

The Kasunean River Revisited: Some Notions on the Role of Cultural Landscape Elements in Cirebon City, West Java, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Waterbodies are the most important landscape elements in the history of settlement formation. Since the 15th century, rivers have played a critical role in distributing logistics and have served as significant infrastructure. In relation to the revitalization of heritage structures in Cirebon, the role of the river, symbolizing the source of life and fertility, has been revisited and has raised the notion of ecological concerns. The reconstruction of Lawang Sanga at the River Kasunean has unveiled the challenge of maintaining cultural landscape elements in regards to resilient landscapes. This paper argues the relation between revitalization efforts and the expanding role of the river.

Keywords: *cultural landscape element, Cirebon city, resilient landscape, rivers*

INTRODUCTION

Water bodies are important elements serving the natural system of an urban landscape. In addition to ecological functions, they also improve the image of the city. One form of water body most commonly found in cities are rivers. In some cities, a river becomes a unique iconic character of the city, making it different from other cities (Simonds & Starke, 2006). One city in Indonesia which has this kind of uniqueness is Cirebon (Figure 1).

The rivers in Cirebon City are an important part and parcel of the history of Cirebon in West Java Province, Indonesia. In addition to functioning as irrigation and drainage, these rivers have become the infrastructure connecting the sea coastal areas with the inland region since the era of Tarumanegara Kingdom (4th century - to-7th century AD). In addition to the transport infrastructure, the rivers served as a royal fortress and barricade in fending off enemy attacks (Adeng, Kuswiah, *et.al.* 1998). In his book *Suma Oriental*, Tomi Pires states that, when he

visited Cirebon in 1513 there were major rivers navigable by *jungs*, a type of small sailing ship (Atja, 1986) (Figure 2).

Furthermore, since the time of the Kingdom of Cirebon in the 15th century to the Dutch Colonial period in the mid-20th century, the function of rivers in Cirebon city continued to change. Although in

general the ecological function of the river has not changed, i.e. as drainage and irrigation, these rivers have additional functions and also imply a different philosophy. As an example, the history of the river Sukalila is associated with the story of Sheikh Magelung¹. In the same period (19th century) Sukalila River and Bacin River changed their shape in order to support the improvement of the ecological

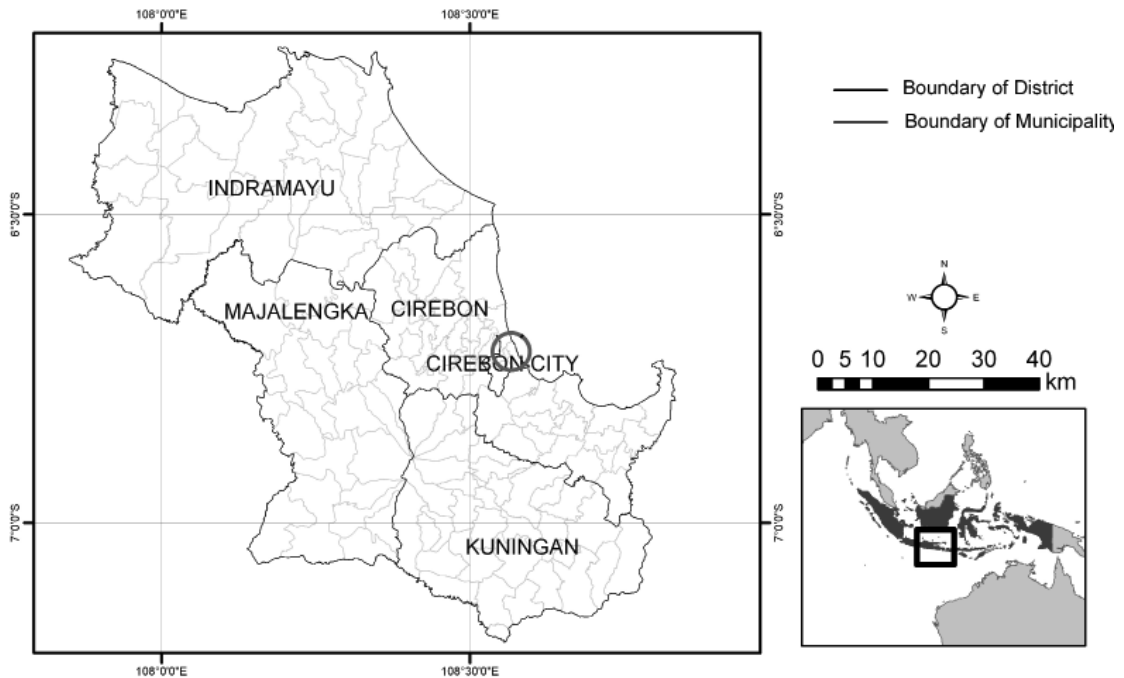


Figure 1:
The Position of Cirebon City in Indonesia



Figure 2:
Bacin River before it was turned into Merdeka Street (left & center) and excavation work prior to Merdeka Street (right)

¹ It is told that Syekh Magelung was a very powerful person who came to Cirebon to look for someone who can cut his hair. By the time he arrived around the Sukalila river (Karangetas street), he was unaware that his hair had been cut by Syekh Syarif Hidayatullah (the King of Cirebon). The term *sukalila* means that Syekh Magelung was pleased because his hair could be cut by someone who was more powerful than him.

conditions of the city of Cirebon, which was very bad at that time. To facilitate the flow of urban drainage, the riverbank of the Sukalila River was straightened. Parallel to the river, a new canal, the Kalibaru, was built. The Bacin River, which was not far from the Sukalila River, was closed and used as a highway. In addition to functioning as irrigation for rice fields and plantations along the river, the Kasunean River also serves as a transport pathway, and the entrance gate from the Cirebon Girang (Cirebon inland) to Cirebon Larang (city of Cirebon). This river also serves as the sacred ritual bath (*ngirab*)², so it has a different philosophical meaning than other rivers.

At the time of the Kingdom of Cirebon (15th - 17th century) Lawang Sanga³ was an important icon, a symbol of economic progress, because in addition to having the guardhouse, it served as a place for commodities to enter the city of Cirebon. However, with the change in the orientation of transportation from river to land in the Dutch Colonial period (18th century to 1945), Lawang Sanga ended its service. Because it was no longer functioning, the guardhouse was abandoned and it became a damaged building.

In 2013, the Government of the Republic of Indonesia held a neighborhood revitalization program of cultural heritage in the city of Cirebon. The program aims to improve the physical condition of the Kratons of Cirebon - which is a fraction of the Kingdom of Cirebon - in an effort to improve and generate a glorious memory of moments in the history of the Kingdom of Cirebon's heyday (Mjoharudin, 2013). One of the buildings included in the program is the Lawang Sanga. The building is part of a revitalization program of Kraton Kasepuhan. This palace was once the administrative center of the Kingdom of Cirebon, and is the largest palace in the city of Cirebon.

This paper aims to describe changes in the shape and function of the rivers of the Kingdom of Cirebon, especially the Kasunean River, along with describing factors that make these rivers and elements still exist to this day. Furthermore the paper will suggest how elements of the Kasunean River and Lawang Sanga can enhance Cirebon's image. This paper is part of my dissertation, whose topic is "The Influence

of Kraton on the Cultural Landscape of Kraton Cirebon", where the rivers and artifacts are elements of cultural landscape.

THEORIES OF RIVERS AS RESILIENT LANDSCAPE ELEMENTS

A river is one of the landscape elements that is formed naturally, due to the movement of water eroding the earth to form a basin. This formation is called a flow or water bodies (Waryono, 2014). Structurally a river is included in the landscape elements that shaped the corridor transporting hydrological water from land to sea (Dramstad, *Et.al.*, 1996). In addition to the ecological function, a river has economic, social, aesthetic, and sometimes political functions. Ecologically, the body and the banks of the river are the source of life. Because of the good ecological conditions, a river also features an aesthetic function. Economically, rivers can be a source of livelihood and transportation lines to support the development of a region. Socially, a river can become a place of social activities and cultural rituals. Politically, a river can function as a defense buffer and administrative boundaries of an area (Robinson, 2012).

A river is a tangible element that can form the identity of a historical city. In addition to its unique character, a river can also serve as a forum for cultural activities, especially in the cultural urban landscape (Rosmalia & Martokusumo, 2012). The same is conveyed by O'Donnell (2008), that the tangible elements in a cultural landscape in the city can contain a 'spirit of place'. So it can be said that a river in an urban cultural landscape can shape the character of the town and evoke 'the spirit of place'.

An urban cultural landscape is a true picture of the cultural landscape, which is the city's real cultural expression (Calcatinge, 2010). In order to maximizing the expression of the culture, a good marker will be required. A river as a place of cultural activities also needs to have good qualities. To

² *Ngirab*, in the Tarumanagara era was called *maha kumba*, which means holy bath. The purpose of this bath is to clean the body in order to become holy again. This ritual was originated in the Hindu culture. The term *ngirab* was used after the arrival of Islam in the Cirebon region around the 15th C.

³ *Lawang sanga* means nine doors. Philosophically it is a symbol of nine holes in human body, which have to be guarded properly and according to the custom (Cirebon local community), in order to gain a noble position.

become so it needs a resilience system. According to (Imran, 2007), resilience is a system that responds to intentional or unintentional disturbances and restores it to its original state. If the interference exceeds the tolerance limit, the interference will gradually be absorbed to form a new resilient system. In a city of cultural landscapes, the landscape of human culture also has a particular endurance limit. This system is a natural response to facing the distractions that can come from humans or from nature itself. According to Plieninger and Bieling (2012), resilience systems in the cultural landscape has a systematic and comprehensive framework. Concepts that emerge from these conditions can cross space and time.

DESCRIPTION: RIVER DEVELOPMENT IN THE CITY OF CIREBON

Since before the 15th century, Cirebon has been famous as a port city. This was before the establishment of the Kingdom of Cirebon. Cirebon port became part of the international trade route, 'The Silk Road' (Lapian & Sedyawati, 1997). During this time, the river had a very important role. In addition to being the border of the city center, the river also served as a transportation route connecting the coastal region (Cirebon Larang) with the interior (Cirebon Girang) (Sulistiyono, 1997; Wahyu, 2005). The river, as the water container, was believed to be the source of life that brought fertility and prosperity

at that time (Falah, 1997). On the other hand, the river was considered as a place favored by the Gods (Ambary, 1998). Therefore, Prince Cakrabuwana (King of the Kingdom of Cirebon I) built Kraton Pakungwati between the Sipadu River and the Kasunean River in the 15th century.

In this period, the Sukalila, Bacin, Sipadu, and Kasunean/Krian/Sipadu/Gangganadi rivers had natural winding shapes and connecting with each other (Figure 2). In addition to functioning as key transport infrastructures, those rivers contain a special meaning. The Kesunean River is regarded as the 'replica' of Ganges river in India, and the Sukalila River, is related to the legend of Sheikh Magelung, a man with magical power whose hair can be cut only by Sheikh Sharif Hidayatullah (King of Cirebon) around this river (Asteja, 2013).

Since the beginning of the 17th century, the role of the river has gradually declined along with the changes of rulers in the city of Cirebon. The existence of a cooperation agreement between the VOC and the Sultan of Cirebon (Sultan Sepuh and Sultan Anom) on January 7, 1681 (Masduqi, 2011) triggered port and land transportation development, as well as the development of the city. Transport infrastructure, which originally used the river, began to change to a land line. The highlight of this diversion occurred with the opening of the SCS (*Semarang-Cheribonsche-Stoomtram-Maatschappij*) railway line connecting Cirebon with other cities on the island of Java, in 1911 (Adeng, *et.al.*, 1998).

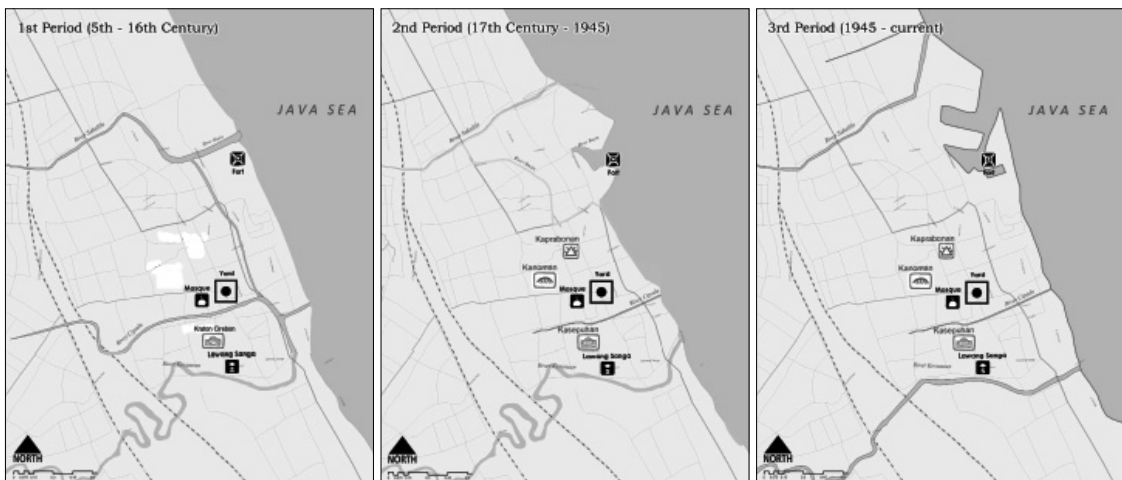


Figure 3:
Form Transformation of Cirebon Rivers

With the development of land transportation, the port and the city of Cirebon grew, paving the way to improve the environmental quality. A report by Godee Molsbergen in *Gedenkboek der Gemeente Cheribon*, 1906-1931, stated that the ecological condition of the city was very bad, waste water was everywhere causing a variety of diseases as the city did not have a sewer. Because of this only a few colonial officials dared to stay in Cirebon (Sulistiyo, 1997). The colonial government then performed various repairs, particularly on the rivers. Map interpretations from 1690 and 1719 show that some rivers changed in function and corridors form. The Sukalila estuary was made straight. Furthermore, in order to discharge the water into the sea more smoothly, the Kalibaru whose position was adjacent to the Sukalila River was then built. To reduce the pool of water which was the source of malaria, the river was closed and converted into a road (currently the Merdeka street) (Figure 3). At this time the north and south sewers were also built, and the river emptied into the Kalibaru and Sukalila rivers. A flood channel was constructed to reduce runoff water from inland to the city of Cirebon.

Although there were many changes, some rivers still serve as irrigation for rice fields and plantations. These rivers are Kasunean and Sipadu. People still believe that the Kasunean River is a holy river, depicting the Ganges River in India. It can be seen that up to the time of independence, the people still performed the ritual holy bath there (Asteja, 2013).

Over time, in the period of Indonesian independence, the rivers in Cirebon have not changed significantly.

Cirebon city is growing into a city of trade and services, in which transport is basically done by roads. The rivers are declining in quality. Rituals held in the past in certain rivers began to be moved to another river, which is more towards Cirebon *Girang* (inland). The function and form of transformation of each period can be seen in Figure 4 and Table 1 below.

DISCUSSION AND CLOSING: KESUNEAN RIVER AS WITNESS TO THE CHANGES OF THE CIREBON CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

As mentioned above, one of the most important rivers in the city of Cirebon is the Kesunean River, or also known as Kalisapu, Krian, Suba, and Gangganadi. This river has important, diverse roles, namely as borders, economic transportation lines, agricultural irrigation, and also entrusted by the community as a holy river, depicting the Ganges River in India.

The role of the the Kesunean River as boundaries started during the Kingdom of Cirebon. Under the reign of Sunan Gunungjati or Sheikh Sharif Hidayatullah, it was designated as a boundary between the Kingdom of Cirebon government centers with the rural districts. As noted in the manuscript Mertasinga, Canto XXIX :06-XXIX: 19, that "... the limits of Carbon at the time was: in the east along the coast, to the south along Kalisapu/ Kasunean time, in the west up to the high seas as a limit, in the northern corner of the city that became



*Figure 4:
The condition of Kesunean River at the present (left) and Lawang Sanga (right)*

Table 1: Function and Form Transformation of Cirebon Rivers

Change Variable	Period 1 (5 th -16 th Century)	Period 2 17 th Century-1945	Period 3 (1945 s/d present)
River Condition	- The Kesunean was reinforced, made wider and deeper. - Sukalila, Cipadu, Bacin River (Now, Jl. Merdeka).	- The condition of the Kesunean river and Cipadu river was still natural. - Sukalila was straightened and divided into Kalibaru and Kali Sungai Sukalila - The Bacin River was closed to be turned into Merdeka street. - Flood canal was built - North and South sewers were built, emptied in Sukalila river.	The physical condition of the rivers remain unchanged, but a change in water quality due to sedimentation, and pollution of domestic and agricultural waste.
Main function	- Kasunean/Krian river as own border, center of government of the Kingdom of Cirebon. - Means of transportation into the inland. - Irrigation for farming. - Ritual place for holy bath.	- Kesunean river as administrative border of the Gemeente Cheribon - No longer have a means of transportation, river as water drainage.⁴ - Irrigation. - Place for holy bath ritual.⁵	- Water channel from upstream to downstream - Sacred place for holy bath (up to 1970).
Philosophy	Favorite place for the Hindu gods.	Good place around the river, water is the most favored elements of the Hindu Gods.	Good place around the river, water is the most favored elements of the Hindu Gods.
Riverbanks Land use	settlement, rice field and plantation	Settlement (Kraton), funeral place	Settlement

Source: (Sulistiyono, 1997; Wahju, 2005; Atlas Maior, 2007; Hasyim, 2013; Observation, 2012& 2013)

Jagabayan. To the east the Customs - sea boundary. Pulled straight south towards the southeastern corner of the Kasunean. Then drawn straight to the west then it is the western corner is the Gate to the south and to the north-west corner of the sea as it was Ki Gedeng Kiring limit, the north door, which

was named Jagabayan Larang located in the south Kasunean." (Wahju, 2005).

The use of the Kasunean River as a boundary continued to the era of Gemeente Cirebon in 1897. This is listed in the State Gazette No. 211 of 1897, as

⁴ With the enactment of the treaty on export tax abolition between the Netherlands and the Sultans, the Netherlands had the authority to develop transportation infrastructure to transport products from the inland (Cirebon Girang). To support the effort, land road infrastructure was constructed and was continued with the construction of railway track in the 20th century (Sulistiono, ST. 1994, pp 114-162)

⁵ The holy bath ritual is part of Mahakumba ceremony which is held every Rebo Wekasan (the last Wednesday) in the month of Suro in the Krian/Gangganadi/Kesunean River which is mentioned as Prince Wangsakerta manuscript.

follows: "...*Met wijziging in zoover van het besluit van 28 Augustus 1887 no.2/c (staatsblad no. 159), vast te stellen de volgende grenzen voor de hoofdplaats Cheribon: ...ten Zuiden: de grens tusschen deze beide dessa's, van gemeld ontmoetingspunt tot de kali Kasoenean (in haren bovenloop ook genaamd kali Krijan, kali Gerit en kali Soeba), verder de rechteroever dezer kali tot hare uitmonding in zee...*". Based on the state sheet, the southern part of *Gemeente Cheribon* is north of the Kesunean River.

In addition to becoming the boundary, the river has also served as a pathway to Kesunean transportation since the 16th century. Sulistiyono (1994) revealed that Kesunean River has acted as a transportation route connecting the port with the hinterland Cirebon (*Cirebon Girang*) since before Tomi Pires came to Cirebon. This is supported by evidence of artifacts Lawang Sanga, and map of the year 1719 AD. Both indicate that the river was the entrance gate of Cirebon *Girang* to the City of Cirebon. According to PRA. Arief Natadiningrat (Sultan Sepuh XII), at the height of the Kingdom of Cirebon, Lawang Sanga acted as a customs building and also as the gateway for the merchants who exported commodities to foreign countries (Natadiningrat, 2012).

In addition to the boundary to support the port, the Kasunean River is also believed to be a replica of the Ganges River in India, for the river is also known as Gangganadi. At certain times, a *ngirab* ritual or holy bath took place at this river, a purifying ritual by bathing in the river (Adeng, *et.al.* 1998; Hasyim, 2014). According to Hashim, the society of Cirebon *Girang*, who was included in the Indraprahasta, has organized an 80-year *ngirab* since the year 80 Saka (1058 AD). The ritual is held every *Rebo Wekasan*, the last Wednesday of the month Sapar, based on *Aboge* calendar (a blend of Javanese and Hijri calendar) (Hashim, 2013). According to the script *Negara Kretabhumi I Parwa I*, at first the *ngirab* ritual is called '*matirta medha*' (self-purifying), originally a Hindu tradition. Since Islam arrived in Cirebon, the ritual was renamed to *ngirab*, along with probing the Islamic concepts into this ritual. Since the 1980s this ritual has not been held because the water quality conditions of River Kesunean got worse.

Right now, there are some efforts from the government of the Republic of Indonesia, local government of Cirebon and local community to revitalize *Lawang Sanga* at the Kasunean River, as part of Cirebon heritage. The program is the revitalization of cultural heritage in order to restore

the physical condition of the area and buildings to that once triumphed Kingdom of Cirebon. According to Sultan Sepuh XII (2012), the program is not only for physical revitalization but also to revive the activities associated with the area. Through the revitalization, the character as an historic region may appear to improve the image of Cirebon

As an important element of cultural and historical landscape, *Lawang Sanga* and the Kesunean River need a special treatment program. The first thing to do is to improve the water quality. Then after building the physical aspects, the next step is generating activities. Since these elements could potentially be a unique tourism resources and attraction, they can be part of Cirebon tourism activities. According to Gunn (1994), cultural sites are important elements that need to be preserved because of their potential as tourist attractions. Furthermore, tourism activities in the region can interpret the heyday of the past kingdom of Cirebon. Cultural tourism activities on the Kasunean River and *Lawang Sanga* is the result of efforts to sustain the cultural heritage of Cirebon. These efforts are automatically strengthening the character of Cirebon as a city of culture and commerce.

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