

The Concept of *Sulūk* in Yogyakarta's *Masangin* Tradition: Reinterpreting the Symbolism of Spiritual Journey

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Abstract

Objective: The *Masangin* tradition at Alun-Alun Kidul, Yogyakarta, has long been understood as a ritual in which blindfolded participants attempt to walk through the narrow passage between two banyan trees in the hope of attaining good fortune or fulfilling personal wishes. This predominantly mythological interpretation has confined scholarly discussions to the domains of folklore, tourism, and Javanese cosmology, leaving its potential relationship with the Sufi concept of *sulūk* largely unexplored. This study therefore aims to reinterpret *Masangin* as a symbolic process of spiritual transformation through the lens of Sufi metaphysics. **Method:** This study employed a qualitative research design using in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis to collect data. The data were analyzed following Creswell's qualitative analysis procedures, including data organization, coding, thematic categorization, interpretation, and the presentation of findings through analytical tables. **Results:** The findings reveal that the *Masangin* tradition embodies a coherent sequence of symbolic stages corresponding to the Sufi spiritual journey (*sulūk*). The blindfold symbolizes detachment from worldly perception (*takhallī*), walking in a straight direction represents steadfastness on the spiritual path (*istiqāmah*), passing between the two banyan trees signifies spiritual striving (*mujāhadah*), maintaining bodily balance reflects the purification of the soul (*tazkiyah al-nafs*), and successfully reaching the destination symbolizes spiritual proximity to God (*qurb ilā Allāh*). These interconnected symbols demonstrate that *Masangin* functions not merely as a cultural ritual but also as a symbolic representation of progressive spiritual formation. **Conclusion:** This study proposes the *Sulūk* Symbolism Framework, which repositions the *Masangin* tradition from a wish-fulfillment myth into a systematic model of Sufi spiritual education. The framework offers a new theoretical perspective for understanding Javanese cultural practices as vehicles for the internalization of Sufi values while enriching scholarly discussions on the intersection between local traditions, Islamic metaphysics, and symbolic spiritual pedagogy.

Keywords: *Masangin* Tradition; *Sulūk*; Sufi Metaphysics; Symbolic Interpretation

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Introduction

The *Masangin* tradition, practiced in *Alun-Alun Kidul* (the Southern Square) of the Yogyakarta Palace, is one of Indonesia's most enduring ritual traditions and continues to attract thousands of participants annually. The ritual requires participants to walk blindfolded through the narrow passage between the two sacred banyan trees known as *Waringin Kurung* while attempting to maintain a straight path. Within popular belief, successfully passing between the trees symbolizes the fulfillment of personal

wishes, prosperity, or future success. Consequently, *Masangin* has become widely recognized as a mystical tradition associated with supernatural expectations rather than as a philosophical or spiritual practice. This dominant public perception has also influenced academic discourse, where *Masangin* is generally examined through the perspectives of folklore, cultural tourism, intangible cultural heritage, and Javanese cosmology, while its deeper relationship with Islamic spirituality remains insufficiently explored (Amrozi, 2021; Hakam, 2017; Tohari, 2023).

Studies on Javanese Islam indicate that ritual traditions should not merely be understood as remnants of indigenous mysticism but rather as products of a long historical dialogue between Javanese cosmology and Islamic teachings during the process of Islamization. Geertz (1960) interpreted Javanese religiosity as a syncretic interaction between Islam and indigenous beliefs. In contrast, Woodward's reinterpretation, discussed by Amrozi (2021), argues that many Javanese ritual traditions represent legitimate expressions of Islamic religiosity rather than deviations from normative Islam. Likewise, Hakam (2017) and Tohari (2023) emphasize that ritual practices embody ethical, educational, and religious values that function as media for internalizing Islamic teachings within local communities. These perspectives suggest that *Masangin* should not simply be interpreted as a cultural myth but also as a symbolic representation of inner spiritual transformation.

The relationship between Javanese ritual traditions and Islamic spirituality has received increasing scholarly attention from anthropological, religious, and Sufi perspectives. Kurniaawati (2021) argues that Javanese rituals are the product of continuous interaction between Islamic teachings and local cultural traditions, resulting in a distinctive form of Javanese religiosity. Similarly, Kabelen et al. (2024) interpret ritual traditions as manifestations of cultural ecology that express symbolic relationships among humans, nature, and society. Nur 'Afifah and Fitra (2025) further demonstrate that ritual practices within the Yogyakarta Palace continue to preserve cosmological, ethical, and religious values despite the pressures of globalization. From the perspective of Islamic mysticism, Yasinatul et al. (2025) explain that Javanese traditions constitute a dynamic arena in which Sufism and local mysticism interact to facilitate spiritual transformation. Complementing these cultural approaches, Yani et al. (2026) argues that Sufi symbolism should be interpreted as an educational instrument that cultivates inner awareness rather than as a mystical mechanism promising supernatural power. Meanwhile, Fathan et al. (2025) identify *murāqabah*, *jihād al-nafs*, *ikhhlās*, *taqwā*, and *ṣabr* as the principal Qur'anic dimensions of *tazkiyah al-nafs*, whereas Ibrahim et al. (2025) demonstrate that *tazkiyah al-nafs* functions as a continuous educational process that develops ethical character, emotional maturity, and spiritual consciousness.

Although these studies significantly advance the understanding of Javanese ritual traditions, Islamic spirituality, and Sufi education, they remain fragmented in their analytical focus. Existing research generally discusses cultural acculturation, heritage

preservation, symbolic anthropology, religious identity, or moral education independently. Consequently, the philosophical relationship between ritual symbolism and Islamic metaphysics remains insufficiently theorized. More specifically, no previous study has systematically interpreted the *Masangin* tradition through an integrated epistemological framework that combines the Sufi concept of *sulūk* with the Qur'anic process of *tazkiyah al-nafs*. This theoretical limitation leaves the educational and spiritual meanings embedded within the ritual symbols largely unexplored.

Within the intellectual tradition of Sufism, *sulūk* refers to the disciplined spiritual journey undertaken by a *sālik* (spiritual seeker) to attain closeness to God through continuous self-purification, ethical discipline, remembrance (*dhikr*), and sustained spiritual practice. Rather than describing physical movement alone, *sulūk* represents an existential transformation in which outward actions symbolize the gradual purification of the inner self. Knysh (2017) explains that the Sufi path fundamentally involves overcoming the ego through continuous moral discipline, while Elias (1998) argues that classical Sufi masters understand this journey as a gradual ascent toward *ma'rifah* (gnostic knowledge) and intimate awareness of the Divine. Reinforcing this perspective, Yani et al. (2026) emphasizes that Sufi symbols function primarily as educational media directing individuals toward inner awareness rather than supernatural expectations. Likewise, Fathan et al. (2025) and Ibrahim et al. (2025) explain that *tazkiyah al-nafs* constitutes the core of Qur'anic spiritual education by cultivating *murāqabah*, *jihād al-nafs*, *ikhhlās*, *taqwā*, and *ṣabr*, thereby shaping ethical integrity, emotional maturity, and spiritual consciousness. Accordingly, ritual symbols should be understood as pedagogical instruments that guide individuals through successive stages of self-transformation rather than as magical objects or miraculous practices.

Viewed from this perspective, the *Masangin* tradition can be reinterpreted as a symbolic pedagogy of *sulūk*. The blindfold symbolizes liberation from sensory illusion and excessive dependence on worldly perception; walking in a straight line reflects *istiqāmah* (steadfastness) in moral commitment; passing between the twin banyan trees represents *mujāhadah al-nafs*, the struggle against egocentric desires; and maintaining bodily balance throughout the journey illustrates the continuous practice of *tazkiyah al-nafs*, requiring patience, humility, self-control, and emotional discipline. Accordingly, successfully completing the ritual signifies not the miraculous fulfillment of worldly wishes but the attainment of inner tranquility (*tuma'nīnah*), moral equilibrium, and increasing proximity to God (*qurb ilā Allāh*). These symbolic correspondences reveal that *Masangin* may function as a form of indigenous spiritual pedagogy in which ritual actions become educational media for moral and spiritual formation.

Despite these philosophical correspondences, existing scholarship has not systematically examined the symbolic structure of the *Masangin* tradition through the

integrated framework of *sulūk* and *tazkiyah al-nafs*. This study therefore addresses an important theoretical gap by proposing a reinterpretation of *Masangin* as a model of Sufi spiritual pedagogy that bridges Javanese ritual symbolism, Islamic metaphysics, and the philosophy of religious education. By integrating perspectives from anthropology, Islamic studies, and Sufi epistemology, this study contributes to expanding contemporary discussions on the educational significance of local ritual traditions while offering an alternative interpretation that moves beyond mystical and folkloric explanations toward a deeper understanding of spiritual transformation

Method

This study employed a qualitative interpretive research design to explore the philosophical meanings embedded in the *Masangin* tradition practiced at *Alun-Alun Kidul*, Yogyakarta. Rather than examining the ritual as a supernatural phenomenon or a tourism attraction, the study positioned *Masangin* as a symbolic cultural text whose meanings are socially constructed and continuously reproduced through historical, cultural, and religious interactions. A qualitative interpretive approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' lived experiences, symbolic expressions, and spiritual interpretations rather than to measure observable variables quantitatively. This analytical orientation is grounded in interpretivist philosophy, which assumes that cultural practices contain multiple layers of meaning that can only be understood through contextual interpretation and dialogue between empirical evidence and theoretical reflection (Creswell, 2023; Denzin & Lincoln, 2022).

The study was conducted at *Alun-Alun Kidul* of the Yogyakarta Sultanate, the principal site where the *Masangin* tradition continues to be practiced. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that each informant possessed substantial knowledge of the ritual's historical development, cultural significance, or religious interpretation. The participants comprised palace cultural custodians (*abdi dalem*), Islamic scholars specializing in Sufism, Javanese cultural experts, local historians, community elders, and individuals who had repeatedly participated in the *Masangin* ritual. These diverse perspectives enabled the researcher to compare popular interpretations with philosophical and religious explanations, thereby enriching the credibility and depth of the findings. Participant recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, indicating that additional interviews no longer generated substantially new conceptual insights (Merriam & Tisdell, 2023; Patton, 2022).

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: semi-structured in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews explored participants' understandings of the symbolic meanings associated with blindfolding, walking between the twin banyan trees, maintaining bodily

balance, following a straight path, and beliefs concerning wish fulfillment. Participant observation enabled the researcher to document ritual sequences, participant interactions, bodily movements, and spatial arrangements while maintaining comprehensive field notes throughout the observation process. Documentary sources included historical manuscripts, publications on the Yogyakarta Sultanate, previous scholarly studies, palace cultural archives, and literature on Sufi metaphysics and Islamic philosophy. The integration of these multiple data sources facilitated methodological triangulation and strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings (Bowen, 2009; Yin, 2021).

Data analysis followed the qualitative analytical procedures proposed by Creswell and Poth (2024), consisting of six iterative stages: organizing the data, reading and familiarizing with interview transcripts and field notes, conducting open coding, developing conceptual categories, interpreting emergent themes, and presenting the findings through analytical narratives and tables. During the coding process, symbolic expressions associated with the ritual were identified and grouped into broader conceptual categories based on recurring patterns across participants. These categories were subsequently interpreted using the theoretical framework of Sufi metaphysics, particularly the concept of *sulūk*, to examine how the ritual symbols correspond to successive stages of spiritual transformation. The analytical process remained iterative throughout the study, allowing empirical evidence and theoretical interpretation to interact continuously until coherent themes emerged that explained the philosophical structure underlying the *Masangin* tradition (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Saldaña, 2021).

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the study, the four criteria of qualitative research quality proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985)—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—were systematically implemented. Credibility was established through source triangulation, prolonged engagement in the field, and member checking with selected participants. Transferability was enhanced by providing rich descriptions of the research setting, ritual context, and participant characteristics. Dependability was maintained through systematic documentation of research procedures, coding decisions, and analytical memos to ensure methodological transparency. Confirmability was strengthened by maintaining a reflexive audit trail that clearly distinguished empirical observations from philosophical interpretations throughout the analytical process. Collectively, these procedures ensured that the proposed *Sulūk Symbolism Framework* emerged inductively from empirical evidence while remaining conceptually grounded within the broader discourse of Sufi philosophy and symbolic interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2022).

Result and Discussion

The qualitative analysis revealed that the *Masangin* tradition cannot be adequately understood as a ritual promising the fulfillment of personal wishes, as it is commonly

portrayed in public discourse. Instead, participants consistently described the ritual as an experience requiring concentration, emotional regulation, self-discipline, and inner awareness. Interviews with palace cultural custodians (*abdi dalem*), Islamic scholars, and local historians indicated that the symbolic meaning of *Masangin* has gradually shifted from a sacred practice of self-reflection toward a tourism-oriented attraction that emphasizes mystical expectations. Nevertheless, the *abdi dalem* consistently emphasized that the original philosophical significance of the ritual lies not in obtaining supernatural blessings but in cultivating moral integrity, spiritual awareness, and ethical discipline through embodied practice (Endraswara, 2023; Woodward, 2021). These findings indicate that the contemporary belief in wish fulfillment represents a popular reinterpretation rather than the ritual's original spiritual purpose.

The coding process generated five interrelated symbolic themes that closely correspond to the Sufi concept of *sulūk*. The first theme, blindfolding, was consistently interpreted by participants as an intentional act of relinquishing dependence on sensory perception. Rather than symbolizing a magical practice, covering the eyes represents the willingness to detach oneself from worldly distractions and material illusions. Palace cultural custodians explained that participants who relied exclusively on physical vision often failed to maintain their direction, whereas those who cultivated calmness, trust, and inner awareness were more likely to complete the journey successfully. Within Sufi philosophy, this symbolic action corresponds to *takhallī*, namely the purification of the self through detachment from egocentric desires and excessive attachment to the material world (Chittick, 2022; Nasr, 2022). The empirical findings therefore suggest that blindness functions not as a physical limitation but as a metaphor for spiritual awakening.

The second and third themes emerged from participants' movements while crossing the sacred space. Maintaining a straight direction symbolized *istiqāmah*, reflecting perseverance, ethical consistency, and steadfast commitment despite uncertainty. Simultaneously, successfully passing between the two banyan trees represented *mujāhadah al-naḥs*, the continuous struggle against the ego and personal desires. Interview data revealed that participants frequently deviated from the intended path because they unconsciously followed fear, external voices, or subjective assumptions rather than maintaining inner balance. Islamic scholars participating in this study interpreted these deviations as symbolic representations of human susceptibility to temptation, emotional instability, and egocentric impulses. This interpretation reinforces the Sufi understanding that the greatest obstacle encountered during the spiritual journey originates within the self rather than from external circumstances (Al-Qushayrī, 2021; Knysh, 2024). Accordingly, the twin banyan trees symbolize not a gateway to supernatural fortune but a threshold of moral discipline and spiritual transformation.

The fourth and fifth themes emphasized the significance of bodily equilibrium and the successful completion of the ritual. Participants consistently associated physical balance with emotional stability, patience, humility, self-control, and ethical restraint. These qualities correspond to *tazkiyah al-nafs*, the continuous purification of the soul through disciplined moral conduct. Likewise, reaching the endpoint of the ritual was never interpreted by the *abdi dalem* as evidence that personal wishes would inevitably be fulfilled. Instead, it was understood as the successful completion of an inner process characterized by sincerity (*ikhhlāṣ*), trust in God (*tawakkul*), and increasing spiritual maturity. Within the framework of Sufi metaphysics, this final stage reflects *qurb ilā Allāh*, referring to spiritual proximity to God rather than material achievement or miraculous intervention (Izutsu, 2022; Schimmel, 2021). Consequently, the empirical evidence challenges the dominant mythological narrative by demonstrating that *Masangin* primarily communicates spiritual ethics, moral formation, and self-transformation rather than supernatural promises.

Table 1. Masangin Tradition as Sulūk Symbolism

Ritual Element	Empirical Findings	Sufi Concept	Philosophical Meaning	Spiritual Value
Blindfold	Participants voluntarily relinquish visual control	<i>Takhallī</i>	Detachment from worldly illusion	Self-awareness and humility
Walking Straight	Maintaining direction despite uncertainty	<i>Istiqāmah</i>	Moral consistency and perseverance	Integrity and commitment
Passing Between Twin Banyan Trees	Overcoming fear and distraction	<i>Mujāhadah al-Nafs</i>	Struggle against the ego	Patience and resilience
Maintaining Balance	Controlling body and emotions simultaneously	<i>Tazkiyah al-Nafs</i>	Purification of the soul	Emotional discipline and self-control
Reaching the Destination	Completion of the symbolic journey	<i>Qurb ilā Allāh</i>	Spiritual proximity to God	Inner peace and spiritual maturity

The analytical framework demonstrates that each stage of the *Masangin* ritual systematically corresponds to a distinct phase of the Sufi spiritual journey (*sulūk*). Rather than functioning as isolated ritual acts, the five symbolic elements constitute an integrated process of spiritual education. The sequence begins with detachment from sensory illusion (*takhallī*), continues through ethical steadfastness (*istiqāmah*) and the struggle against the ego (*mujāhadah al-nafs*), progresses toward the purification of the soul (*tazkiyah al-nafs*), and culminates in spiritual proximity to God (*qurb ilā Allāh*). This sequential structure indicates that *Masangin* operates as a symbolic pedagogy of inner transformation rather than as a ritual guaranteeing the fulfillment of supernatural wishes. Based on these findings, this study proposes the *Sulūk Symbolism Framework*,

which reconceptualizes *Masangin* as a structured model of Sufi spiritual education embedded within the Javanese cultural tradition.

The findings further demonstrate that the *Masangin* tradition should no longer be interpreted solely through dominant narratives of wish fulfillment, mystical belief, or cultural tourism. Instead, the empirical evidence indicates that the ritual functions as a symbolic process of ethical cultivation and spiritual transformation. This reinterpretation challenges the prevailing assumption that *Masangin* derives its significance from supernatural efficacy. Rather, its enduring relevance lies in the way it encodes philosophical teachings within embodied ritual practices, enabling participants to experience moral discipline, self-control, and existential reflection through symbolic movement. Similar arguments have been advanced in studies of ritual symbolism, which emphasize that sacred rituals preserve systems of meaning that transcend literal belief by communicating ethical and metaphysical principles through symbolic action (Bell, 2022; Geertz, 2021). Consequently, *Masangin* may be understood as a pedagogical ritual whose primary function is not to predict destiny but to cultivate spiritual consciousness.

From the perspective of Islamic philosophy, this reinterpretation is particularly significant because it reconnects *Masangin* with the historical encounter between Javanese culture and Sufism. Since the Islamization of Java, Sufi teachings have frequently been transmitted through local cultural symbols rather than exclusively through doctrinal instruction. The integration of Islamic spirituality into palace traditions produced symbolic practices capable of conveying ethical values while remaining culturally recognizable. Historical studies demonstrate that the Yogyakarta Sultanate adopted numerous cultural expressions reflecting Islamic cosmology without eliminating pre-existing Javanese philosophical traditions (Ricklefs, 2022; Woodward, 2021). Accordingly, interpreting *Masangin* through the concept of *sulūk* is historically plausible because it aligns with the broader pattern through which Sufi metaphysics became embedded within Javanese ritual life.

The empirical findings also reveal that each ritual element possesses an internally coherent symbolic relationship rather than functioning as an isolated cultural performance. The blindfold, the straight pathway, the twin banyan trees, bodily balance, and the final destination collectively constitute a sequential structure that parallels the progressive stages of spiritual education described in classical Sufi literature. This structural coherence distinguishes *Masangin* from ordinary folk rituals because its symbolic order reflects an educational process rather than a collection of independent ceremonial acts. Comparable observations have been reported in phenomenological studies of ritual, which argue that bodily practices function as outward manifestations of inner consciousness, ethical cultivation, and spiritual formation (Merleau-Ponty, 2022; Nasr, 2022). Therefore, the symbolic structure of *Masangin* should be interpreted holistically rather than by examining each ritual element in isolation.

Another important implication concerns the transformation of public understanding. Contemporary participants frequently approach *Masangin* with expectations of miraculous outcomes or material fortune, largely influenced by tourism promotion, social media narratives, and oral folklore. Such interpretations gradually obscure the philosophical dimensions embedded within the ritual itself. Interviews conducted in this study indicate that palace cultural custodians (*abdi dalem*) consistently distinguish between symbolic meaning and literal belief, emphasizing that the value of *Masangin* lies in cultivating self-discipline rather than obtaining supernatural rewards. This distinction resonates with broader discussions in symbolic anthropology, which argue that ritual meanings are often simplified when transmitted through popular culture, thereby diminishing their deeper metaphysical significance (Endraswara, 2023; Turner, 2021). Reconstructing the philosophical meaning of *Masangin* therefore contributes not only to preserving Javanese cultural heritage but also to revitalizing the intellectual legacy of Islamic spirituality embedded within local traditions.

Most importantly, the present study extends existing scholarship by proposing a new conceptual interpretation that integrates empirical observations with Sufi metaphysics. Previous studies have generally described *Masangin* as a form of cultural heritage, local wisdom, or mystical tradition. In contrast, this study demonstrates that the ritual embodies a systematic model of spiritual formation structured around the principles of *sulūk*. This theoretical shift moves the discussion beyond descriptive cultural analysis toward a philosophical explanation of ritual symbolism grounded in Islamic spirituality. Accordingly, the proposed *Sulūk Symbolism Framework* contributes to contemporary debates in Islamic philosophy, ritual studies, and cultural hermeneutics by demonstrating that local traditions can function as sophisticated pedagogical media for transmitting spiritual knowledge. The following discussion elaborates this contribution through three analytical perspectives: (1) the concept of *sulūk* in the *Masangin* tradition of Yogyakarta, (2) the reinterpretation of ritual symbolism as a spiritual journey, and (3) the *Sulūk Symbolism Framework* as a philosophical model integrating Sufi metaphysics with Javanese ritual symbolism.

The Concept of *Sulūk* in the *Masangin* Tradition of Yogyakarta

The empirical findings demonstrate that the *Masangin* tradition represents more than a ritual performance embedded within Javanese cultural heritage; it constitutes a symbolic process that reflects the fundamental principles of *sulūk* within the Sufi intellectual tradition. In classical Sufism, *sulūk* refers to the gradual spiritual journey undertaken by a *sālik* (spiritual seeker) to attain closeness to God through self-discipline, ethical purification, and continuous remembrance (*dhikr*). This journey is neither instantaneous nor miraculous; rather, it requires sustained moral struggle, spiritual commitment, and continuous self-transformation (Al-Qushayrī, 2021; Chittick, 2022). The empirical findings revealed that participants who successfully

completed the *Masangin* ritual consistently emphasized concentration, sincerity, patience, emotional stability, and self-control rather than supernatural intervention. These findings indicate that the ritual embodies the essential characteristics of *sulūk*, in which outward movement becomes a visible manifestation of an inward process of spiritual refinement. Accordingly, *Masangin* should be understood not as a ritual for obtaining extraordinary fortune but as a symbolic exercise that cultivates spiritual awareness, ethical responsibility, and inner transformation.

A significant finding of this study is that the symbolic structure of *Masangin* closely parallels the sequential stages of Sufi spiritual education. The ritual begins with blindfolding, which participants consistently described as a condition of uncertainty that requires reliance on inner awareness rather than sensory perception. Within Sufi metaphysics, this condition corresponds to *takhallī*, namely the process of emptying the heart of arrogance, attachment, illusion, and excessive dependence on worldly perception (Knysh, 2024; Nasr, 2022). Rather than merely obstructing physical vision, the blindfold symbolizes liberation from the dominance of the senses, enabling the spiritual seeker to rely upon inner consciousness instead of material certainty. This interpretation is reinforced by interviews with palace cultural custodians (*abdi dalem*), who explained that participants often fail because they place greater trust in external assumptions than in inner composure. Consequently, the blindfold functions as an educational symbol that cultivates humility, surrender, and awareness of human limitations before embarking upon the spiritual journey.

The subsequent stages of walking in a straight direction and passing between the twin banyan trees further illustrate the ethical dimension of *sulūk*. Maintaining a straight path despite the inability to see symbolizes *istiqāmah*, reflecting steadfast commitment to righteousness amid uncertainty and temptation. Meanwhile, passing through the narrow passage between the twin banyan trees represents *mujāhadah al-nafs*, the continuous struggle against egoistic desires that hinder spiritual development (Izutsu, 2022; Schimmel, 2021). Participants acknowledged that fear, overconfidence, and external distractions frequently caused them to deviate from the intended path. From the perspective of Sufi philosophy, these obstacles are not accidental but instead reflect the existential reality that the greatest barriers to spiritual growth originate within the self rather than from external circumstances. Accordingly, the ritual transforms physical movement into a metaphor for ethical perseverance and spiritual discipline, emphasizing that the path toward God requires sustained inner struggle rather than miraculous assistance.

Another important contribution of the findings concerns the relationship between bodily balance and spiritual purification. Participant observation revealed that individuals who remained calm and maintained bodily equilibrium were more likely to complete the ritual successfully than those who reacted impulsively to surrounding voices or emotional pressure. This observation corresponds to the Sufi concept of *tazkiyah al-nafs*, which emphasizes the purification of the soul through self-control,

patience, sincerity, and emotional discipline (Al-Ghazālī, 2021; Nasr, 2022). In this context, physical balance should not be interpreted merely as a motor skill but as an embodied manifestation of inner harmony. The ritual therefore teaches that external stability reflects internal purification, illustrating the inseparable relationship between ethical conduct and spiritual maturity. These findings challenge the popular assumption that success in *Masangin* depends upon luck or mystical power, demonstrating instead that disciplined character formation constitutes the central philosophical message of the tradition.

Taken together, these findings indicate that *Masangin* embodies a coherent model of *sulūk*, in which each ritual sequence represents a successive stage of spiritual formation. Unlike previous studies that primarily interpreted *Masangin* as folklore, cultural tourism, or local wisdom, the present study demonstrates that the ritual functions as an indigenous pedagogy of Islamic spirituality grounded in symbolic action. The novelty of this interpretation lies in identifying *Masangin* as a localized expression of Sufi spiritual education, whereby the ritual sequence systematically mirrors the successive stages of *takhallī*, *istiqāmah*, *mujāhadah al-nafs*, *tazkiyah al-nafs*, and ultimately *qurb ilā Allāh*. This conceptualization expands contemporary discussions of Sufi philosophy by demonstrating that spiritual knowledge can be transmitted not only through textual traditions but also through culturally embedded ritual practices. Consequently, *Masangin* should be understood as a dynamic philosophical tradition that integrates Javanese cultural symbolism with the metaphysical principles of Islamic spirituality, thereby enriching scholarly discussions in ritual studies, Islamic philosophy, and Sufi metaphysics.

Reinterpreting the Symbolism of the Spiritual Journey

The reinterpretation of the *Masangin* tradition proposed in this study begins by questioning the dominant assumption that the ritual primarily functions as a means of obtaining good fortune or fulfilling personal wishes. The empirical evidence indicates that this popular interpretation has been shaped largely by oral traditions, tourism promotion, and contemporary media representations rather than by the philosophical worldview preserved within the Yogyakarta Palace. Interviews with *abdi dalem* (palace cultural custodians) and cultural historians consistently revealed that the ritual was originally intended to cultivate self-control, humility, and moral reflection through symbolic action rather than to promise supernatural intervention (Endraswara, 2023; Woodward, 2021). This distinction is important because it shifts the interpretive focus from external outcomes to the process of inner transformation. From the perspective of Sufi philosophy, rituals function as educational rather than magical practices, guiding individuals to cultivate ethical character through disciplined spiritual training. Accordingly, *Masangin* should be understood as a symbolic narrative of spiritual formation in which every ritual act conveys ethical and metaphysical principles rather than literal supernatural efficacy.

The first symbolic reinterpretation concerns the blindfold, which is commonly regarded as merely a procedural element of the ritual. The present findings demonstrate that the blindfold represents an epistemological transition from dependence on sensory perception to the cultivation of inner awareness. Participants repeatedly reported that once visual perception was removed, they became increasingly attentive to their breathing, bodily movements, emotional stability, and inner confidence. These experiences closely correspond to the Sufi principle of *takhallī*, whereby the spiritual seeker intentionally detaches from worldly attachments, illusions, and egocentric perception before embarking upon the spiritual journey (Al-Qushayrī, 2021; Chittick, 2022). In this context, blindness does not symbolize ignorance but rather the suspension of material certainty in order to cultivate deeper spiritual perception. Consequently, the blindfold functions as a metaphor for epistemological purification, reminding participants that genuine knowledge is acquired not only through the physical senses but also through moral consciousness and spiritual insight.

The second reinterpretation concerns the symbolic meaning of walking in a straight direction and passing between the twin banyan trees. Rather than representing a test of luck or mystical ability, the empirical findings indicate that these actions symbolize the ethical demands of remaining steadfast on the path toward God. Maintaining a straight course despite uncertainty reflects the Sufi virtue of *istiqāmah*, emphasizing perseverance, consistency, and unwavering commitment to righteousness. Likewise, the narrow passage between the banyan trees represents *mujāhadah al-naḥs*, the continuous struggle against fear, pride, hesitation, and selfish desire (Knysh, 2024; Nasr, 2022). Participants acknowledged that the greatest challenge was not the physical distance but the difficulty of regulating emotional responses under conditions of uncertainty. This finding reinforces the Sufi understanding that the principal obstacles to spiritual development originate within the self rather than from external circumstances. Therefore, the twin banyan trees should be interpreted not as magical objects but as symbolic thresholds separating ordinary consciousness from disciplined spiritual awareness.

The reinterpretation further demonstrates that bodily balance and reaching the final destination symbolize the culmination of spiritual education rather than the attainment of worldly success. Participant observation revealed that individuals who maintained composure, patience, and controlled movement were more likely to complete the ritual successfully than those who relied primarily on speed or self-confidence. These observations correspond to the Sufi principle of *tazkiyah al-naḥs*, according to which spiritual progress is achieved through the continuous purification of the soul and mastery over emotional impulses (Al-Ghazālī, 2021; Schimmel, 2021). Completing the journey therefore represents *qurb ilā Allāh*, the attainment of spiritual proximity to God, characterized by inner tranquility (*ṭuma'nīnah*), sincerity (*ikhhlās*), and trust in God (*tawakkul*). Within this interpretive framework, the destination

symbolizes the realization of spiritual maturity rather than the fulfillment of material aspirations. Consequently, the meaning of success in *Masangin* is transformed from an external reward into an expression of inner transformation and ethical refinement.

To synthesize these findings, this study proposes a comprehensive symbolic reinterpretation of *Masangin* by integrating empirical observations with the sequential stages of *sulūk*. Unlike previous studies that examined individual ritual symbols in isolation, the present research demonstrates that *Masangin* operates as a coherent sequence of interconnected spiritual experiences. The novelty of this reinterpretation lies in demonstrating that the ritual constitutes a complete symbolic journey of Sufi education, in which every ritual element systematically corresponds to a distinct phase of spiritual transformation. This framework extends existing scholarship on ritual symbolism by demonstrating that local cultural traditions can preserve sophisticated metaphysical concepts without requiring explicit theological instruction. Consequently, *Masangin* should no longer be interpreted merely as a mystical tradition or a cultural attraction but as an embodied philosophy of spiritual formation that harmonizes Javanese symbolic heritage with the ethical and metaphysical foundations of Islamic Sufism.

Table 2. Reinterpretation of the Spiritual Symbolism in the *Masangin* Tradition

Ritual Symbol	Conventional Interpretation	Reinterpreted Meaning in <i>Sulūk</i>	Sufi Principle	Spiritual Outcome
Blindfold	Ritual requirement	Detachment from sensory illusion	<i>Takhallī</i>	Self-awareness and humility
Straight Path	Walking challenge	Moral steadfastness	<i>Istiḳāmah</i>	Ethical consistency
Twin Banyan Trees	Sacred objects granting wishes	Threshold of inner struggle	<i>Mujāhadah al-naḥs</i>	Victory over the ego
Bodily Balance	Physical coordination	Purification of the heart and emotions	<i>Tazkiyah al-naḥs</i>	Emotional maturity
Final Destination	Wish fulfillment	Spiritual proximity to God	<i>Qurb ilā Allāh</i>	Inner peace and spiritual realization

The table illustrates a paradigmatic shift in understanding the *Masangin* tradition. Each ritual symbol, commonly interpreted through mythological belief, acquires a deeper philosophical meaning when examined through the framework of *Sulūk*. The ritual sequence forms a progressive educational process in which participants symbolically move from self-detachment toward spiritual realization. This reinterpretation demonstrates that *Masangin* is not centered on supernatural promises but on cultivating ethical discipline, spiritual awareness, and inner

transformation. The integrated symbolic structure provides the conceptual foundation for the *Sulūk* Symbolism Framework, which constitutes the principal theoretical contribution of this study.

The *Sulūk* Symbolism Framework: Integrating Sufi Metaphysics with the *Masangin* Tradition

The empirical findings and philosophical reinterpretation presented in this study culminate in the development of the *Sulūk* Symbolism Framework, a conceptual model that explains the *Masangin* tradition as a structured process of Sufi spiritual education embedded within Javanese ritual culture. Unlike previous studies, which have primarily interpreted *Masangin* as an isolated cultural performance, this framework demonstrates that the ritual comprises a coherent sequence of symbolic stages that guide participants from sensory awareness toward spiritual consciousness. The framework does not claim that *Masangin* originated directly from formal Sufi doctrine. Rather, it argues that the symbolic structure of the ritual closely corresponds to the metaphysical logic of *sulūk*, whereby outward actions function as pedagogical instruments for inner transformation (Chittick, 2022; Nasr, 2022). Accordingly, *Masangin* may be understood as an indigenous model of spiritual pedagogy that integrates Javanese cultural symbolism with the universal ethical and metaphysical principles of Islam.

A major theoretical implication of this framework is its reconstruction of the relationship between ritual, symbolism, and spiritual epistemology. Classical Sufi philosophy maintains that genuine knowledge (*maʿrifah*) cannot be attained solely through rational inquiry but must emerge through lived spiritual experience, ethical discipline, and the continuous purification of the soul (Al-Ghazālī, 2021; Izutsu, 2022). The findings indicate that *Masangin* embodies this epistemological principle by transforming bodily movement into a medium of self-knowledge and spiritual reflection. Walking without sight compels participants to confront uncertainty, regulate their emotions, and cultivate trust in inner awareness rather than external certainty. The ritual therefore functions as a practical exercise in spiritual epistemology, through which knowledge is acquired by means of disciplined experience rather than abstract instruction. This interpretation extends existing discussions of ritual symbolism by demonstrating that embodied cultural practices can serve as alternative modes of philosophical inquiry and spiritual learning.

The framework also contributes to broader debates concerning the relationship between Islam and local culture. Contemporary scholarship frequently positions Islamic teachings and indigenous traditions as competing or even contradictory systems. However, the present findings suggest that *Masangin* exemplifies a process of cultural integration rather than theological conflict. The ritual preserves Javanese symbolic forms while simultaneously expressing values that are consistent with Sufi

ethics, including humility (*tawāḍu'*), sincerity (*ikhlaṣ*), steadfastness (*istiqāmah*), self-discipline (*mujāhadah al-naḥs*), and reliance upon God (*tawakkul*) (Ricklefs, 2022; Woodward, 2021). This synthesis demonstrates that local traditions can function as effective cultural media for transmitting Islamic spiritual values without requiring the abandonment of indigenous symbolic expressions. Consequently, *Masangin* represents an important example of how Islamic metaphysical principles become localized through cultural practice while preserving their essential ethical orientation.

Another important contribution of the *Sulūk* Symbolism Framework concerns the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. Contemporary tourism narratives predominantly emphasize the mystical attraction of wish fulfillment, encouraging visitors to interpret the ritual through expectations of supernatural intervention rather than philosophical reflection. Such narratives risk reducing *Masangin* to a commercial spectacle while obscuring its educational and spiritual significance. The findings of this study suggest that heritage preservation should extend beyond safeguarding physical spaces and ritual performances to include the preservation of the symbolic knowledge embedded within these traditions (Harrison, 2023; Smith, 2021). Reframing *Masangin* as a model of spiritual education enables cultural institutions, educators, and religious communities to communicate its ethical and philosophical values more effectively to younger generations. In this respect, the *Sulūk* Symbolism Framework offers not only a theoretical contribution but also a practical strategy for preserving the philosophical integrity of Javanese cultural heritage in the context of globalization.

The principal novelty of this research lies in the formulation of the *Sulūk* Symbolism Framework, a conceptual model that has not previously been identified in scholarship on the *Masangin* tradition. Earlier studies generally interpreted *Masangin* through the perspectives of folklore, cultural tourism, local wisdom, or Javanese cosmology. In contrast, the present study reconstructs *Masangin* as a sequential model of Sufi spiritual formation grounded in empirical evidence. The proposed framework demonstrates that the ritual follows a systematic progression through the stages of *takhallī* (detachment from worldly illusion), *istiqāmah* (moral steadfastness), *mujāhadah al-naḥs* (the struggle against the ego), *tazkiyah al-naḥs* (purification of the soul), and ultimately *qurb ilā Allāh* (spiritual proximity to God). Accordingly, this study contributes to the fields of Islamic philosophy, Sufi metaphysics, ritual studies, and cultural hermeneutics by offering a new conceptual framework for interpreting indigenous religious traditions. Rather than viewing *Masangin* as a myth-centered ritual, the *Sulūk* Symbolism Framework redefines it as a philosophically coherent system of spiritual education that bridges Javanese symbolic traditions with Islamic metaphysical thought.

Table 3. The *Sulūk* Symbolism Framework

Stage of the Ritual	Empirical Observation	Sufi Metaphysical Principle	Educational Function	Philosophical Contribution
Blindfolding	Participants voluntarily surrender visual control	<i>Takhallī</i>	Detachment from worldly illusion	Beginning of spiritual awareness
Walking Straight	Maintaining direction despite uncertainty	<i>Istiqāmah</i>	Moral consistency and perseverance	Formation of ethical character
Passing Between Twin Banyan Trees	Confronting fear, doubt, and distraction	<i>Mujāhadah al-Nafs</i>	Self-discipline and victory over the ego	Transformation through inner struggle
Maintaining Balance	Controlling bodily movement and emotion	<i>Tazkiyah al-Nafs</i>	Purification of the heart	Emotional and spiritual maturity
Reaching the Destination	Completing the ritual with composure	<i>Qurb ilā Allāh</i>	Realization of spiritual consciousness	Attainment of inner peace and divine proximity

Table 3 synthesizes the principal findings into the *Sulūk* Symbolism Framework, illustrating the sequential relationship between empirical ritual practices and the metaphysical stages of *Sulūk*. Each ritual action represents a pedagogical phase through which participants symbolically progress from external perception toward inner spiritual realization. The framework demonstrates that *Masangin* is organized as an integrated educational system rather than a collection of independent ritual acts. The progression from *takhallī* to *qurb ilā Allāh* reflects a coherent process of ethical purification, existential struggle, emotional discipline, and spiritual fulfillment. This sequential model constitutes the central theoretical contribution of the study because it repositions *Masangin* from a popular myth of wish fulfillment into an indigenous model of Sufi spiritual education. Furthermore, the framework provides a transferable analytical model for examining other ritual traditions in Southeast Asia that similarly integrate local cultural symbolism with Islamic metaphysical concepts.

Conclusion

This study addressed the theoretical problem arising from the dominant interpretation of the *Masangin* tradition as a wish-fulfillment ritual rooted in mystical belief, while its philosophical relationship with the Sufi concept of *Sulūk* has remained largely unexplored. Through a qualitative interpretive approach, the findings demonstrate that *Masangin* is more appropriately understood as a symbolic process of spiritual

transformation than as a mechanism for obtaining supernatural blessings. The ritual embodies a coherent sequence of ethical and metaphysical stages, beginning with *takhallī* (detachment from worldly illusion) through blindfolding, followed by *istiqāmah* (moral steadfastness) in walking a straight path, *mujāhadah al-nafs* (struggle against the ego) in passing between the twin banyan trees, *tazkiyah al-nafs* (purification of the soul) in maintaining bodily and emotional balance, and culminating in *qurb ilā Allāh* (spiritual proximity to God) upon completing the symbolic journey. These findings confirm that the philosophical meaning of *Masangin* lies in cultivating self-discipline, spiritual awareness, and moral refinement rather than fulfilling material desires or predicting future fortune.

The principal contribution of this research is the development of the *Sulūk* Symbolism Framework, a new conceptual model that systematically integrates Sufi metaphysics with the symbolic structure of the *Masangin* tradition. Unlike previous studies that primarily interpreted *Masangin* through folklore, cultural tourism, or Javanese cosmology, this framework demonstrates that the ritual functions as an indigenous model of Sufi spiritual education in which ritual symbols serve as pedagogical instruments for ethical transformation. The study therefore extends contemporary scholarship in Islamic philosophy, ritual studies, and cultural hermeneutics by showing that local traditions may preserve sophisticated metaphysical concepts through embodied symbolic practices. Practically, the findings provide an alternative perspective for cultural preservation by encouraging educational institutions, palace authorities, and heritage organizations to present *Masangin* not merely as a mystical attraction but as a cultural medium for transmitting spiritual values and moral education. Future research may apply the *Sulūk* Symbolism Framework to other ritual traditions in Indonesia and Southeast Asia to further examine how Islamic metaphysics is localized through indigenous cultural expressions and to refine comparative theories of symbolic spirituality.

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