



Suluk Ritual and Mental Health: Exploration of the Experiences of the Suluk of the Tarekat Naqshbandiyah Khalidiyah Babussalam (TNKB), Indonesia

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Abstract

This study aimed to examine the relationship between suluk rituals and mental health. To achieve this objective, questions were formulated about the nature of suluk rituals and ethical considerations to determine its relationship with mental health. Qualitative data was selected using a case study approach to answer the formulated questions. The main data sources in this study are murshid, caliphs, and congregations. Data were collected using observation, interviews, and documentation, and analyzed in different stages with the presentation of results. The result showed that the suluk rituals are a form of spiritual training activity requiring each congregation to carry out a series of rituals, such as dhikr, muraqabah, tawajuh, and others. To discipline the congregations in its implementation, ethical guidelines are established, requiring adherence and implementation before, during the process, and at the end of the process. These ethical guidelines consistently maintain the practices during the suluk. Furthermore, the suluk rituals with mental health was found through the intersubjective experiences of the pilgrims who perform the rituals through recognition of the changes experienced, namely becoming calm and able to think rationally. The practice of dhikr, which is the main activity of the suluk rituals, has significantly contributed to shaping the mental health of the congregations. Consequently, it can be confirmed that the suluk rituals positively influenced mental health formation.

1. Introduction

Limited studies have addressed Sufi rituals in the context of alternative mental health. Several studies including Harifuddin & Zainuddin (2017) have examined the community's interpretation of the flood disaster from the perspective of local beliefs and Sufism. The results showed that within society perception, flood events are regarded as trials and manifestations of God's will. Consequently, every event is seen as an effort to erase sins. Flood is also interpreted as something positive because it has wisdom from all the events that occur in life. Another relevant study was conducted by Maghfur (2019), focusing on the activities of Sufis in Indonesia to protect the earth, specifically regarding religious responses in the context of ongoing climate change. The result showed that climate change was understood as the authority of God. Therefore, Sufis understand climate change starting from a view of the balanced relationship between humans, nature, and God. Efforts to actualize takhalli, tahalli, and tajalli manifest ecological repentance in the form of climate change mitigation and adaptation behavior.

Ma'shum (2020) attempted to show the role of Sufi healing as part of an alternative to dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. The result showed that Sufi healing as an alternative to physical and psychological healing based on Sufistic values through reading the Koran, doing dhikr, and praying, contributes to a sense of tranquility. This effect has implications for relaxation and increasing the immunity of the body. A normative study by Kerwanto (2020) examined the pandemic phenomenon from the perspective of Sufi interpretation by considering the signs of related verses. The result showed COVID-19 as a small creature based on the al-Qur'an and efforts to maintain balance in life. Due to the limited investigation regarding mental health, this study aims to examine Sufi rituals, or tarekat, as an alternative to mental health.

It is noteworthy that engagement with structured spiritual practices shares conceptual similarities with structured learning environments, in which rule-based frameworks, guided mentorship, and consistent practice have been shown to foster positive behavioral and psychological outcomes (Hasibuan et al., 2025). The role of consistent guidance from an authority figure whether a murshid in Sufi tradition or a teacher in an educational context reflects a broader principle that structured mentorship facilitates internalization of values and promotes well-being (Irham et al., 2024).

2. Method

This qualitative study used non-numerical or statistical data, focusing on the reality of phenomena or events in society. Data was collected using an enterography framework, namely determining objects, asking questions, collecting data, recording, analyzing, and writing. The Data collected were analyzed in stages, first, domain analysis to obtain an overview of the object and the occurring situation. Second, taxonomic analysis is to comprehend the internal and external structure of

the object under study. Third, componential analysis to group and specify the data obtained. Fourth, cultural analysis to determine the related relationships between the elements used. This qualitative descriptive approach is aligned with methodological traditions employed in sociolinguistic and educational research contexts, wherein researchers seek to describe and interpret phenomena as they naturally occur (Batubara & Purnomo, 2025).

3. Result & Discussion

Suluk Ritual

Suluk is a core activity at TNKB, carried out without time constraints because it can be done whenever the congregation is willing. TNKB is one of the congregations that does not impose a time constraint on the conduct of suluk activities. Therefore, every congregation, both new and old, engaging in suluk at TNKB, is not bound by a specific timeframe. Some of the congregation choose a certain time to carry out the suluk for technical reasons only, specifically pilgrims from outside the region, such as before the First Tuan Guru (TGP) haul and the Eid al-Fitr holiday, or other holidays. Eid al-Adha (Syahrul & AS, 2019, 169-189). Pilgrims from various regions who come to worship, including international visitors, specifically Malaysia, both male and female, arrive to engage in worship at any given time. The implementation of suluk takes between 10, 20, and 40 days, and the choice of time is decided by the congregation. In the practice of suluk at TNKB, pilgrims always come one after another, and usually, each congregation makes a minimum effort to carry out suluk once a year to TNKB (Bruinessen, 1992, 108).

Suluk has several rituals that persist continuously and become part of the tradition, practiced in its implementation. According to (Rosowsky, 2019, 382-405), implementing suluk for novice pilgrims usually begins with several special baya'at rituals. Bay'at is the initial stage for a congregation to express willingness to participate in practicing the doctrines and rituals taught at TNKB. The bay'at process usually begins with a bath of repentance, which symbolically means a form of repentance from sin and mistakes. This repentance bath is an initial ritual that is always carried out, specifically for novice pilgrims who are strongly committed to suluk. Bathing in repentance is also a form of acceptance of all regulations imposed at TNKB.

Accordingly, it includes cleansing oneself and fostering a sincere commitment to the performance of the suluk ritual as instructed at TNKB (Ahmad, 2022). After carrying out the repentance bath, the congregation continues with repentance prayers, accompanied by the caliph who imparts teachings on various aspects of suluk. Performing repentance prayers strengthens your commitment to repent to Allah by improving bad behavior. Subsequently, a congregation is guided to strengthen their hearts, ensuring consistent adherence to teachings at TNKB (Ahmad, 2022).

In carrying out suluk, congregations are required to stay in the provided suluk and make use of all the available facilities. The main activity in bersuluk is the instruction to carry out the dhikr rituals consistently, commencing from the number 5000 with certain conditions. Zikr is carried out continuously because each congregation is required to maintain continuous dhikr. There is a 2 x 2 activity room in the suluk house with only mats. A performer must accept all the conditions, as each element is integral to the spiritual formation process. Suluk performers are instructed to consistently carry out congregational prayers five times a day with the stipulation of being present in the mosque for half an hour or one hour before entering the congregational prayer. Before praying, each congregation is asked to continuously practice dhikr according to the numbers determined based on their respective levels (Muzakkir, 2019).

In suluk rituals, there are many regulations that the congregation must obey. According to Jailani (2022), existing regulations are an important part of internalizing the doctrine and rituals, facilitating the congregation's transformation into improved individuals. All forms of regulations and obligations determined are supervised by officers who are caliphs, entrusted by the murshid to guide the congregation. Congregants are asked to continuously have holy conditions. Therefore, the performance of wudu, as an essential element to maintain purity, should be continuous. When wudu is broken, a congregation is asked to continue to maintain ablution.

Continuous efforts to maintain wuduk emphasize that a congregation must always maintain personal purity (Jailani, 2022). During the process, a congregation is not allowed to eat from living creatures. In practice, the management of the suluk house usually provides food arranged traditionally applied at TNKB. A congregation can only eat the specified food (Tamrin, 2022).

Suluk is strictly regulated, including activities carried out by the congregation. These pilgrims have a special road differentiated from the general public used as a place of activity. When walking, pilgrims are always asked to keep their eyes open because it has implications, resulting in the heart being veiled to God (Fuad, 2022). All forms of views are believed to be connected to the heart. Therefore, a congregation is prohibited from opening views as wide as possible to expand negative imaginations.

A pilgrim is consistently advised to monitor gaze when walking because this can prevent the congregation from behaving contrary to the purpose of suluk (Yasin, 2022). It is believed among the congregation that views will shape feelings or the condition of the heart. In the suluk rituals, a congregation is kept in check to keep their eyes on things that can disturb their concentration, ensuring a constant connection to God through uninterrupted dhikr.

Suluk Ethics

The main element in carrying out the suluk rituals is maintaining and implementing all determined rules and ethics. Compliance with ethics is an important element contributing to the success of the conducted suluk rituals (Mayeur-Jaouen & Patrizi, 2017, 1-2). Suluk internalizes ethics in spiritual formation, which determines the success of the rituals. Therefore, compliance in carrying out all forms of ethics regulated therein determines success in the spiritual formation of the congregation.

Ethics in suluk are strictly regulated and supervised by officers entrusted by the mursyid to ensure proper implementation during the process (Fuad, 2022). The ethics related to suluk are written as a reminder for all pilgrims to always comply with all forms of etiquette. All ethics in suluk are directly related to the formation of character, guiding individuals to always maintain and comply with ethics, including ethical conduct towards the murshid, between fellow congregation members, and others.

Various ethics are directly related to the phases proceeding, during, and after the implementation of suluk. Ethics related to the pre-suluk phase require every congregation to correct their intentions, ensuring that the implementation is an effort to get closer to Allah (Fuad, 2022). In practice, every suluk congregation will always be reminded to improve intentions as this greatly determines the results. According to (Papas, 2008, 4-22), the implementation is dedicated to transversing the path towards God. Any intention outside this purpose may impact the outcome of the forthcoming suluk rituals.

In addition, a congregation is also asked first to complete all matters related to the family's interests, specifically ensuring that clothing and feeding needs are met. Pilgrims must also ensure sufficient mental preparation and accommodation for some time when performing the rituals. Suluk must not be mixed with otherworldly activities. Therefore, everything related to affairs and interests must first be fulfilled to achieve total implementation (Fuad, 2022).

The main activity in suluk is making every effort to maintain proximity to Allah by continuously doing dhikr (Zarcone, 2008, 57-68). Zikr, as the core activity in suluk, has several stages according to the level of the congregation. In practice, it is many congregations only stop at certain levels of remembrance. Only a small number are fast enough to go through the predetermined stages of remembrance. Determining the stages in dhikr is completely under the guidance of the murshid to ensure that a congregation is worthy of improving the dhikr process or just focusing on the level (Jahanbakhsh, 2000, 129). The position of the murshid is absolute because spiritually, all congregants must have a connection with the murshid. Determining the level of dhikr is entirely up to the murshid by looking through the mind's eye. For this reason, another important etiquette of suluk is to obey all orders and instructions from the murshid (Hakim, 2020, 47).

This dynamic between the murshid and the congregation bears resemblance to the teacher-student relationship observed in formal educational settings, wherein structured authority and guided mentorship have consistently been shown to facilitate learning, behavioral compliance, and personal development (Hasibuan et al., 2025). Just as students in a classroom setting benefit from a structured learning environment where clear expectations and systematic guidance are provided, suluk participants rely on the absolute guidance of the murshid to navigate their spiritual journey.

Ethics are the main concern in the suluk rituals, which forces a congregation to always comply with all the stipulated provisions. Many ethics are directly related to the implementation of the core rituals or supporting external elements, both of which are mandatory for continuous adherence and paid attention to by the congregation. Ethics in suluk are regulated in the form of written rules specifying the actions of a congregation throughout the process. There are several ethics outside of rituals that require adherence to ensure the achievement of the spiritual internalization process.

First, the ethics of speaking restrictions are strictly regulated. Congregations are limited to communicating with each other using only 14 words, and in the presence of guests, the allowance is further restricted to seven words each day (Tamrin, 2022). The restriction on speaking necessitates a concentrated focus on the ongoing spiritual activities. By limiting speaking, a Suluk congregation aims to exercise self-restraint, guided by the belief that excessive talking among Suluk congregations may result in unproductive outcomes. It can cause the heart to become hard and an element that motivates the emergence of sin (Tamrin, 2022).

Second, another etiquette in carrying out suluk also regulates the activities of all pilgrims not to leave unless there is an urgent necessity. To discipline the suluk pilgrims, the companions of the congregation will always be present to ensure that all pilgrims carry out the rules and maintain the established ethics. The Suluk congregation can convey all forms of wishes through companions who are tasked with fulfilling all needs (Fuad, 2022).

Third, another etiquette regulated during the suluk process is that each congregation cannot eat food from animate creatures. Non-living food ethics require every Suluk congregation to only consume vegetative foods. It is believed that food derived from meat leads to fatigue and also encourages the emergence of sexual desires (Fuad, 2022). The ethics regarding this food are very strict in its implementation. Consequently, all food brought into the Suluk house is subjected to thorough inspection to verify its origin, ensuring it does not originate from animate creatures. Suluk pilgrims are only allowed to eat food provided by officers who are believed to understand the ethics of this food (Hoffman, 1995, 465-482).

In the cooking process, it is also ensured that the cooks first perform wudu', ensuring that the prepared food is served by individuals who consistently maintain rituals purity. Other technicalities in cooking food for Suluk pilgrims include using

special equipment that should not be confused with the general public (Khalid, 2022).

The ethics that are part of the suluk process are supervised by officers appointed by the murshid. Ethics are established as a training process to discipline the congregation to always comply with all provisions to the maximum extent possible. Suluk ethics extend beyond the practice, shaping the conduct of the congregation and considerations after completing its implementation. Suluk requires the congregation to maintain dhikr in all circumstances and situations experienced after completing suluk (Khalid, 2022). Likewise, other practices include maintaining unbroken ablutions, always praying together in the mosque, and watching your speech.

Spiritual activities outside suluk are the full responsibility of each congregation to maintain in their lives continuously. Furthermore, a suluk congregation is tasked with sustaining connectivity to the murshid by maintaining an open connection to all aspects associated with TNKB as a spiritual organization.

Mental Health

The suluk rituals performed are believed to be connected to mental health, which is a form of emotional stability with the ability to exert self-control in overcoming encountered challenges. Meanwhile, the suluk rituals carried out by the congregation have different expressions of experiences (Munandar, 2021, 77-107). This cannot fully explain the conditions experienced by the congregation participating in the suluk activity. Some showed that the suluk rituals resulted in positive changes in the personal lives of the congregation (Khalid, 2022). The experiences of suluk as subjective cannot be generalized to represent the entire expression felt by the congregation. Some of these subjective experiences in the form of intersubjectivity provided a general picture of the relationship between suluk rituals and aspects of mental health (Malik, 2006, 3).

Each congregation has a different background and motivation from one another. The differences in background and motivation are part of the driving force behind the choice to participate in suluk rituals activities (Khalid, 2022). Suluk has an attachment to the congregation because it is perceived by some as a tradition passed down through generations. Diligent efforts to perform suluk represent a commitment to maintaining family tradition, an integral part of an ongoing legacy preserved to the present day (Liebeskind, 1995, 276). This parallel between motivation in spiritual practice and motivation in other structured endeavors is well-documented in educational research, where intrinsic motivation has been consistently linked to greater persistence, deeper engagement, and superior outcomes (Irham et al., 2024).

The various experiences of intersubjectivity felt by the congregation regarding the suluk rituals and mental health are related to the belief that all forms of 'inner illness' occur due to neglect of the dhikr activities. According to (Kusuma,

2020, 175-178), this illness takes the form of anxiety, worry, fear, and others, which occur due to unhealthy mental situations, resulting in unstable conditions. In such circumstances, an individual is prone to engage in unconventional actions or make decisions without contemplating their ethical implications. Mental emptiness also greatly influences aspects of behavior, prompting individuals to adopt alternatives for a false calm with actions whose benefits are unknown. This challenge intensifies in the environment or social circle that does not contribute to personal growth (Juniarni, et al. 2022, 139-145).

Mental weakness is a form of illness susceptible to influence from prevailing situations and conditions (Afidah, et al., 2021, 370-373). When the situation does not lead to God's path, the anticipated forms of pleasure and peace remain elusive. Some suluk practitioners believe that efforts to fill the inner emptiness can only be made with dhikr (Tenyk & Goktap, 2008, 217-236). According to (Khalid, 2022), in suluk activities, dhikr is part of the core activity that must persist, as its cessation paves the way for the devil to fill the soul. When the soul is filled with Satan, all forms of evil will appear good, steering an individual action away from Allah. Continuous dhikr activities are a form of exercise to fill the heart, ensuring continuous connection to God, which is the pinnacle of serenity. A calm mental condition guides an individual into consistently contemplating and acting with awareness, carefully assessing the implications and consequences of every contemplated action (Fuad, 2022).

Bakri's (2022) intersubjectivity experiences showed that before participating in suluk, a successful entrepreneurial status was achieved. However, being carried away by all forms of pleasure led to the inability to manage the business, resulting in bankruptcy and excess debts. The family also receives the impacts arising from economic challenges. At this moment of despair, Bakri decided to participate in suluk to release all the burdens felt during the period. Diligently following all forms of rituals and ethics, Bakri seemed to have rediscovered his lost self. The dhikr activities conducted during the suluk and continued afterward provided him with new energy, enabling clear thinking and the courage to confront and gradually solve various problems (Bakri, 2022).

Another intersubjectivity experienced by the Suluk Hasibuan congregation (2022) reported a ten-year struggle with heart disease. This disease has been treated in hospitals and through traditional methods, but the right medicine was not found. Treatments abroad were also pursued including all types of therapy but the desired result was not provided. In a state of resignation to Hasibun's situation, a friend suggested the suluk rituals. Initially skeptical about the suluk, but agreed to participate after an adequate explanation. While performing the suluk rituals, his heart disease recurred. Despite this occurrence, Hasibuan persisted in directing dhikr towards the heart, aiming for relief and striving to extract wisdom from each dhikr performed. The process of remembrance was executed until fainting occurred. Upon regaining consciousness, heart pain was no longer experienced

(Hasibuan, 2022).

Another interesting intersubjectivity experiences was found by Farhan (2022), a young man who was addicted to drugs. After joining the suluk, the officers monitoring the implementation told the murshid about the young man. Subsequently, Mursyid advised against imposing the rules and ethics of suluk on Farhan, suggesting a gradual approach. As an individual struggling with drug addiction, Farhan exhibits different behavior from other congregants. After going through the first suluk stage, Farhan was returned to the family. The family requested permission for a second suluk session due to the observed positive changes in Farhan following the initial suluk process. The three iterations of the process showed positive development with the emergence of self-awareness and the ability to think, although not optimally (Khalid, 2022).

Several intersubjective experiences have been stated to show that suluk has a positive influence on mental health. It is believed among Suluk practitioners that the continuous activity of dhikr is a form of cleansing the soul, always to be connected to God. A connected soul to God becomes a positive energy that can make an individual think logically and rationally about life. This constant connection to God as the source of all goodness allows for clear thinking, leading to the discovery of solutions to the diverse trials experienced in life (Sulistyawati, et al., 2019, 411-416). The transformative impact of consistent, structured practice on mental clarity and behavioral change resonates strongly with findings from educational research, where structured repetition, guided learning, and the cultivation of confidence have been shown to positively affect learners' psychological well-being and cognitive performance (Batubara & Purnomo, 2025).

The positive impact of the dhikr rituals on soul cleansing is attributed to the belief among practitioners that only through dhikr can the soul be purified. Dhikr that is done consistently will bring a sense of calm to the soul. However, in practice, not all suluk pilgrims can get the pleasure of reciting the dhikr, because sincerity and totality are the main keys. Another aspect is that when the implementation of the suluk is not carried out seriously, the objectives will not be achieved and can also result in mental illness, making it difficult to accept the truth. Monitoring the intersubjectivity of the experiences of Suluk pilgrims confirms that dhikr activities carried out consistently, specifically under a murshid's guidance, positively influence aspects of mental health. This mental health will also have a strong energy influence on forming physical health, facilitating optimal functioning of the human organ.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the series of rituals, particularly the remembrance activities, were systematically conducted as determined in practice, with an emphasis on consistent execution. The sulk rituals were a process of internalizing dhikr for the congregation always to be connected to God in all situations. In the experience of

TNKB, dhikr had several levels according to the ability and potential of the congregation, which is determined under the authority of a murshid. The practice of suluk rituals was also strictly regulated regarding the ethics that must be adhered to by all congregants.

Ethics covered several aspects before, during, and after the implementation of suluk. Compliance with ethics was the main key to the success of the suluk rituals. Therefore, the totality of maintaining and carrying out suluk ethics was a part that required constant attention from every congregation participating in suluk. Implementing the suluk rituals carried out by the TNKB congregation had different aspects of intersubjectivity. Several intersubjective experiences showed that the remembrance rituals carried out in suluk positively influenced the mental health aspects of the congregation.

Continuous dhikr activities contributed to the attainment of mental well-being, fostering a sense of tranquility and the ability to think rationally. Mental health was important to forming physical health because the two were directly connected. These findings are consistent with broader scholarly understandings of how structured, mentor-guided, and ethically framed practices contribute to personal transformation and psychological resilience (Hidayah et al., 2025).

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