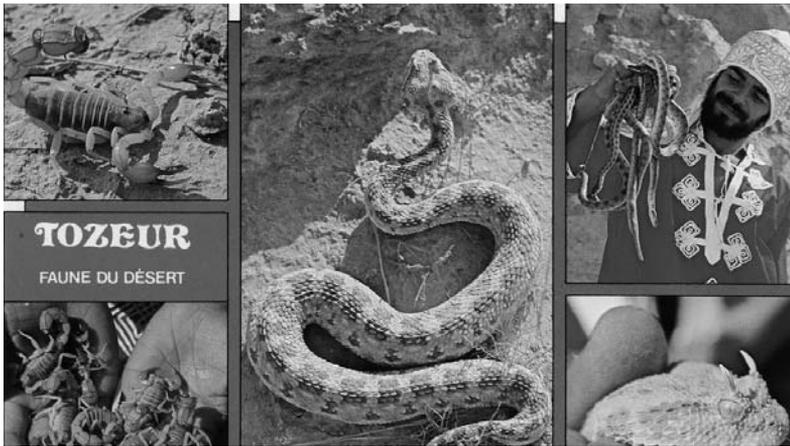


FIGURE 5. Tunisian 'Isawi dervish handling snakes and scorpions (postcard).

ones such as snakes and scorpions, are obedient to God and become tame and peaceful in the presence of saints. In particular, the charismatic and enraptured *majzub*, a Muslim ecstatic who embodies “otherness,” has a reputation of being able to touch any wild and venomous animal without being harmed. Similarly, it is said that also the holy fools of Oriental Christianity were immune to any danger and could step on snakes and scorpions (BENZ 1938, 41, 53). Within popular Sufism, dervishes especially are imbued with magical powers, such as those belonging to the Rifa'iyya, Sa'diyya, 'Isawiyya (Aissaoua), and Jalali, and they have the capacity to handle scorpions. It is reported that in Egypt the Rifa'i and the related Sa'di, in a state of trance, took venomous scorpions and snakes into their mouth and partly devoured them (LANE 1914, 241, 460; FREMBGEN 2000, 96, 113–15). The Gurzmar fakirs, who represent the Indian offshoot of the Rifa'iyya, are also known to do this.

Furthermore, in Iran there are peripatetic entertainers who apparently let themselves be stung by scorpions (as observed in the 1960s in Kashan).<sup>17</sup> It is thought by locals that the use of opium provides some sort of immunity against scorpion bites. Throughout North Africa the 'Isawi dervishes make a living as peripatetic or partly sedentary snake charmers (FIGURE 5). During their performances, they also take scorpions into their mouth. In addition to their activity as entertainers, they catch scorpions and work as healers. WESTERMARCK reports from the Moroccan city of Fez, "when a person has been bitten by a scorpion, he ties up the part of the body which has been bitten, so as to prevent the poison from spreading, and then an 'Esáwi sucks the blood from the wound and spits it out. But the 'Esáwi first puts salt into his mouth—not as a protection against the poison, which he is proof against, but on account of the blood" (1926, 303). In Bir Lahmar (near Medenine) in South Tunisia, a villager told me in May 1997 that they utter magical formulas while applying a ligature, pressing out the wound, and sucking out the poison (compare NARBESHUBER 1904, 17). In Afghanistan, M. H. Sidky observed the healing of a scorpion sting by an old *malang* (wandering dervish). He describes in detail: "After examining the sting, the *malang* sat down on the floor in front of the young man. He produced a knife and an old safety razor from the pouch strung around his shoulders underneath his robe, placing them on the floor in front of him. Picking up the knife and feeling its edge with his thumb, he placed the blade against his patient's skin, about twelve centimetres above the sting. Pressing the blade so as to indent but not break the skin, with a downward motion, he began to stroke the afflicted leg. As he manipulated the knife, the *malang* recited magical formulae and, at the end of each one, blew on the afflicted spot. This treatment, which lasted about five minutes, was said to neutralize the venom. Finally, using his safety razor, the *malang* made a small incision just below the sting and caught the resultant flow of dark-colored blood in a ceramic cup. After allowing the wound to bleed for about a minute, the *malang* applied a wad of moist tobacco to it, then bound it with a piece of cloth. Tobacco, the healer told me, draws out all kinds of *zahr*, or toxins" (SIDKY, 1990, 291–92). The basis of such healing practices by dervishes and performances by "holy travelling entertainers" demonstrating anaesthesia, is the mystical *jihad* (lit. struggle for the sake of God) against the *nafs*—the lower, vital self, which has to be educated with the help of various ascetic practices (FREMBGEN 2000, 179–87). Nevertheless, unlike the saint, these peripatetics primarily occupy an economic niche and handle scorpions for monetary reasons.

## THE SCORPION AS A METAPHOR FOR SEXUALITY

Thus far, we discussed the scorpion as a general embodiment of evil—associated with malice and death—as well as its importance in Sufi imagery as a symbol for the mystic’s power of mastering the evil. A third level of meaning refers to morality and unfolds in the language of physical love. In the popular culture of Indo-Pakistan, for instance, the scorpion is used as a metaphor of pain, carnal desire, and lust—and, in a more concrete way, of coitus itself (thereby invoking the experience of orgasm as a sort of “half-death” or “little-death”). In this context the scorpion’s sting (Urdu/Punjabi *dank*, Pashto *lasha*) serves as a paraphrase for the erect male penis.

The metaphorical sense of the words used for a scorpion (Urdu *bichchu*, Punjabi *thuan*, Siraiki *withuan*, Sindhi *wichchha*, Pashto *laram*) is often indicated in a more or less veiled form in folk and film songs dealing with love. In an old Urdu song performed by Rona Laila, the expression *dasgaye bichchhuan* refers to the heroine who is under love’s spell and feels as if she has been stung by a scorpion. A Pashto song starts with the line *laram da laram*, indicating the woman’s lover, who treats her like a scorpion. Vulgar Pashto films make ample use of the sexual imagery: paraphrasing the hero as a scorpion means that he acts in a cruel way and that he is “hot” and “horny.” In this sense a girl sings in another Pashto folk song: *wa more da radou ka, laram khwaraley-yam*—“O mother come, the scorpion has bitten me!” Erotic songs performed by the *duma* (dancing girl and prostitute in the North-West Frontier Province) frequently contain this arousing metaphor.

The sexual imagery of scorpion bites is widespread on the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent. In the course of the *rai* dance of the Gond in Bundelkhand (Central India), for instance, the girl sings that she is going to die because a scorpion (that is, her lover) has bitten her. A protective significance can be more likely assumed in the case of scorpions depicted on a number of sculptures showing celestial nymphs (*surasundari*) at medieval Hindu temples in Khajuraho. There the insect is placed on the thighs of the female body. Similarly, the scorpion is embroidered as a design with a symbolic meaning on contemporary Gujarati women’s skirts (*ghaghro*). Referring to Parmar, Emma TARLO explains, “the scorpion motif, which also appears in tattoos, is a sex symbol that was in the past commonly found at the top of the *vadkyu* [embroidered end-flap; author’s note] of the *ghaghro*, at the top of the woman’s thigh. These scorpions were not, it seems, merely decorative. They were potentially malevolent to anyone who should usurp a woman’s *ghaghro* and, by implication, her husband’s bed. Parmar recalls...a song which runs:

Manibai is having her bath, my beloved  
The scorpion has climbed her *ghaghros*,  
It climbed up and bit her, beloved.

Here the scorpion in the song bit a woman's husband's lover. According to Parmar, dying women would often say: 'If my *ghaghros* are worn by my husband's second wife, she will be bitten by a scorpion.' Here the scorpion seems to be at once decorative, protective (of the wife's rights), malevolent (towards the imposter) and phallic" (TARLO 1996, 228). As far as the last mentioned aspect is concerned, it can be added that in Bundelkhand a "horny" wife who does not get sexual satisfaction from her husband is called in the vernacular a *dankini* (scorpion's bite), that is, somebody who yearns for

قیمت	پیکنگ	خواص	نام دوا
۲۰ روپے	فی شیشی	پرائی سے پرائی خارش کیلئے سفید سے چھوڑے پھی کا خاتمہ کرتی ہے	اکتیرا خارش (تیل)
۲۰ روپے	۱۰ گرام	مشہور دھوپ طلا سے عضو مخصوص کی حملہ امراض کیلئے بے حد مفید ہے۔ عجی لاغری کو دور کرتا ہے۔	شاہی طلا
۳۰ روپے	فی شیشی	بالوں کی حملہ امراض کا زود اثر علاج ہے گتے بالوں کو روکتا ہے بالوں کو کھٹا چمکدار بنا کر خشکی مٹاتی کا خاتمہ کرتا ہے۔	روغنِ املہ
۱۵ روپے	فی شیشی	تیبڑا، کھچا اور دیگر جانوروں کی چربیوں اور پٹھی پوٹیوں سے تیار کردہ روغنِ خاص پولیو، فالج اور جسمانی دردوں کیلئے سفید ہے۔	روغنِ خاص
۲۰ روپے	۲۰ گرام	پرائی سے پرائی بوا سیر کیلئے سفید سے جلن اور سوزش کو دور کرتی ہے۔	مرہم بوا سیر
۱۰ روپے	۲۰ گرام	سر درد، نزلہ، زکام، قلو، سینے کی کھرن جیسی فی دردوں کیلئے سفید ہے۔ جلد میں خوری جذب ہو کر ناک اور دماغ کو کھولتی ہے۔	شاہی بام
۲۵ روپے	۵ گرام	اس کے استعمال سے طرفین میں لذت پیدا ہوتی ہے مہرت کے لمحات کو پرمہرت بناتی ہے خوشبودار ہے۔ بیڑی استعمال کی دوا	ملذذ خاص
۲۰ روپے	۲۵ گولی	خونی و بادی بوا سیر کیلئے مجرب دوا ہے۔ خون کو بند کرتی ہے۔ قبض کشا ہے۔	حب بوا سیر
۱۰ روپے	فی شیشی	آنکھوں کی امراض کیلئے سفید سے۔ بینائی کو طاقت دیتا ہے۔	روشن چیراں نمبر
۵ روپے	ایک گولی	وقت ضرورت کی خاص دوا ہے۔ ماسک پیدا کرتی ہے۔ مضر صحت اجڑا سے پاک ہے۔	حب ماسک
۸۰ روپے	۵۰ گرام	اعلیٰ درجہ کی مقوی باد مچھون سے۔ اعصابی و جسمانی کمزوری کو دور کرتی ہے۔	لبوب کبیر جواہر دار
۲۵ روپے	۵۰ گرام	دل و دماغ کو طاقت دیتا ہے۔ بینائی کو تیز تر کرتا ہے۔	خمیرہ گاوزبان

FIGURE 6. Advertising scorpion medicine on a leaflet from Lahore.

(in other words, wants to kill) a lover. Similarly in Rajasthan, a sexually obsessed woman is called *bichchhuri rand* or *daḳan rand* in a pejorative way, thereby pointing to the observation that the female scorpion frequently kills the male after copulation. Finally, also the scorpion motif frequently appearing on Moroccan women's textiles are interpreted as being "associated with fertility and having prophylactic functions against adultery" (JEREB 1995, 47).

By the way, comparable erotic elements can be found in Southern Italian and Sardinian tarantism (since the fifteenth century): the bite of the tarantula spider is used as an oblique reference in the language of physical love, hence the invocation to the patron-saint "my St Paul of the Tarantists who pricks the girls in their vaginas" (LEWIS 1989, 81).

It can be added that Pashto wit and mockery focuses on the peculiar anatomy of the scorpion, which stings forward although the sting protudes from its back. Thus, after an actual scorpion bite, the victim could be asked jokingly "did the scorpion sting from the front or from the back?" In the realm of sexuality, such imagery either refers to male-female or to male-male sexual relations. It is therefore a very serious insult among men to say "you have been bitten by a scorpion from the back!" (meaning "you have been used as a passive sexual partner").

#### FOLK MEDICINE AND MAGIC

##### *Scorpions used in the Preparation of Folk Remedies*

Taking the above-mentioned sexual metaphors into account, it is small wonder that oil extracted from the sting of the scorpion is widely used in South Asia by Jogi-type medical practitioners to prepare a remedy (*dawa*) for restoring or increasing virility. The Jogi puts a number of living scorpions into a clay pot, closes it well, and heats the vessel for a certain time; the residues of the insects are then used for the preparation of a number of different folk remedies. Hakim Hajji Malik Fida Husain, for example, a healer practicing in Lahore, recommends scorpion medicine on an advertising leaflet against a number of ailments, such as weakness of muscles, general physical weakness, difficulties in urinating, and so on (FIGURE 6).

On 1 November 1996, I had the chance to observe the advertising performance of such a practitioner in Peshawar's busy Saddar bazaar whereby the Jogi extolled the potency of his products in the manner of an experienced actor (FIGURE 7). He manufactured and sold a massage oil for men, which was meant to be applied to the breast, back, arms, and legs in order to restore vitality. Furthermore, he advised to apply it to the glans of the penis and expressively pointed to the power of the erect scorpion sting. The oil consisted of nine egg yolks and other ingredients (such as wild rue, garlic,

cloves, musk, saffron, dried mushrooms, oil of alligators, oil of scorpion sting, and so on). The whole concoction was heated in a pan and then the oil was extracted. During this sort of “medicine show,” the Jogi let scorpions run over his hands (the sharp point of their stings had been scraped off) in order to impress the audience. The scorpion oil manufactured in this way is considered to be “hot” (*garm*), according to the concept of *yunani* folk medicine, which is derived from classic Galenic medicine.

In Kabul (Afghanistan), Karim-e Mar-gir was a famous Tajik medical practitioner (he died in the 1960s from snake bite)

who specialized in preparing and selling a variety of remedies made from the ingredients of snakes and scorpions.<sup>18</sup> He was particularly known for his ability to cure skin diseases and jaundice. Scorpion medicine is also mentioned in a popular book called *Kitab ul-mufardat*, which was written in Urdu by Hakim Muzafar Husain Awan (it was first published in the 1950s). The author re-commends that the remedy obtained from the black scorpion whose venom is stronger and therefore more useful than that of the more feeble pale yellow variety (MUZAFAR HUSAIN AWAN 1995, 116). He advises readers to use the ash as well as the extracted oil of the insect to cure paralysis and to destroy kidney stones and urinary calculus. A local healer in the Walled City of Lahore also sold a special *tez dawa* (“hot medicine”) against kidney stones consisting of scorpion oil, radish, and *sang-e yahud* (a mixed substance shaped into a pill). Hakim Muzafar Husain Awan furthermore mentions a marzipan-like medicine called *ma’jun-e ‘aqrab*, which consists of a mixture of different ingredients. Of course, such contemporary treatises have much earlier classical antecedents written in Arabic. IBN AL-BAITAR, for instance, recommended using the ash of the scorpion to strengthen the eyesight and to break up kidney stones, whereas it is said that scorpions dissolved in boiling olive oil would help to heal ulcers, to ease pains in the back and in the hips, and to increase the growth of hair (1840, vol. II, 201–202). Another medieval scholar, Mohammad ibn-Zakariyya ar-Razi (865–923),



FIGURE 7. Jogi selling scorpion medicine in Peshawar (Pakistan).

notes, “if one eats a scorpion, it will break up the stones in the bladder” and in case of scorpion bite (the subject of the following section) “if you squash a scorpion and lay it on the wound, this will help considerably” (ULLMANN 1997, 109).

#### *Antidotes for Scorpion Bites*

Ancient and medieval Arabic books about stones mention malachite (*hagar ad-dahnag*) as a suitable substance to be pressed on the wound after somebody has been stung by a scorpion (EISENSTEIN 1991, 89). Similarly, in Egyptian folk medicine, a magical “stone” called *fass al-‘aqrab* was used until recently (WINKLER 1936, 339). It consisted, in fact, of the closing top of a sea snail revealing a spiral design, which (following the sympathetic concepts of magic) is explained as the tail of a scorpion.

Ibn al-Jazzar, a physician who practiced in the tenth century in the North African (now Tunisian) town of Kairouan, recommended in his treatise *Tibb al-fuqara’ wa’l-masakin* (“Medicine for the poor and destitute”) several magic recipes, namely “taking the dried dung of a donkey who grazes on grass, mixed with wine; or hanging on the person who has been stung the root of an olive tree; or killing a black beetle and placing it on the site of the sting” (BOS 1998, 372–73). The Andalusian Ibn al-Baitar referred to *zanab al-‘aqrab* (*Scorpiurum sulcatum*), a plant whose leaves and seeds resemble the tail of a scorpion (IBN AL-BAITAR 1840, vol. I, 473). Following the ideas of sympathetic magic, a compress made of these seeds is supposed to heal scorpion bites. He also advised cutting a gecko into pieces and placing it on the wound in order to ease the pain (IBN AL-BAITAR 1840, vol. II, 3). More recently, a number of different *materia medica* are used by people between the *maghrib* and the *mashriq* (that is, the West and the East of the Muslim world) to extract the venom. In Southern Tunisia, I was told that after the incision, the wound should be pressed into the flesh of a freshly slaughtered chicken—a practice which is supposed to extract the poison. Another local method consists of applying the powdered horn of a rhino or the fat of a Waran lizard (NARBESHUBER 1904, 17). Similarly, peasants in the oases of the Sahara use the flesh of a Waran (NEUMANN 1983, 195), whereas villagers in Western Egypt cure scorpion bites by first dripping lemon juice into the incised wound before cauterising it (BLISS 1984, 55). In Yemen, people use *dahan al-balasan* (Arabian balsam), that is, the resin of *Commiphora opobalsamum*, and, particularly in Wadi Rima’ (Tihama), also the pulverized roots of *wazer* (*Achyranthes aspera* L.) (SCHOPEN 1983, 58–59, 194). Henri MASSÉ reports from Iran that “les gens de Kachan appliquent sur la piqûre une pièce (de monnaie) de cuivre; ... après y avoir laissé cette pièce vingt-quatre heures, ils mettent sur la place un emplâtre fait de miel et de vinaigre” (1938, 346;

compare CURZON 1892, 15). Alternatively, they bathe the wound with myrtle water or apply lettuce. Generally, in Iran insect bites are treated through an incision of the wound and the application of yoghurt. Furthermore, Persian pharmacopoeia lists natural bitumen (*momiya'i*) as an antidote to scorpion bites and other poisoning (FREMBGEN 1999, 26). In Pakistan, the reader of the *Kitab ul-mufardat* is advised first to eat radish and then to apply a paste made of refined *naushadir* (ammonium chlorite) (MUZAFAR HUSAIN AWAN 1995, 116). Another folk medicine is recommended in the Punjab, namely, putting earwax or a dead fly on the scorpion (or wasp) stings. People in the Mewar area of Southern Rajasthan treat the wound either with a piece of iron or with salt. In Mithila, a region in Northern Bihar, *haldi* powder (turmeric) is used. An Ayurvedic antidote to scorpion bites consists of bathing the wound several times with hot water and then applying a compress made of potash and sulphur.

Effective antidotes for scorpion bites made from dead scorpions are mentioned in medieval Arabic treatises on pharmacology (EISENSTEIN 1991, 102–103; GLADISS 1999, 150). Following the concept of sympathetic magic, it is interesting to discover that a special remedy was also prepared from mice, mentioned as the traditional enemies of scorpions in Arabic literature (EISENSTEIN 1991, 40, 104). But all over the Muslim world, from South Asia to North Africa, the most common antidote is an oil which is, so to speak, pickled with scorpions, or an oil of the scorpion itself, which is extracted by frying the creature. In the Punjab, one uses mustard oil or another bitter oil; in the Near East olive oil is mixed with the scorpion “juice” (WHITE 1851, 305–306). Often the Jogi or Kalbélia (in Rajasthan) who prepare this folk medicine mix additional ingredients (animal substances and herbs) to the scorpion oil, which is applied to the wound after incision. In Afghanistan as well as in Eastern Turkestan, I found that peasants collect a number of scorpions, put them in glass bottles alive, and expose them to the sun. They kill and devour each other and only the strongest one survives for a certain time until he dies from the heat. In this way, the scorpions dissolve into an oily substance, which is used as a serum.<sup>19</sup> People in the high mountain areas of Hunza and Nager in the Karakoram cure the bite of the local small yellow-greenish scorpions (which constitute a less poisonous species) by applying *gashuqe masha maltash*, that is, a mixture of onions and fresh butter. In North Africa, the Moroccan ‘Isawi (Aissaoua) dervishes are said to “treat the bites of scorpions by making an incision in the place that was bitten and sucking it, and then applying to the wound a paste made with the scorpion that gave the bite” (LEGEY 1935, 202).

*Scorpion amulets*

In addition to the healing practices of dervishes and the use of folk remedies and antidotes, people try to ward off scorpions and malevolent demons, who take on the shape of these insects, by various magical means. Before focusing on the use of particular scorpion amulets in the Muslim world, it should be mentioned that since earliest times, for instance in Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, the utterance of magical formulas was considered to be an effective treatment for scorpion bites. In contemporary North Africa, the patient is advised to write the following words on a piece of paper, dissolve them in water, and lick them up together with honey or oil: “Belqim, Faliaqid’mam; Dieu est bon, c’est le plus miséricordieux des miséricordieux; o poison, o douleurs, partez, retournez d’où vous êtes sortis; soyez comme le feu à Abraham, fraîcheur et salut. Il n’y a de force et de puissance qu’en Dieu” (DOUTTÉ 1909, 237). Muslim magicians and diviners (such as the *aahmil*) in the Punjab, in Baluchistan, and so on, recite the four *qul suras* of the Qur’an (that is, *suras* 109, 112–14) and blow (*dam lena*) on the wound. By comparison, in the context of Hindu folk religion, scorpion and snake bite are often treated by the recitation of mantras, for instance uttered by the Bhopa-priest in Rajasthan or the Ojha-medium in Bihar. A special *bichchhu ka mantra* consists of counting from one hundred back to one and repeating this one hundred and eight times. An informant from North India qualified this by saying that this would only work on the Holi and Diwali festival days as well as during solar and lunar eclipses.

Among the amulets supposedly protecting the wearer against scorpion bites, there are firstly those containing a written text from the Qur’an, such as, for instance, verse fifty-eight from *sura ya-sin* (the thirty-sixth *sura*) of the Holy Book in Iran (DONALDSON 1937, 260). Secondly, there are those with particular magical ingredients: For example, in Algeria, the hair of a small child, which has to be cut at the age of four months and ten days (VILLOT 1888, 216), the head of a Waran in the oases of the Sahara (NEUMANN 1983, 195), and finally amulets which, in a purely sympathetic way, show the shape of a scorpion (EISENSTEIN 1991, 222). The latter can also be part of written amulets with more extensive texts (KRISS and KRISS-HEINRICH 1962, 112). As far as the style of the depictions is concerned, many resemble those of illustrated manuscripts of the zodiac where “scorpio” is depicted besides the other zodiacs. Until recently, in Egypt, people used scorpion-shaped amulets made of bead work; the smaller ones were worn as personal amulets on the body, whereas the larger ones were hung above the entrance of private houses, shops, and so on (SCHIENERL 1983, 16; 1984, 89–100). SCHIENERL notes: “Bead-work scorpions were used for two different reasons; firstly, to ward off

scorpions and secondly, to avert the dangers emanating from the much-dreaded 'Evil Eye.' Two different ideas, with no connection to each other, form the basis for these superstitious practices. One idea, which may be traced back to pharaonic times, may have caused the emergence of scorpion goddesses. The other notion that scorpions offered protection against the 'Evil Eye,' is rooted in more recent magical beliefs that were current during the Roman period" (1983, 16). Furthermore, there are Egyptian stone amulets as well as early Islamic amulets written on paper, both with depictions of scorpions (SCHIENERL 1983, 18; GLADISS 1999, 159). A Coptic-Arabic



FIGURE 8. Nigerian amulet with Arabic script and the depiction of a scorpion.

protective formula, written on a piece of paper, shows the stylized depiction of a large scorpion in the center (SCHULZ and KOLTA 1998). The amulet was actually used in 1932 to protect a woman from scorpion bites. A similar picture is found on an earlier Coptic amulet, dating from the tenth or eleventh century, which was written on papyrus (SCHULZ and KOLTA 1998, 103). Likewise, a scorpion is depicted in a very stylized form (FIGURE 8) in an Arabic treatise on magic dealing specifically with the use of an amulet called *Musa*.<sup>20</sup> Written in 314 Hijri (926 CE) by al-Hajj Mohammad al-Ta'im in Kanu (Nigeria), it represents an early example of the well-known genre of books about charms and talismans. The practical use of an Anatolian amulet from Kastamonu showing a scorpion, a snake, and Arabic words drawn on a piece of paper is explained in the context of marriage: it

serves to protect the newly married couple from any sort of evil magic, such as that causing infertility or other bad luck. In Turkey, experts printed amulets with the help of a particular type of bronze stamp seals (eighteenth/nineteenth centuries) of a round shape depicting two stylized scorpions facing each other as well as magical inscriptions.

### *Islamic Healing Bowls*

Arabic medicinal or magical bowls (*tasa*), made of brass mostly in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, were widely used in the Muslim medieval period; they have engravings showing various pictorial motifs and inscriptions which promise healing (*shifa'*).<sup>21</sup> Patients had to drink water (or sometimes also milk or oil) out of these hemispherical bowls, which were usually left overnight in order to fully absorb the powers of the magical symbols. In certain parts of

the Muslim world, people still use similar specimens. Almut von GLADISS emphasizes that the inscribed texts show a total indifference towards the scientific medicine of Islam and promise the healing of diseases and particularly the fight against poisoning solely through the power of the belief in God (1999, 149). The inscriptions of all the healing bowls first mention scorpion stings and snake bite; often these animals are also depicted on the bowl in a stylized form. According to the sympathetic concept *similia similibus evocantur*, the magical power of the scorpion picture was supposed to heal scorpion stings and also prevent the user of the bowl from being bitten. It is interesting that one bowl, dated 570 Hijri, which was thought to help against all sorts of diseases and bad luck (including scorpion stings), says at the very beginning of the inscription that “it was prepared and carved while the moon was in the scorpion” (SPOER 1935, 255), thereby referring to the “scorpio” (*al-‘aqrab*), a magically powerful sign of the zodiac (compare CARBONI 1997, 38–39).

#### *Warding off Scorpions*

There are a number of magical means and practices to ward off scorpions which do not make use of pictorial or symbolic representations. In Iran, for instance, the *basmala* (that is, the Qur’anic formula, “in the name of Allah, the merciful, the compassionate”) is uttered three times in this regard; in comparison, in Lahore, a local healer advised to recite the *basmala* twenty-one times and then blow on the wound. Another symbolic action held to be efficacious in Iran is to keep a hazel nut and some almonds on the body in order to protect it from scorpion bites (MASSÉ 1938, 202; ATKINSON 1832, 79). In Afghanistan, “bricks from the shrine of Khwaja Musesfer, ‘the Holy Traveller,’ on the roadside between Kabul and Paghman, are famous throughout the country for their ability magically to repel the scorpions which infest most Afghan homes. These bricks are collected by the shrine keeper, who, for a fee, blesses them and gives them to the pilgrims. The latter, on reaching home, grind the bricks into powder, sprinkling a little over each room, or else sewing some into tiny cloth bags, to be placed on shelves” (SIDKY 1990, 288). It has to be added that holy earth from the shrine is also rubbed on scorpion wounds (EINZMANN 1977, 223). On the subcontinent, the great Muslim saint Mu’in ud-Din Chishti (d. 1236), who is buried in Ajmer (Rajasthan), is considered to be a protector from snake bites and scorpion stings (CURRIE 1989, 109). Throughout North Africa the people believe that the hoopoe successfully attacks scorpions (and snakes). Therefore, in Tunisia, the preserved head of the bird is fixed to the wall to ward off the creatures (VENZLAFF 1994, 46, 72). Tunisians sometimes also use the dried



FIGURE 9. Tattooer's signboard in Lahore.

and powdered meat of the hoopoe as an antidote against scorpion bites (VENZLAFF 1994, 38, 46).

#### *Scorpions as Apotropaic Symbols*

Within the material culture of the Muslim world, one frequently comes across stylized symbolic representations of scorpions—especially on textiles—which serve as objectified magical means to ward off the evil (“evil eye,” scorpion bite, evil spirits appearing in the form of scorpions). Thus, the scorpion appears as an important apotropaic animal, like the snake, lizard, and centipede. A few examples should suffice to emphasize this protective power.

The scorpion motif found on Moroccan women's garments is supposed to protect the wearer not only from actual scorpion bites, but also from sexual transgressions (JEREB 1995, 38, 47; KOROLNIK-ANDERSCH and KOROLNIK 2002, 123, 126–27). In Southern Morocco, the scorpion is depicted on the doors of buildings as well as in the jewellery of the Berbers (PHILIPPS 1995, 569). A number of tribes belonging to this ethnic group, which is settled in the Middle Atlas, also call a specific carpet design *tigherden* (“scorpion”) (RESWICK 1985, 143; CATALOGUE 1989, No. 13). On traditional Tunisian textiles, such as knotted carpets, flatwoven rugs, and embroideries for garments, one can find stylized protective scorpion motifs; often motifs are simply interpreted as depicting the scorpion's bite (RESWICK 1985, 94, 99, plates 6, 10, 14; DOLZ 1999, 45). A particular object “full of magic” is an earthenware dish from the Berber tribe of the Ait Melloul in Morocco (which is kept in the Museum of Ethnology, Rotterdam) showing the painted depictions of a red hand, two eyes,

and two black scorpions (WILLEMSEN 1993, 132, 134). Occasionally, the scorpion also appears in a more natural form in the context of popular *hajj* paintings on the façades of Egyptian houses. In Nubia, embroidered pieces of cloth depicting scorpions are supposed to protect the house from being entered by real scorpions as well as by scorpion-shaped demons (SCHIENERL 1984, 101–102). Similarly, women paint protective scorpions on the façades of their homes. In Palestinian embroidery, one of the patterns is called ‘*aqareb* (“scorpion”’) (EL KHALIDI 1999, App. III, 133). On Near and Middle Eastern carpets, although the



FIGURE 10. Scorpion-shaped lock from Jodhpur (Rajasthan/India).

motif seems to be quite rare, I once saw a unique piece, a small-sized Kirşehir from Western Anatolia (nineteenth century), exhibited by a dealer in Munich, which showed a central apotropaic depiction of a scorpion against a blue, likewise apotropaic, background. By the way, in rural Iran, the scorpion is, together with the lizard, depicted as a female tattoo pattern incised by the midwife of the village. Tattooers in Lahore have the depiction of a scorpion on their signboards (FIGURE 9). Furthermore, the motif of the scorpion is found on Central Asian textiles, for instance on *ikat* weavings from Ferghana, on *suzani* embroideries, and often on the embroideries of the Lakai Uzbeks and Yomut Turkmens.<sup>22</sup> Several scorpion motifs also protect the wearers of embroidered silk belts, such as those traditionally used by Rajput men in the Southern Pakistani province of Sindh.<sup>23</sup> They also appear on particular women’s garments from Cholistan and Southern Punjab which are decorated with silver foil. Finally, in India, symbolic representations of scorpions can be found, for example, on bronze vessels for rice in Bihar (CATALOGUE 1984, 76, 122). More fancy objects are the contemporary locks in the shape of scorpions made particularly by craftsmen in Jodhpur (Rajasthan), an area infested with dangerous black scorpions as big as the palm of the hand (FIGURE 10).

#### CONCLUSION

Among the animals commonly considered to be ugly, dangerous, vicious, but also powerful and often ambivalent, such as the hyena, bat, gecko, snake, and other reptiles as well as insects, it is the scorpion that has in many ways

caught the popular imagination of people in the Muslim world. Because of its poison and its menacing appearance with a hooked sting and large claw-like pincers, the scorpion has been feared from earliest times until now. In folk Islam, it is associated with the hell and seen as an embodiment of demons and evil spirits. But, following the concept of sympathetic magic, this “underworld creature” is also regarded as a powerful guardian and protector to counter other evil forces. In this positive sense, the scorpion variously appears as an apotropaic symbol on ancient and modern pictorial representations, on bronze seals, as well as in contemporary embroideries. The dangerous and terrifying aspects of the animal are particularly emphasized in proverbs, sayings, and folk tales between North Africa and South Asia. This popular imagery has been transformed in didactic stories about Islamic mystics, whereby the scorpion is taken as a symbol for the holy man’s power to master evil and for his immunity to danger. Consequently, in lived practice, the dervish became a specialized healer of scorpion bites. The peculiar anatomy of the scorpion with his hooked sting has inspired the language of physical love. In related proverbs, sayings, and songs, the scorpion represents a metaphor of pain and carnal desire. Due to this sexual imagery, oil extracted from the scorpion’s sting is especially used as a remedy for restoring or increasing virility. But, apart from that, the scorpion plays its most conspicuous role in the field of folk medicine and magic. People are always eager to find antidotes against its painful and venomous bite. Moreover, they try to ward off scorpions using special amulets and by many other magical means and practices. The present paper’s kaleidoscopic view on the folklore of the scorpion in the Muslim world shows how this animal has inspired human imagery in dealing with evil and in expressing experiences of danger, pain, and desire.

#### NOTES

\*The bibliographical material for this article has been compiled over a period of about twelve years; it is supplemented by data collected during various field trips to Tunisia, Pakistan, and India as well as by information provided by a number of Muslim friends and acquaintances.

I would like to thank Dr. Norbert Herrmann (Moosburg) for the photograph of the two fighting scorpions from Afghanistan (FIGURE 4). The other photographs were taken by my friend Alexander Laurenzo (Museum of Ethnology, Munich) and myself.

1. For further information see the website [www.arachnodata.ch/projekte.htm](http://www.arachnodata.ch/projekte.htm) (accessed December 2000).

2. Personal communication by Mrs. Massuma Salah (Kabul).

3. [www.arachnodata.ch/projekte.htm](http://www.arachnodata.ch/projekte.htm) (accessed December 2000); GESSAIN and GILLOT 1983, 166.

4. Compare MASSÉ 1938, 203; ADAMEC 1976, 320 (Kashan). A few years ago, it was reported (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 12 October 2000, p. 16) that, in the town of Taiz in Southern Yemen, a twenty-year old bride was killed in a particular gruesome way, out of rivalry and jealousy, by the second wife of her husband. With the help of a barber, the older woman carefully placed a living, deadly scorpion inside the wedding wig of the young bride. According to local newspaper reports, the girl eventually died of twenty-four scorpion bites.

5. Personal communication by Mrs. Nasrin Schlamminger (Munich).

6. Written communication by Mr. Norbert Herrmann (Moosburg).

7. Probably the last mentioned aspect provides some clue as to why in the Arab world 'Aqrab is, surprisingly, also known as a personal female name (EISENSTEIN 1991, 227). On the protective function of scorpion figures, compare GLADISS (1999, 160) and SCHIENERL (1984, 96–100).

8. Personal communication by Mr. Ejaz Ullah Baig (Baltit/Hunza in Northern Pakistan).

9. Personal communication by Mr. Abdullah (Urumchi/Sinkiang).

10. Personal communication by Mrs. Massuma Salah (Kabul).

11. Personal communication by Mrs. Khadija Baburi (Kabul).

12. There is even a famous graveyard in Peshawar (North-West Frontier Province/Pakistan) called *sudkhor-kabristan* because of the large number of scorpions found there. *Samnaysin* medical practitioners regularly visit this place in order to catch scorpions for their medicine.

13. This resembles the motif of the “knotted snake” found on a number of medieval healing bowls in the Near East (GLADISS 1999, 159–61).

14. Personal communication by Mrs. Nasrin Schlamminger (Munich).

15. Jaina variants of this theme often mention nuns who are stung by scorpions and who are aware that they are going to die. Nevertheless, after the sting, they carefully place the insects into an earthen pot and carry them out of the house. It is in the nature of scorpions to sting and Jains are not allowed to kill animals. The motif of nuns stung by scorpions could also be interpreted as a symbol for sexual temptation and for the transgression of moral rules. (I wish to thank Renate Syed for drawing my attention to these narratives and for discussing the material.)

16. The same motif is found in an Afghan folktale from the Timurid period (fifteenth century) in which an obedient military officer allows himself to be stung several times by a scorpion while listening to the commands of the king (GÖPEL 2002, 203–204).

17. Personal communication by Mrs. Nasrin and Mr. Karl Schlamminger (Munich). Apparently it is possible to build up an immunity to the poison, such as, for example, the young Thai lady Kanchana Ketkaew, known as the “Scorpion Queen,” who managed to live for thirty-two days inside a glass case together with about three thousand poisonous scorpions. During her stay she was stung a total of nine times (*The News/Lahore*, 24 Oct. 2002, 22).

18. Personal communication by Mrs. Massuma Salah (Kabul) and Mr. Osman Salimi (Kabul).

19. In a similar way, tribes of South China were known to prepare a strong poison called *ku*. It is said: “Among the Miao, on the fifth day of the fifth month poisonous animals were put into a pot and were allowed to devour each other. The remaining beast was the *ku*. In dried and pulverized form it was taken in tea or wine. Almost the same is reported for a religious leader of the White Lotos sect during the Ming time in Su-chou (Kiangsu): it had to be the fifth day of the fifth month, and among the animals were centipede, snake, scorpion, and the gecko” (EBERHARD 1968, 149–50).

In other parts of China, the poison known as *wu-tu* consisted of snake, scorpion, centipede, toad, and lizard (personal communication by Mr. Bruno Richtsfeld, Munich). Being

a poison and not an antidote, "it could be used as a love charm with the object of forcing the loved male to come back to the woman. The *ku* could be used also as an evil magic with the object of obtaining subservient spirits. This was done by feeding it to unrelated persons who would either spit blood or whose stomachs would swell because the food they had taken would become alive in their insides, and who would die as a result." (EBERHARD 1968, 152).

20. I wish to express my thanks to Mrs. Hannelore Thöner (Deisenhofen) for permission to study her copy of that treatise.

21. GLADISS 1999; CATALOGUE 1996, 41 (No. 19); GIERLICH 1993, Cat. No. 8; SPOER 1935; compare KRISS and KRISS-HEINRICH 1962, 128, 137; SCHIENERL 1984, 82–83.

22. HARVEY 1996, 31 (ill. No. 32), compare 30 (ill. No. 31), 41, 114; FITZ GIBBON & HALE 1994, 74; ANDREWS 1976, 57; VOK and TAUBE 1994, No. 7.

23. I wish to thank my friend Aasim Akhtar (Islamabad) for giving me the opportunity to see and discuss this piece of folk art, which is part of his own collection.

## REFERENCES CITED

ADAMEC, Ludwig W.

1976 *Historical Gazetteer of Iran. Vol. 1: Tehran and Northwestern Iran*. Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt.

ANDREWS, Mügül and Peter ANDREWS

1976 *Türkmen Needlework: Dressmaking and Embroidery Among the Türkmen of Iran*. London: Central Asian Research Centre.

ATKINSON, James

1832 *Customs and Manners of the Women of Persia and their Domestic Superstitions*. London: John Murray and Parbury, Allen and Co.

BALDICK, Julian

1993 *Imaginary Muslims: The Uwaisi Sufis of Central Asia*. New York: New York University Press.

BARLAS, Uguroł

1974 *Anadolu düğünlerinde büyüsel inanmalar*. Karabük.

BENZ, Ernst

1938 Heilige Narrheit. *Kyrios* 3/1–2: 1–55.

BLISS, Frank

1984 Volkshelkunde in den ägyptischen Oasen der westlichen Wüste. *Curare* 7: 49–60.

BOS, Gerrit

1998 Ibn al-Jazzar on medicine for the poor and destitute. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118/3: 365–75.

BRENTJES, Burchard

1983 *Alte Siegelkunst des Vorderen Orients*. Leipzig: E. A. Seemann.

CARBONI, Stefano

1997 *Following the Stars: Images of the Zodiac in Islamic Art*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

CATALOGUE

1977 *Tibet. Kunst des Buddhismus*. München: Haus der Kunst.

CATALOGUE

1977/1978 *Trésors du musée de Bagdad. 7000 ans d'histoire mésopotamienne*. Mainz: Philipp von Zabern.

## CATALOGUE

- 1984 *Kult und Alltag. Gelbguß in der Volkskunst Indiens*. Heidelberg: Völkerkundemuseum der von-Portheim-Stiftung.

## CATALOGUE

- 1989 *Le nouveau corpus des tapis marocains. Tome II. Les tapis et hanbels du Moyen-Atlas (Béni-M'guild, Zayane, Béni M'tir)*. Casablanca: Ministère de l'Artisanat et des Affaires Sociales.

## CATALOGUE

- 1996 *Sultan, Shah, and Great Mughal: The History and Culture of the Islamic World*. Copenhagen: The National Museum.

## CURRIE, P. M.

- 1989 *The Shrine and Cult of Mu'in al-Din Chishti of Ajmer*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

## CURZON, George N.

- 1892 *Persia and the Persian Question, Vol. II*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co.

## DALLEY, Stephanie

- 1989 *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

## DOLZ, Silvia

- 1999 Produkte des textilen Frauenhandwerks aus Tunesien im kulturellen und historischen Vergleich. *Abhandlungen und Berichte des Staatlichen Museums für Völkerkunde Dresden* 50: 17–59.

## DONALDSON, Bess Allen

- 1937 The Koran as Magic. *The Moslem World* 27: 254–66.

## DOUTTÉ, Edmond

- 1909 *Magie & religion dans l'Afrique du Nord*. Alger: Adolphe Jourdan.

## DURRANI, Farzand Ali

- 1988 *Excavations in the Gomal Valley: Rehman Dheri Excavation Report No. 1*. (Series: Ancient Pakistan VI). Peshawar: Department of Archaeology Peshawar University.

## EBERHARD, Wolfram

- 1968 *The Local Cultures of South and East China*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.

## EINZMANN, Harald

- 1977 *Religiöses Volksbrauchtum in Afghanistan. Islamische Heiligenverehrung und Wallfahrtswesen im Raum Kabul*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner.

## EISENSTEIN, Herbert

- 1991 *Einführung in die arabische Zoographie. Das tierkundliche Wissen in der arabisch-islamischen Literatur*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer.

## FITZ GIBBON, Kate and Andrew HALE

- 1994 Lakai: The Bad Beys of Central Asia. *Hali* 16/3 (issue 75): 69–79, 104.

## FREMBGEN, Jürgen Wasim

- 1999 Musk, Bezoar and Bitumen: Materia Medica in Northern Pakistan. *Hamdard Medicus* 42/1: 24–27.

- 2000 *Reise zu Gott. Sufis und Derwische im Islam*. München: C. H. Beck.

## GESSAIN, Antoine and Michel GILLOT

- 1983 Serpents et scorpions en pays bassari: Craintes et réalité. *Objets et Mondes* 23/1–2: 165–72.

## GIERLICH, Joachim

- 1993 *Drache-Phönix-Doppeladler. Fabelwesen in der islamischen Kunst*. Berlin: Staatl. Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz.

## GILBERTSON, George Waters

- 1932 *The Pakkhto Idiom: A Dictionary*. Vols I, II. Hertford: Stephen Austin & Sons.

- GLADISS, Almut von  
 1999 Medizinische Schalen. Ein islamisches Heilverfahren und seine mittelalterlichen Hilfsmittel. *Damaszener Mitteilungen* 11: 147–61.
- GÖPEL, Kathleen  
 2002 *Tiere des Himmels. Geschichten aus dem Orient*. Kreuzlingen, München: Diederichs.
- GRAMLICH, Richard  
 1976 *Die schiitischen Derwischorden Persien II. Glaube und Lehre*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner.
- GRANOFF, Phyllis  
 1980 Vrśīkodari: A study of the relationship between myth and image in Indian art. *East and West* 30/1–4: 77–96.
- HARVEY, Janet  
 1996 *Traditional Textiles of Central Asia*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- HELLER, Amy  
 n.d. Notes on the symbol of the scorpions in Tibet. Manuscript.
- IBN AL-BAITAR  
 1840 *Große Zusammenstellung über die Kräfte der bekannten einfachen Heil- und Nahrungsmittel von Abu Mohammed Abdallah ben Ahmed aus Malaga bekannt unter dem Namen Ebn Baithar*. Aus dem Arabischen übersetzt von Joseph v. Sontheimer. Vol. 1–2. Stuttgart: Hallberger'sche Verlagshandlung.
- JEREB, James F.  
 1995 *Arts and Crafts of Morocco*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- JEWETT, James Richard  
 1891–1893 Arabic Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 15: 28–120.
- KEIMER, Ludwig  
 1929 Ein Skorpion-Amulett aus dem heutigen Ägypten. *Kemi* 2: 104–106.
- EL KHALIDI, Leila  
 1999 *The Art of Palestinian Embroidery*. London: Saqi Books.
- KNAPPERT, Jan  
 1985 *Islamic Legends: Histories of the Heroes, Saints and Prophets of Islam*. Vol. 1. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- KOROLNIK-ANDERSCH, Annette and Marcel KOROLNIK, eds.  
 2002 *The Color of Henna: Painted Textiles from Southern Morocco*. Stuttgart: Arnoldsche.
- KRISS, Rudolf and Hubert KRISS-HEINRICH  
 1962 *Volksglaube im Bereich des Islam. Vol. II. Amulette, Zauberformeln und Beschwörungen*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- LANE, E. W.  
 1914 *The Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*. London, New York: J. M. Dent and E. P. Dutton. First edition 1836.
- LEGEY, Françoise  
 1935 *The Folklore of Morocco*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- LEWIS, I. M.  
 1989 *Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession*. London, New York: Routledge.
- LOEFFLER, Reinhold  
 1988 *Islam in Practice: Religious Beliefs in a Persian Village*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- MAJUPURIA, Trilok Chandra  
 1991 *Sacred Animals of Nepal and India*. Lashkar/Gwalior.

- MASSÉ, Henri  
 1938 *Croyances et coutumes Persanes*. Paris: G. P. Maisonneuve.
- METCALF, Barbara Daly  
 1992 *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi's bihishti zewar. A Partial Translation with Commentary*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- MÜLLER, Claudius  
 1982 *Der Weg zum Dach der Welt*. München: Pinguin.
- MUZAFAR HUSAIN AWAN, Hakim  
 1995 *Kitab ul-mufardat*. Lahore, Hyderabad, Karachi: Sheikh Ghulam Ali Publ. Twenty-seventh edition.
- NARBESHUBER, R.  
 1904 Anthropologisches aus Süd-Tunesien. *Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien* 34: 1–18, 93–111.
- NEUMANN, Wolfgang  
 1983 *Die Berber. Vielfalt und Einheit einer alten nordafrikanischen Kultur*. Köln: DuMont.
- PARKES, Peter  
 1991 Temple of Imra, Temple of Mahandeu: A Kafir Sanctuary in Kalasha Cosmology. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* LIV/1: 75–103.
- PERROT, Jean  
 2003 L'iconographie de Jiroft. *Les Dossiers d' Archéologie* 287: 97–113.
- PHILIPPS, Tom, ed.  
 1995 *Africa: The Art of a Continent*. London: Royal Academy of Arts.
- RANKIN, Wayne and Jerry G. WALLS  
 1994 *Tarantulas and Scorpions*. Neptune, N.J.: T. F. H. Publications.
- RESWICK, Irmtraud  
 1985 *Traditional Textiles of Tunisia and Related North African Weavings*. Los Angeles: Craft and Folk Art Museum, Los Angeles.
- RHIE, Marylin M. and Robert A. F. THURMAN, eds.  
 1996 *Weisheit und Liebe. 1000 Jahre Kunst des tibetischen Buddhismus*. Bonn: Kunst und Ausstellungshalle.
- RUSHDIE, Salman  
 1996 *Des Mauren letzter Seufzer*. München: Kindler.
- SCHIENERL, Peter W.  
 1983 Amulets in Modern Egypt Drawn from the Collection of the Ethnographic Museum in Cairo. *Ornament* 6/4: 16–20.  
 1984 *Tierdarstellungen im Islam. Am Beispiel des Schmuck- und Amulettwesens*. Göttingen: Edition Herodot.
- SCHOPEN, Armin  
 1983 *Traditionelle Heilmittel im Jemen*. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner.
- SCHULZ, Regine & Kamal Sabri KOLTA  
 1998 Schlangen, Skorpione und feindliche Mächte. Ein koptisch-arabischer Schutzspruch. *Biblische Notizen* 93: 89–104.
- SIDKY, M. H.  
 1990 Malang, sufis, and mystics: An ethnographic and historical study of shamanism in Afghanistan. *Asian Folklore Studies* 49: 275–301.
- SPOER, H. Henry  
 1935 Arabic magic medicinal bowls. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 55: 237–56.
- TARLO, Emma  
 1996 *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India*. London: Hurst.

- TIFFOU, Étienne  
 1993 *Hunza Proverbs*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press.
- ULLMANN, Manfred  
 1997 *Islamic Medicine*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- VENZLAFF, Helga  
 1994 *Al-Hudhud. Eine Untersuchung zur kulturgeschichtlichen Bedeutung des Wiedehopfs im Islam*. Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang.
- VILLOT  
 1888 *Moeurs, coutumes et institutions des indigènes de l'Algérie*. Alger: Adolphe Jourdan.
- VOK, Ignazio & Jakob TAUBE  
 1994 *Suzani. Eine textile Kunst aus Zentralasien*. München: Edition Vok.
- WESTERMARCK, Edward  
 1926 *Ritual and Belief in Morocco. Vol. 1*. London: MacMillan.
- WHITE, Charles  
 1851 *Drei Jahre in Constantinopel oder Sitten und Einrichtungen der Türken*. Stuttgart: Franckh'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung.
- WILLEMSSEN, Marlous  
 1993 A Dish Full of Magic. *Dreaming of Paradise. Islamic Art from the Collection of the Museum of Ethnology Rotterdam*, Catalogue, 132–35. Rotterdam: Martial and Snoeck.
- WINKLER, Hans Alexander  
 1936 *Ägyptische Volkskunde*. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer.
- WUERING, Hans  
 1994 *Märchen aus Babylon*. Frankfurt a.M., Leipzig: Insel.