



Vidyottama Sanatana
International Journal of Hindu Science and Religious Studies

Vol. 9 No. 2 October 2025

TANTRIC SYMBOLISM AND ITS RELEVANCE IN HINDUISM: A STUDY OF CANDI SUKUH ON MOUNT LAWU

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Received: September 10, 2025

Accepted: October 07, 2025

Published: October 31, 2025

Abstract

Candi Sukuh, located on the slopes of Mount Lawu, is a late Majapahit monument that prominently displays Tantric symbolism. Its terraced pyramid architecture, lingga–yoni reliefs, and erotic iconography reveal the dominance of Tantric teachings in the candi's cosmological narrative. This study aims to examine the relevance of Tantra in Hinduism as embodied in the architecture, iconography, and symbolism of Candi Sukuh, while also uncovering its contribution to the enrichment of Hindu philosophy in the Indonesian archipelago. The method employed is qualitative-descriptive analysis with a literature review approach, utilizing studies in archaeology, history of religion, and Hindu philosophy. Data are drawn from journals, books, and prior research on Tantra and Candi Sukuh. The analysis indicates that the candi's symbols are not merely erotic but represent the unity of body, cosmos, and spirit. The lingga–yoni reliefs emphasize the balance of masculine–feminine energies (Śiva–Śakti) sustaining the cosmos, where sexuality is understood as a sacred power leading toward mokṣa. The findings affirm Candi Sukuh as both a symbolic text and a philosophical heritage enriching the dynamics of Hindu thought in Java.

Keywords: Candi Sukuh, Tantra, Hinduism, Lingga–Yoni, Nusantara philosophy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Uncovering the mystery of sexual symbolism that transcends religious discourse, Candi Sukuh stands on the western slope of Mount Lawu, precisely in Berjo Village, Ngargoyoso District, Karanganyar. Jermiah Martin Johnson, the Resident of Surakarta, was the first to discover the ruins of Candi Sukuh in 1815, subsequently reporting it to Governor-General Thomas Stamford Raffles, who was compiling the book *The History of Java* (Jordaan, 2015). The candi was built in the 15th century, at the end of the Majapahit era, a period marked by political turmoil, cultural shifts, and the emergence of syncretic religious practices. The candra-sengkala carved at the candi entrance reads 1359 Saka (1437 AD), marking the construction of this sacred complex in the midst of the decline of Majapahit. This historical context is important because it reveals the crisis that gave birth to new creativity in Javanese religious and spiritual expression (Syafi'i, 2021).

Architecturally, Candi Sukuh features a terraced punden shape reminiscent of the megalithic tradition (Sulistiyowati, 1999), unlike most Hindu candis in Central Java, such as Prambanan, which emphasise symmetry and vertical elegance. This architecture also shows the continuity between prehistoric Javanese beliefs and Hindu traditions (Marsono, 2017). A study of Candi Sukuh emphasises that the choice of a terraced shape for Candi Sukuh shows that the Javanese people at that time still maintained an ancient cosmology, in which mountains and heights were understood as the axis of the world and a sacred space connecting humans with the universe (M. T. Riyanti, 2020). Thus, Candi Sukuh is not only a Hindu heritage, but also a meeting place between local beliefs and Hindu philosophy.

The uniqueness of Candi Sukuh lies not only in its architectural form, but also in the reliefs that adorn the walls and gates of the candi. These reliefs feature symbols that explicitly reveal the meanings of fertility, birth, and sexual union. Lingga-yoni, male statues with erect penises, and turtle carvings, which in Hindu cosmology are understood as the cosmic foundation, show that Candi Sukuh is a spiritual space that

emphasises the teachings of fertility and cosmic reproduction (Riyanti, 2018). This sexual iconography has sparked a long debate: are the reliefs and statues at Candi Sukuh merely representations of agricultural fertility, or are they manifestations of Tantric teachings in Hinduism, which place the body, sexuality, and cosmic energy as the path to liberation (moksha)?

This question reveals an academic problem that remains relevant to this day. Tantra in Hinduism is known as an esoteric tradition, rich in symbolism, layered meanings, and often transmitted only to disciples who have undergone initiation. Generally, Tantra centers on the union of Purusha (the masculine principle, Shiva) and Prakriti or Shakti (the feminine principle, cosmic energy). This union is not merely understood in biological terms, but as the realization of cosmic unity between the human body, the universe, and transcendental reality. Tantric rituals often employ the body and sexual energy as mediums of spiritual transformation, which in broader society are commonly regarded as taboo (Flood, 2006). This raises a critical question: why would such an esoteric teaching be expressed so publicly in the reliefs of Candi Sukuh?

Recent studies suggest that Tantric symbolism at Candi Sukuh is not coincidental. An architectural study emphasizes that the candi's gateway (gapura wiwara) and its innermost chamber (garbhagrha) were designed according to Tantric symbolism, where the gateway represents the path of birth and the garbhagrha symbolizes the cosmic womb (Yusran, Widisono, & Antariksa, 2021). This interpretation aligns with Harriyadi's (2025) view that Candi Sukuh reflects a dialectic between the collapsing socio-political order of Majapahit and local cultural agents seeking new symbolic expressions to reaffirm their spiritual identity. Thus, the presence of Tantric iconography at Candi Sukuh can be understood as an effort by Javanese society at the time to discover renewed meanings of life, fertility, and the cosmos amid the kingdom's profound transformations.

Accordingly, this article seeks to explore the relevance of Tantric teachings in Hinduism as reflected in the architecture, iconography, and spiritual symbolism of Candi Sukuh. The analysis focuses on how Tantric concepts, such as cosmic union, the body as a spiritual medium, and fertility symbolism are manifested in concrete forms at Candi Sukuh. This analysis is crucial because previous studies on Candi Sukuh have predominantly emphasized its historical and aesthetic aspects, while its philosophical and spiritual dimensions have received comparatively little scholarly attention. The urgency of this study can be understood from at least two perspectives. First, a philosophical inquiry into Tantra within the Nusantara context enriches the academic discourse on the diversity of Hindu expressions. This is important because understandings of Hinduism in Indonesia are often limited to its ritualistic and institutional aspects, while its deeper philosophical and spiritual dimensions remain overlooked. Second, this study offers a new perspective on the body, sexuality, and fertility as integral components of Hindu spirituality rather than merely biological aspects. As White (2000) points out, Tantra introduces a revolution within Hindu tradition by affirming the body as a path toward transcendence.

Therefore, this research is expected to make a significant contribution to the understanding of the relationship between Hindu philosophy (particularly Tantra) and religious practice in the Nusantara. Furthermore, this study highlights that Candi Sukuh is not merely an archaeological artifact but also a philosophical text bearing a universal spiritual message—that the body, the cosmos, and life are inseparable aspects of a sacred unity.

II. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach based on library research, framed within a philosophical-hermeneutical analysis. This approach is chosen because the object of inquiry consists of texts, doctrines, and symbols within the Tantric tradition, which are then contextualized with the reliefs of Candi Sukuh, located on the slopes of Mount Lawu in

Karanganyar Regency. Data collection was conducted through literature review, documentation, and direct observation of Candi Sukuh. Primary sources include classical Tantric texts (tantras and commentaries), Hindu religious scriptures, and supporting works that discuss the philosophy of Tantra. Secondary sources such as journal articles, academic books, and recent studies were also utilized to provide contextual analysis.

Data analysis was carried out through philosophical hermeneutics, which entails deep interpretation of texts and concepts while taking into account the historical, cultural, and religious contexts of Tantric teachings. The hermeneutical steps included: (1) understanding the literal meaning of Tantric texts; (2) interpreting the symbols carved on Candi Sukuh; and (3) correlating Tantric doctrines with the candi's symbolic representations. Thus, this study is not merely descriptive but also analytical and critical in examining the relevance of Tantra as manifested in the Candi Sukuh reliefs.

To ensure the validity of findings, a comparative analysis was conducted between classical literature and modern scholarship. This comparison is crucial to prevent the understanding of Tantra from being confined to normative-theological dimensions, instead revealing its practical and philosophical aspects that remain relevant today. Through this method, the study highlights that Tantric teachings had long flourished in the Nusantara and were embodied, among others, in Candi Sukuh.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Discussions on Candi Sukuh cannot be separated from the symbolic dimensions embedded within its architecture and reliefs. Before examining the Tantric teachings manifested in its structures and symbols, it is necessary to first understand the fundamental framework of Tantra and its relevance to Javanese architecture and spirituality. With such an understanding, the analysis of Candi Sukuh does not merely stop at the level of aesthetics or architecture but also opens space for broader cosmological and religious

interpretations. Candi Sukuh thus stands not only as an architectural monument but also as a guardian of the noble values of Hindu-Tantric teachings inherited from the Javanese society of the Majapahit era. These values remain highly relevant today, particularly in responding to modern challenges such as environmental degradation, moral decline, and the loss of spiritual orientation amid increasingly materialistic lifestyles.

In Hindu Tantra, the central teaching emphasizes balance, harmony, and integration among the various elements of life. The philosophy of purusa and prakrti, or masculine and feminine energies, highlights that the sustainability of the cosmos depends upon the harmony between the forces of creation, preservation, and dissolution. At Candi Sukuh, this teaching is vividly embodied in the linga-yoni symbolism that serves as the focal point of worship, affirming the union of the two primordial principles of the universe that cannot be separated.

A. Tantric Teachings in Hinduism

Tantric teachings developed during the early medieval period, often referred to as the “Tantric Age,” as an esoteric tradition within both Hinduism and Buddhism. Numerous Tantric texts were composed in Kashmir, Bengal, and Nepal, which served as major centers of Śaiva and Buddhist thought (Dhargyey, Tulku, & Landaw, 1979; Wedemeyer, 2001). In particular, Kashmiri Śaivism, especially the Trika school, emphasized meditative practices and transformative rituals oriented toward the union of Śiva (*Puruṣa*) and Śakti (*Prakṛti*) (Urban, 2001). The earliest developments of Tantra are often traced to the Śaiva *Mantramārga* tradition around the fifth century CE, marked by inscriptions from Gandhāra containing early references to the term *tantra* and to the worship of the Dākinī, a feminine entity central to esoteric practices (Gray, 2016). From there, Tantric traditions expanded into Śaktism, which centers on devotion to the Goddess as the embodiment of divine energy (Śakti). Tantra also broadened the scope of religious practice through the use of mantras, yantras, *dīkṣā* (initiation), and yoga—typically undertaken under the guidance of a guru. Within Vaiṣṇavism, the *Pāñcarātra Āgama*

represents a Tantric strand, though less prominent, that reflects the symbolic integration of Viṣṇu and Śrī (Lakṣmī) as manifestations of divine unity (Lussana, 2015).

The central principle of Tantric philosophy lies in the understanding of reality as dual yet ultimately unified. *Puruṣa* (Śiva) represents pure, passive, and transcendent consciousness, while *Prakṛti* or Śakti embodies the dynamic, creative, and immanent force that generates the cosmos. Rather than being separate, they are complementary aspects of a single cosmic unity. The existence of the universe is thus conceived as a cosmic play (*līlā*) arising from the interaction and union of Śiva and Śakti (Urban, 2001).

This union is not merely a metaphysical doctrine but also deeply existential. Tantra teaches that every human being contains within themselves the aspects of consciousness (Śiva) and vital energy (Śakti) (Biernacki, 2006; Gray, 2016; White, 2000). Spiritual practice seeks to harmonize these two dimensions, enabling the practitioner to experience wholeness and union with ultimate reality (Donder, 2020). Accordingly, the union of *Puruṣa* and *Prakṛti* in Tantra functions not only as a cosmogonic principle but also as a method of inner transformation—emphasizing full awareness of the body, energy, and the sacredness of life.

The body in Tantric philosophy is conceived as a microcosm of the universe, a miniature cosmos in which all divine energies reside (Suamba, 2025). The female body, in particular, embodies the power of Śakti, the creative and dynamic principle that sustains life (Shimkhada & Reading, 2015). Female fertility is not merely a biological function measurable through pregnancy, but rather a spiritual symbol that connects humanity with the cosmic cycle of birth, growth, death, and rebirth. Thus, within the Tantric framework, the female body is not an object per se, but a sacred space where cosmic energies operate.

The principle of fertility in Tantra further emphasizes the unity between Śakti (feminine, creative, transformative energy) and Śiva (masculine consciousness, static, transcendent). The two are inseparable, for without Śakti, consciousness remains powerless, and without

Śiva, energy is without direction (Perkins, 2022). The female body, regarded as the center of fertility, is therefore the embodiment of Śakti—the force that moves and gives birth. To reduce the female body merely to a vehicle of biological reproduction is to diminish its spiritual meaning. Tantra instead teaches that the body is a pathway to enlightenment, a medium for experiencing existential wholeness.

From a broader Tantric perspective, the connection between fertility and spirituality extends beyond biological continuity, encompassing the perpetuation of knowledge and consciousness. Each birth is not simply a physical event but a cosmic moment that sustains universal harmony. The female body is therefore conceived as a bridge linking human beings with the transcendental dimension, a living yantra infused with sacred power. In this light, the female body ought to be revered and honored, rather than disciplined or reduced within a social framework that prioritizes reproductive norms.

The union of the feminine and masculine aspects in Tantra is symbolized through the Lingga-Yoni, which embodies both spiritual and philosophical understandings of cosmic unity. The Lingga, commonly interpreted as a masculine symbol, is not merely a representation of the male organ, but rather a cosmic principle of consciousness, stability, and transcendent stillness (Astawa & Suwadnyana, 2020; Danielou, 1995; Saputro, 2023). Conversely, the Yoni, as the feminine symbol, does not solely signify the biological aspect of women but represents the cosmic womb, the locus of fertility, and the creative force from which all forms of life emerge (Amazzone, 2010; Saputro, 2023). When united, these two symbols transcend the sexual dimension and become icons of harmony between Purusha (consciousness) and Prakriti (matter), between stillness and movement, between the masculine and the feminine principles.

The union of Lingga-Yoni in Tantric practice is thus not a mere erotic representation but an embodiment of moksha, spiritual liberation achieved through the realization of divine unity (Shimkhada & Reading, 2015). The Lingga is incomplete without the Yoni, and the Yoni is powerless without the Lingga. This symbolism

affirms that all creation arises from the harmonious interaction of complementary forces. In this sense, Tantra rejects views that reduce the female body to a mere biological object or reproductive instrument. Instead, through the Yoni, the female body is placed at the sacred center of the cosmos—the source of life and the axis of creative energy.

This meaning reveals that Tantra teaches the principle of non-duality: the masculine and feminine are not antagonistic entities but two aspects of the same reality. The Lingga-Yoni, as an icon, is not merely a ritual object but a meditative instrument that facilitates the realization of humanity's interconnectedness with the cosmos. Contemplation upon the Lingga-Yoni in Tantric meditation leads practitioners to an awareness that all forms of duality—male and female, body and soul, matter and spirit—ultimately converge into inseparable unity.

The Tantric tradition affirms that the spiritual journey begins with the internalization of the body as the locus of divine energy. This profound idea is key to understanding Tantric symbols found in sacred art and architecture across the Indonesian archipelago, including Candi Sukuh. The representation of masculine and feminine union in the candi's iconography should not be read solely as a symbol of biological fertility, but as a philosophical expression of cosmic harmony and a spiritual path toward perfection. Accordingly, this foundational principle provides a framework for interpreting the relevance of Tantric teachings as manifested in the architectural and symbolic dimensions of Candi Sukuh.

B. Manifestation of Tantric Teachings in Candi Sukuh

The architectural form of Candi Sukuh represents one of the most distinctive features within the landscape of Hindu-Buddhist candis in Java. Unlike most Hindu candis, which generally adopt the form of a tower (*meru*), Candi Sukuh is constructed in the style of a stepped pyramid (*punden berundak*), an architectural pattern that predates Hindu influence in the Indonesian archipelago. This design not only reflects continuity with the megalithic tradition but also conveys

philosophical meanings closely related to Tantric cosmology.

As one of the most prominent architectural elements, the *punden berundak* form of Candi Sukuh serves as a key to understanding the cosmology and philosophy underlying its construction. The structure embodies a symbolic ascent, wherein each level represents a different plane of existence leading towards the sacred center. Within the Tantric framework, this upward progression reflects the spiritual journey of uniting Śiva (consciousness) and Śakti (creative energy), thus aligning the architectural form with the principles of inner transformation and cosmic harmony.



Figure 1. The Entire Complex of the Three Terraces of Candi Sukuh (Top View)

Source: Marsono Documentation, 2024



Figure 2. The Third Terrace of Candi Sukuh

Source: Marsono Documentation, 2024

The stepped-pyramid structure (*punden berundak*) of Candi Sukuh presents an architectural form that is unusual when compared to most Hindu candis in Java (Isawati, Pelu, & Abidin, 2023). Unlike the towering, multi-roofed candi structures of the Prambanan complex, Candi Sukuh adopts a terraced pyramid form that reflects the continuity of the indigenous megalithic tradition of the archipelago (Wirakusumah, 2017). This layered structure can be interpreted as a representation of Tantric

cosmology, in which each architectural level symbolizes a stage of the human spiritual journey. The lower level corresponds to the profane world, the middle level represents the process of consciousness transformation, and the summit embodies the union with the highest reality, or moksha. Thus, the *punden berundak* functions not merely as a ritual space but as a symbolic medium teaching the path of transcendence as outlined in Tantric philosophy. The three terraces of Candi Sukuh may be understood as representing the spiritual ascent from the profane realm to divine consciousness. The lower terrace reflects the material world and the human condition marked by duality, symbolized by the sacred Bhīma relief. The middle terrace signifies the symbolic journey towards enlightenment, illustrated by reliefs depicting the *Rāmāyana*, *Garudheya*, and *Sudhamala*. Meanwhile, the upper terrace represents the sacred realm of moksha, liberation from worldly attachments, embodied in the *Swargarohanaparwa* relief. Marsono (2017) emphasizes that the tiered structure of Candi Sukuh should not be seen merely as a legacy of megalithic architecture, but as a cosmological interpretation parallel to Tantric teachings concerning the stages of spiritual ascent toward ultimate awareness.

Within the Tantric framework, cosmology is understood as the journey from material existence toward unity with Brahman. Accordingly, the stepped-pyramid form of Candi Sukuh is not simply a remnant of local tradition, but rather a visual articulation of the Tantric principle of gradual ascent toward enlightenment. The terraced architecture embodies spiritual symbolism that enables devotees to experience ritual as a journey from the body toward transcendence (Wirakusumah, 2017). Thus, Candi Sukuh's architecture can be read as a cosmological text infused with Tantric philosophy.

One of the most prominent features of Candi Sukuh is the monumental relief of the *lingga-yoni*. This relief does not merely depict reproductive organs in a naturalistic manner, but emphasizes the principle of cosmic union that underlies Tantric doctrine. As previously noted, in the Hindu-Tantric tradition, the *lingga* is not

simply understood as a symbol of the male organ, but as an emblem of cosmic consciousness, stability, and transcendental energy. Conversely, the *yoni* represents femininity, creative power, and the dynamic energy of *prakṛti*. The following image illustrates the representation of the *lingga-yoni*, which stands as the central axis of religious and spiritual meaning within the Tantric framework.



Figure 3. Lingga–Yoni Relief at the Gate (Gapura) of Candi Sukuh
Source: Marsono Documentation, 2024

The Lingga–Yoni relief at Candi Sukuh is not merely to be interpreted as a symbol of biological fertility, but rather as one that embodies a profound cosmological dimension. The lingga represents the masculine principle of Śiva, namely the stable and transcendent cosmic consciousness, while the yoni symbolizes Śakti as the feminine, creative, and dynamic energy that sustains all life. Their union depicts the process of cosmic regeneration as well as the harmony between *Purusha* (consciousness) and *Prakṛti* (matter). Within the Tantric framework, this symbol affirms that life, fertility, and spirituality are inseparable, for both the body and the cosmos reflect divine unity. Thus, the presence of the Lingga–Yoni relief at Candi Sukuh does not merely show the adaptation of Hindu teachings, but also the distinct Nusantara articulation of Tantric philosophy.

The union of lingga and yoni, therefore, constitutes a cosmological metaphor of the unity

between *Purusha* (Śiva) and *Prakṛiti/Śakti*. Lingga and yoni are symbols of divine dualities; yet, in their union, they transcend dichotomies and affirm the principle of Tantric non-dualism (Fleming, 2012). In other words, the depiction of the lingga–yoni at Candi Sukuh should not be narrowly understood as eroticism, but as a symbol of cosmic fertility and the equilibrium of universal energies.

The reproductive organ ornamentation at Candi Sukuh signifies the dualistic poles that complement one another within the framework of Tantrayana (Marsono, 2017). Hence, the lingga–yoni relief is not only a symbol of fertility, but also an element of Tantric theology, wherein the body and sexual energy are elevated as legitimate spiritual means toward *moksha*.

The erotic iconography at Candi Sukuh, which depicts the male and female genitals explicitly, has long generated debate among archaeologists and religious scholars. Yet, within the Tantric paradigm, this iconography conveys a profound spiritual meaning. Tantra does not view sexuality as something profane, but as a cosmic force that may be channeled toward the highest spiritual realization. The following figures present examples of the erotic iconography embedded in Candi Sukuh.



Figure 4. Statue with an Erect Penis and Four Marble-like Spheres at Its Tip
Source: Marsono Documentation, 2024



Figure 5. Relief of a Bhuta in a Squatting Position with an Erect Penis
Source: Marsono Documentation, 2024



Figure 6. Lingga–Yoni Statue at the Right Companion Candi
Source: Marsono Documentation, 2024

Sexuality in both Indian and Javanese Tantric traditions is understood as a form of *Śakti* energy that enables human beings to transcend the dualities of the body. Sexual practice in Tantra is not merely a physical experience, but a means to unveil cosmic unity through the body (White, 2000). This perspective resonates with the erotic iconography at Candi Sukuh, which depicts the body in a naturalistic manner to suggest that spiritual awareness can be attained through the body rather than by denying it. Such symbolism simultaneously challenges puritanical notions of spirituality. Erotic iconography within the context of Candi Sukuh conveys that sexuality is not sin, but rather sacred energy that, when properly directed, becomes a pathway to liberation. Thus, the

erotic imagery at Candi Sukuh constitutes an integral component of Tantric cosmology, affirming the body as a sacred medium.

Beyond architecture and sexual iconography, Candi Sukuh also preserves a series of narrative reliefs depicting mythological stories, such as the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Garudeya*, and *Bhīma Suci*. These reliefs are carved in alignment with the candi's tiered terraces, forming a cosmological narrative consistent with Tantric principles.

The reliefs on the lower terrace illustrate the profane world, filled with conflict and suffering. On the middle terrace, the reliefs depict the spiritual journey of mythological figures, such as Bhīma in his quest for the water of life. On the highest terrace, the reliefs narrate the *Swargarohanaparwa*—the story of ascension to heaven—symbolizing release toward *moksha*. Sulistyowati (1999) observes that “the narrative reliefs at Candi Sukuh not only recount epic tales but also guide devotees through Tantric symbolism regarding the soul’s journey from the profane realm toward cosmic consciousness.” The *Swargarohanaparwa* relief can be seen in the following figure.

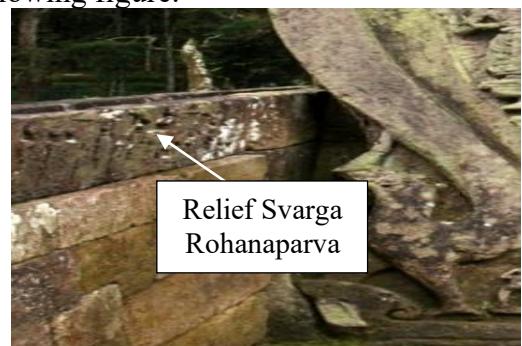


Figure 7. Relief of *Swargarohanaparwa* on the Wall of the Left Companion Candi at the Third Terrace
Source: Marsono Documentation, 2024

Within the Tantric framework, mythology is not merely a set of moral tales but a cosmological representation functioning as a spiritual map. Thus, the narrative reliefs (*wayang*) at Candi Sukuh operate as metaphysical texts that connect myth with ritual practice. This demonstrates that Candi Sukuh serves as a “stone scripture,” embodying Tantra in both visual and narrative forms.

Based on the foregoing discussion, it is evident that Candi Sukuh is not only a relic of late Majapahit architecture but also a manifestation of Tantric teachings expressed through architecture, iconography, and mythological narrative. The stepped-pyramid structure represents a stratified cosmology; the *lingga-yoni* relief symbolizes the cosmic unity of Siva and Śakti; the erotic iconography signifies sexuality as spiritual energy; while the mythological reliefs affirm the candi’s function as a Tantric text that instructs the path toward *moksha*. In this sense, Candi Sukuh may be understood as tangible evidence of how Tantric philosophy was adopted, adapted, and materialized within the Javanese cultural context at the end of the Majapahit period.

C. Philosophical and Spiritual Relevance

Tantric teachings begin from the conviction that the body is not an obstacle to sanctity, but rather an essential medium through which human beings may attain enlightenment. Tantra, in this sense, rejects the dichotomies between material and spiritual, sacred and profane, as well as soul and body. Instead, it affirms an integral interconnectedness that enables the attainment of *mokṣa* through the realization of cosmic unity.

The existence of Candi Sukuh on the slopes of

Mount Lawu, Central Java, serves as an important material testimony to the internalization of Tantric teachings within the religious practices of Hindu-Javanese society. Through its architecture, reliefs, and iconography imbued with Tantric symbolism, Candi Sukuh constitutes a spiritual space that embodies teachings on fertility, the balance of masculine and feminine energies, and the sacrality of the body. These symbols establish Candi Sukuh not merely as an archaeological site, but as a philosophical text offering alternative perspectives on the body, sexuality, and spirituality.

To systematically understand how Tantric teachings are reflected in the symbols of Candi Sukuh, a conceptual mapping is required that links the principal doctrines of Tantra with the candi’s architectural and iconographic aspects. The following table functions as an analytical medium, affirming that Candi Sukuh is not simply an archaeological monument but a symbolic text containing profound philosophical ideas. By placing Tantric principles—such as the union of Siva-Śakti, cosmic fertility, and the sacrality of the body—in direct relation to the candi’s reliefs, structures, and visual narratives, the table clarifies the philosophical and spiritual relevance of Tantra to the interpretation of Candi Sukuh. Through such mapping, readers may discern that each architectural and iconographic element of Candi Sukuh is, in fact, a concrete representation of Tantric cosmology emphasizing balance, unity, and transcendence.

Table 1. Representation of Tantric Elements in the Architecture and Iconography of Candi Sukuh

Aspect	Element / Structure	Tantric Meaning	Transformation at Candi Sukuh	Philosophical Explanation
Architecture	Stepped pyramid (<i>punden berundak</i> , three levels)	Three cosmological realms: <i>bhur</i> , <i>bhuvah</i> , <i>svah</i>	Javanese-style stepped pyramid	Spiritual path from the material world toward union with the divine
	Main gateway	Symbol of the	Distinctive arched	Transition into the sacred

	(<i>gapura</i>)	womb, threshold of consciousness	Javanese gateway	space as an initiatory experience
	Main terrace (Lingga–Yoni)	Cosmic union of Shiva–Shakti	Central and dominant element of the candi	Symbol of cosmic energy sustaining life
Symbols / Reliefs	Lingga–Yoni	Union of masculine–feminine principles	Actual worship practice at Candi Sukuh	Not merely erotic, but a cosmic fertility symbol
	Erotic iconography	Sexuality as a spiritual path (<i>maithuna</i>)	Human couples depicted in intimate acts in Javanese style	Sexuality understood as a means of enlightenment, not as taboo
	Wayang mythological reliefs	Moral and metaphysical narratives	Wayang-style reliefs with Javanese adaptation	Integration of Tantric teachings into Javanese cosmology
Conceptual (Shiva–Shakti)	Lingga (masculine)	Consciousness, stability, transcendent power	Lingga as the dominant symbol in Sukuh	Cosmic principle of permanence and stillness
	Yoni (feminine)	Energy, dynamism, creative power	Yoni as the vessel of fertility	Manifestation of the life force complementing the Lingga

(Source: Processed by Marsono, 2024)

Tantra within the spiritual framework of Hinduism provides a distinctive approach by positioning the human body as a microcosm of the universe. Spiritual awareness is not attained through the rejection of the body, but through its full acceptance. Thus, Tantra teaches that the body is a path (*sādhanā*), not an obstacle. Brooks (1990) explains, “*Tantra is that Asian body of beliefs and practices which ... seeks to ritually appropriate and channel that energy, within the human microcosm in creative and emancipatory ways*” (Rochester, 2006; White, 2000). This statement emphasizes that Tantra is not a spiritual path that denies the body, but rather celebrates it as the meeting point between the divine macrocosm and human experience, a sacred medium for spiritual realization. It also illustrates that Tantra opens new horizons within Hindu spirituality, in which body and spirit are perceived as inseparable entities. Hindu spirituality in the Tantric perspective is therefore not merely ascetic but integrative—uniting the physical, psychological, and cosmic dimensions.

The relevance of Tantra in Hindu spirituality lies in its doctrine of unity. The union of *lingga* and *yoni*, frequently depicted in iconography, is not merely a biological encounter but a cosmic representation of the unity between Śiva (consciousness) and Śakti (dynamic energy). Spiritual reality in this view can only be achieved through the understanding of interconnection and balance between the masculine and the feminine, body and spirit, earth and cosmos.

One of the fundamental aspects of Tantra is the recognition of fertility and cosmic harmony. The *lingga* and *yoni* in Hindu iconography—including those present at Candi Sukuh—carry a deeper meaning than a mere representation of reproductive organs. The *lingga* symbolizes the masculine cosmic principle: consciousness, stability, and transcendental stillness. Conversely, the *yoni* symbolizes the feminine cosmic principle: dynamism, creation, and the vital force that sustains life.

According to Urban (2010), Tantra is not primarily concerned with sexual pleasure but

rather emphasizes the utilization of the divine power of the Goddess—the energy that flows simultaneously in the cosmos, the human body, and political order—as a symbolic and spiritual medium. Thus, the union of *lingga* and *yoni* represents how life is governed by sacred cosmic balance. Candi Sukuh clearly embodies this through its reliefs depicting fertility, reproduction, and sexual union as integral elements of spiritual cosmology.

In Tantra, fertility is understood not only biologically but also spiritually. The female body is regarded as the manifestation of *Sakti*, the source of power that gives birth to life. Tantra underscores the importance of balancing masculine and feminine energies, which also form the foundation of cosmic harmony.

Candi Sukuh delivers an important message for modern humanity, which often regards sexuality as taboo or merely a biological matter. The erotic iconography carved on the candi's walls is not intended as vulgar or pornographic, but as a teaching that sexuality is a sacred aspect of life. Sexuality is viewed as a spiritual force capable of connecting humans with transcendent reality.

Geertz (1973) emphasizes that religious symbols in the Indonesian archipelago function dually—as expressions of culture and as pedagogical instruments (Saddhono, Sukmono, Saputra, & Wisnu Wardana, 2024). Within this framework, the *lingga-yoni* reliefs at Candi Sukuh must be read as a medium of moral and spiritual instruction. The message is clear: the body is not to be rejected but understood as a medium for attaining enlightenment.

For modern society, this message remains highly relevant in the discourse on sexuality. Rather than placing sexuality in the realm of taboo or reducing it to mere biological consumption, Candi Sukuh teaches that sexuality is a spiritual path that unites body, cosmos, and divine consciousness. This perspective challenges reductionist views of the body and sexuality while opening space for a more inclusive spirituality.

Candi Sukuh plays an important role in enriching the corpus of Hindu philosophy in the

Indonesian archipelago. As a site with Tantric characteristics, the candi demonstrates that Hindu thought in Java was not monolithic, but adaptive and syncretic. The Tantric symbols carved at Candi Sukuh reflect the Javanese attempt to contextualize Hindu teachings within local culture.

Zoetmulder & Hartomo (1991) emphasize that Javanese mysticism is syncretic, merging Hindu-Buddhist cosmology with local traditions. The existence of Candi Sukuh is tangible evidence of such syncretism. On one hand, it presents universal Tantric iconography, such as *lingga-yoni* and erotic motifs; on the other hand, it incorporates Javanese cultural elements such as wayang reliefs and mythology. This synthesis produces a unique form of Javanese Hindu philosophy that emphasizes not only transcendence but also continuity of life and cosmic harmony.

Thus, the contribution of Candi Sukuh lies in its ability to present a localized interpretation of Hindu teachings, particularly Tantra. This interpretation enriches our understanding of Hindu spirituality in the archipelago while illustrating that Hindu philosophy can evolve in dialogue with local cultural traditions.

From the foregoing, it is clear that Tantra in Hindu spirituality emphasizes the unity of body, cosmos, and spirit as the path to enlightenment. The concepts of fertility, harmony, and the balance of masculine-feminine energies embedded in Tantric teachings are vividly reflected in the architecture and iconography of Candi Sukuh. More than an archaeological site, Candi Sukuh conveys a spiritual message highly relevant for modern humanity: that the body and sexuality are sacred aspects of life and serve as a medium toward cosmic consciousness.

The contribution of Candi Sukuh to Hindu philosophy in the archipelago is highly significant, as it offers a local interpretation of Tantric teachings that integrates Hindu cosmology with Javanese cultural traditions. In this way, Candi Sukuh not only enriches the history of religious architecture but also provides a philosophical legacy that remains relevant today.

The Tantric teachings within Hinduism, as

IV. CONCLUSION

manifested in Candi Sukuh, ultimately constitute a valuable legacy that remains contextually relevant in the modern era. The values of harmony, reverence for nature, inclusivity, and equality serve as spiritual foundations that align with the needs of both present and future societies. As one of the late Majapahit monuments, Candi Sukuh occupies a unique position within the religious-philosophical heritage of the Indonesian archipelago. Its significance lies not only in its archaeological value but also in its philosophical import, as it represents the integration of Tantric teachings into Hindu spirituality.

Through its stepped-pyramid architecture (*punden berundak*), *lingga-yoni* reliefs, erotic iconography, and cosmological symbols, Candi Sukuh offers a localized interpretation of the sacredness of the body, fertility, and cosmic balance. Tantra affirms the principle of the unity of body, cosmos, and spirit, wherein sexuality is regarded not as taboo but as a spiritual path toward *mokṣa*. This relevance is clearly reflected in Candi Sukuh, which teaches that masculine energy (*Śiva*) and feminine energy

(*Śakti*) must remain in harmony to ensure cosmic balance. Accordingly, the body is understood not merely as a biological entity but as a spiritual medium.

For modern humanity, the message of Candi Sukuh is of critical importance, reminding us that sexuality and the body should not be reduced to the profane sphere but rather recognized as sacred dimensions of life. This perspective offers a critique of dualistic and reductionist views of the body while simultaneously opening a space for a more inclusive spirituality.

The contribution of Candi Sukuh to Hindu philosophy in the Indonesian archipelago is highly significant. It demonstrates that Tantric teachings are not confined to the classical texts of India but are also rearticulated within the Javanese cultural context. This underscores the dynamic, adaptive, and dialogical nature of Hindu philosophy, which is open to cultural engagement. Thus, Candi Sukuh is not merely a monument of the past but also an intellectual legacy that remains relevant for ongoing inquiry into the relationship between body, cosmos, and spirituality.

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