

## **Symbols of Cross-cultural Communication in Kasepuhan Palace Indonesia**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to illustrate how art and culture in the Kasepuhan Palace can be interpreted as a form of cross-cultural communication. The inquiry addresses two research questions: What are cultures that interact in the 15<sup>th</sup> century in Indonesia? and How does this interaction appear in Kasepuhan Palace. The results show interactions with culture from India, China, Egypt and Europe. Among the motives: trade, the spread of religion and international politics.  
**Keywords:** Cirebon, Cross-cultural Communication, Kasepuhan Palace, Semiotics

### INTRODUCTION

Kasepuhan Palace (also known as Keraton or Kraton, that is, sultan palace) is located in the Kasepuhan Village, a subdistrict of Lemahwungkuk, Cirebon, on the northwest coast of Java, Indonesia. The palace was established in 15<sup>th</sup> century as the administrative centre of the Sultanate of Cirebon, one of the first Islamic states in the territory alongside the Sultanate of Banten. Kasepuhan covers an area of 10 hectares and has great historical value, including a unique blend of Sunadanese, Javanese, Islamic, Chinese and Dutch styles.

Although the settlement had been established as early as 1445, the palace became the official residence of Sunan Gunungjati (born Syarif Abdullah Maulana Huda 1448-1568), a prince of Egyptian Hashemite descent whose mother was Nyai Rara Santang, daughter of the Prabu Siliwangi (also Sri Baduga Maharaja and Sang Ratu Jaya Dewata) King of the Hindu Sunda Kingdom in West Java. Sunan Gunungjati also claimed descent on his paternal side from Islamic prophet Muhammad. He proclaimed Cirebon's independence from Pajajaran in 1482.

Kasepuhan Palace has an interesting architecture, with a peculiar division of space. Currently, the palace hosts a museum containing heirlooms and paintings of the royal collection. Many historical objects, some of cross-cultural value, are evidence of the good relations of the sultanate with other regions and countries.

This paper uses interpretive research based on oral statements from researchers, information from the palace administrators, and supporting literature. The data collected is described by the application of qualitative methods (Purwasito, 2003; Moleong, 2006).

## CIREBON PORT AND THE ANCIENT TRADE ROUTES

In recent years, research related to cultural aesthetics attempts to show the intersection of form and function with questions of value, meaning and significance. Three contemporary approaches are being used to study cross-cultural communication: the social science approach, the interpretative approach, and the critical approach. This paper follows an interpretative approach that emphasizes the impact of signs in human behavior and cultural representations. This approach is largely based on the study of signs (semiotics) as a way to unveil how information is transferred. (Martin and Nakayama, 2011).

In the last decades, the term heritage is being characterized by its expansion and semantic transfer, approaching international directives that heritage is not just limited to a particular national dimension. From a purely normative approach, we have moved to a less restrictive approach based on the capacity of architectural objects and artefacts to arouse certain values that led the society in question to consider it as heritage (Randall, 2002). This method has also made it possible to recognize intangible cultural heritage, which was ignored for a long time, as heritage to be protected and safeguarded (Fujiwara, 2013). Thus, the concept of heritage acquires many dimensions: cultural, physical, human and social. Its value - both intrinsic and economic - is a function of these different dimensions and of the flow of associated services. (Commission, 2014). This transnational concept of heritage can be seen at play in the case of Kasepuhan Palace, an example of international cross-cultural communication between the local sultan and other countries.

In the 15th century the ports of Java (including Cirebon) had a very important role in the transit and distribution of essential goods. They were used as warehouses in the distribution of spices as part of the spice route. The trade route in Southeast Asia was characterized by two major pathways, namely the path of China-Malacca and the Moluccas-Malacca lane, part of the Silk Road. According to historical records, Cirebon was an important port visited by merchants coming from Gujarat (India), China and Egypt.

Although Morris Rossabi has explained that the fall of the Han dynasty in the early 3rd century was the cause of the decline of the trade along the Silk Road, the rise of the Tang Dynasty in the 7th century meant a revival of these commercial routes, witnessing a large flow of merchandise across Asia on its way to Europe. As a result there was also an increase of cross-cultural relations.

The word of Cirebon, originating in *Caruban*, means “mixture”. Indeed, Cirebon is an area that was populated by a mixture of various tribal settlements. According to Rossabi this area on the north coast of Java was often called Muhara Jati. (see also Harjamukti, 2015). The place developed into an important port with very strong connections with the Islamic world and Egypt, as mentioned above. Thus, cross-cultural communication occurs in Cirebon as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century based on trade, the spread of religion and inter-marriage.

#### CROSS-CULTURAL ELEMENTS OF KASEPUHAN PALACE

The marriage ties of Cirebon Sultanate was an important factor in the adoption of foreign cultural aspects in Kasepuhan Palace. Influences also came from trade ties with various territories. For example, the Dutch were among the first to establish commercial ties. Several Indonesian islands and cities fell under their influence; for example Malacca. This gave the Dutch unchallenged right to the Asia spice trade, overtaking the previous Portuguese control. Indeed Holland had prospered by supplying ships and crews to the Portuguese. France was also a major power, although it did not play a large part in the developing trade because its lack of investment in spice exploration. However, the French did help to break the Dutch hold on the market by stealing from their plantations and begin planting on their own French-controlled islands in the Indian Ocean.

As a result, there are examples of European styles in the style and architecture of Kasepuhan Palace. For example, the hall follows similar interior designs as those used in France under the Bourbon dynasty, including a table and chairs and a chandelier. There are also many Dutch blue porcelains (blue Delft). The palace is also decorated with Greek Doric style columns used in the *Pancaniti* pavilion buildings located on the front right side. Poles are round or cylindrical and there are tapers at the bottom as well as on the top. Another example of European-style

architecture is the semi-circular arch doorways contained in *Lawang Sanga* building (nine doors), where each of the three sides has three arches. European building style is also evident in the decorative pilasters on the walls of buildings, in the form of doors and windows in the width and height of the *Pringgondani* ward, as well as the use of jalousies as air vents. At the top of the doors there is a light / air inlet called *bovenlicht* (*above light*), with small floral and animal motifs, mainly red flowers placed in among the circular tangle of stems and green leaves. The style tendrils are reminiscent of Art Nouveau style, developed in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and incorporated in Kasepuhan Palace at a later stage.

The architecture and interior Kasepuhan Palace also depicts symbols of art and culture associated to other countries such as China, the Islamic world, as well as local culture, namely Hindu-Javanese. Hindu-Javanese architecture clearly stands out in the building known as *Siti Hinggil* (*Siti* = ground, *hinggil* = high), which located at the front part of the palace complex. *Siti Hinggil* is an open building complex consisting of five stages without walls. The entire building is made of traditional Hindu brick construction. Around the temple complex there is a fence of bricks with pillars and tower called *Laras*. Decoration includes octagonal shaped geometric along the fence body. *Siti Hinggil* was also renovated by a Dutch architect in 1936 to include symbols of nobility.

One significant Hindu-Javanese aspect is the lotus-shaped decoration that covers the front pillars, the rear stairway and the court-ward that flanks the stairs. The lotus flower is believed to be a symbol of life and immortality. Here it appears in red, meaning blood, and life. There are also other flowers containing petal symbolism (i.e. the number five) and sometimes two white *Genduwong* (parrots) are also placed at both sides of the flower symmetries. Flowers are a symbol of honesty and the parrot a bird that can speak like humans. The *Prabayasa* floors are geometrically shaped including large ornament meanders.

Chinese influence can be seen in the *Kuncung* building ornaments. The gate features a *Wadasan* (rock) at the bottom as a symbol of strength, and a cosmological symbol *Mega Mendung* (rainclouds) at the top. In the middle of the building there is a gate with curved pillars of European style, and also in the *Jinem Pangrawit*, *Jinem Arum* located next to the main building. The poles in this building are namely round or octagonal, adorned with different patterns. Subsequently, at the *Gajah Nguling* building, which is sort of an open corridor that connects the ward *Jinem*

*Pangrawit* with the *Pringgondani* wards, there are six pole pieces shaped similarly. Interestingly, these are used to support the wooden roof construction of Javanese architectural style.

Other decorative elements include important symbolic animals such as *Singa* (Lion), designed in 1549 by Panembahan Losari, grandson of Sunan Gunung Jati. There are also trains of animal engravings including elephants, symbolizing the friendship of Cirebon Sultanate with India, a headed dragon as a symbol of friendship with China, etc.

## CONCLUSION

The above discussion shows the main interactions of Cirebon Sultanate with India, China and Egypt and Europe (mainly Portugal, France and Holland). The cause of such interactions were mainly due to trade, marriage and politics and can be traced to the 15<sup>th</sup> century when Kasepuhan Palace was built. These mutual influence expanded during the peak of spice trade, when the ports of Java Island (including Cirebon) became places of transit and distribution.

Evidence of these cross-cultural exchanges can be found the architecture, designs and decorations of Kasepuhan Palace, which can clearly be associated to Europe, China, the Islamic world as well as the local culture, namely Hindu-Javanese. There are height place such as symbols or hierarchy for a more noble or honorable person. The lotus flower is believed to be a symbol of life and immortality, while the red emblem of the blood, the life, and the left and right walls is heavenly. Flower emblem of honesty. The symbols of art and culture can be seen from the architecture and ornamentation of the building palace dating from any countries with a symbol that implies such a hierarchy in government and the spirit of eternal life through the symbol of a lotus flower on building ornaments.

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