LEBAK LITERACY FESTIVAL 2026
Book Review | Thursday | Oct 29, 2026

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SOME NOTES ON LOCAL CONTENT WITHIN THE CULTURAL WISDOM OF LEBAK



Published by Library and Archives Office
Lebak Regency - Rangkasbitung 2025

ISSUE

The book titled *Konten Lokal Dalam Kearifan Budaya Lebak* (Local Content within the Cultural Wisdom of Lebak), published by the Lebak Regency Library and Archives Office (2025), provides a concise description of various cultural practices in Lebak Regency (Banten Province). This anthology of local culture comprises sixty essays by sixty different authors, covering a wide range of topics organized into seven primary themes: Indigenous communities (16 articles), Rites (10 articles), Culinary traditions (13 articles), Music-arts (5 articles), Crafts (5 articles), Traditional games (5 articles), and Cultural attraction as tourism potentials (6 articles).

The large number of contributors reflects a diversity of content, interconnected by shared narrative interests and a specific geographical setting; some of the texts are even grounded in academic research. Despite this thematic variety, there is a common vision: to examine social phenomena within the realm of local culture as rooted in a contemporary context. With the exception of the Baduy community in Kanekes Village—who have long been a primary focus for both Indonesian and international researchers—most of these local cultural elements remain largely unexplored within the human and social sciences, particularly from ethnohistorical, anthropological, and sociological perspectives.

The issues raised reflect an initial attempt to address several key questions. First, there is the matter of the geographical landscape between Lebak and other parts of Banten Province—a topic often viewed through the lens of economy-political inequality between coastal and inland regions. Second, the text explores the distinct characteristics of the local inhabitant, which serve as the basis for cultural expression within the *Banten Kidul* (Southern Banten) paradigm. Third, this study examines social transformation rooted in Sundanese ethnic identity, as reflected in ideological traditions, language, genealogy, communalism, and

cultural institutions; all of which are still perceived, to this day, as being homogeneous in nature.

Regardless of its methodological strengths and limitations, this book presents a study of change and continuity driven both by internal resilience and by adaptation to external influences within the process of modernization. It highlights deeply rooted local representations that emerged following the implementation of the Dutch colonial system—specifically through the *cultuur-stelsel* (forced cultivation system) within the agro-industrial sector of inland Banten; a region once shielded from occupation and exploitation, but now open to scholarly inquiry across various academic disciplines. And, gradually, to broader purposes as well.

LOCI

Local cultural content has been gathered from approximately twenty rural settlement loci within the Lebak Regency—spanning both the highlands and the southern lowlands of Banten; situated in valleys formed by the dendritic mountain systems of the Halimun, Kendeng, and Sanggabuwana ranges. Specifically, Cipanas, Sajira, Guradog, Sobang, Hariang, Kanekes, Cibarani, and Cisungsang represent the highland areas, while Malingping, Bayah, Cihara, and Sawarna are located in the lowlands along the southern coast of Java.

Despite sharing commonalities in cosmology, genealogy, occupations, and language, each locus possesses its own unique character—shaped by its social geography and living cultural heritage—manifesting in distinct social structures, rituals, customs, arts, creative expressions, and gastronomy, all of which have emerged from the interaction between humans and their local environments.

Given the scope of the loci examined, this book highlights the vast cultural landscape contained within them. Through direct observation—and, more importantly, systematic research—it becomes clear that an undertaking of this nature cannot be completed within a single research period or by a single academic discipline. The authors and publishers deserve recognition for their exploratory study and research into the local cultural content of these relatively hard-to-reach areas.

CONTENT

Statistically, the topic that has received the most attention from authors concerns indigenous communities. Whether by coincidence or otherwise, one-third of all the articles explore a theme frequently encountered in various national and international scholarly journals—a theme largely inspired by the local wisdom of *Sunda Wiwitan* (as observed among the Old Sundanese people on Baduy home-land) or similar manifestations that coexist with Islamic practices in the *Banten Kidul* region. This encompasses cosmological and ecological concepts, as well as indigenous institutional frameworks integrated into the paradigm of the

customary village (*desa adat*) or, more broadly, the indigenous community (*komunitas adat*).

Closely related to the subject of indigenous communities, the category of rituals ranks second among all the articles. Although it holds the third position in terms of sheer quantity, the content addressing these rituals invites profound reflection. The primary challenge in analyzing such rituals lies in applying a rigorous theoretical foundation to understand each phenomenon—examining them through both structural and semantic perspectives.

A distinct focus emerges in themes concerning contemporary cultural practices, such as traditional aesthetics, musical performances, handicrafts, traditional games, and cultural attractions (tourism). Meanwhile, through various life-cycle rituals, communal well-being ceremonies, and fertility rites —such as the annual ritual of paying homage to the Goddess *Nyi Pohaci* or *Sanghyang Sri* — the dimension of spirituality, rooted in the harmony between the microcosm and the macrocosm, stands out as a dominant cultural element.

Taking its content as a whole, this book can be likened to a representation of the structure of a "cultural tree". Elements such as religion, oral traditions, agricultural practices, social communication, and cultural institutions serve as the foundation that supports the growth of the trunk, along with the cultural branches and twigs that emerge from it. The fruit borne by this "cultural tree" is remarkably diverse; a diversity that mirrors the branching of the culture itself. Although they originate from the same tree, this reflects a historical process involving adoption, acculturation, and assimilation among the diaspora of Austronesian-language speakers. This phenomenon is reflected in the material culture found in the Halimun and Kendeng hills, including what are known as *Arca Domas*, *Sasaka Domas*, the stepped structures of Cibedug, and the stone terraces of Kosala, all of which, regardless of their specific names, likely share a common origin: the Southeast Asian megalithic tradition.

NOTE

After reading this entire work on local culture—spanning more than 400 pages—it becomes clear that there are several fundamental gaps in information. While the author is under no obligation to explore every aspect in exhaustive detail, it would have been far more beneficial to address these issues rather than leaving them hanging as unanswered questions.

First, there have been no preliminary efforts to identify any "diffusion center" —a cultural core or point of dispersal— that might have exerted a centrifugal influence on the spread of local culture throughout the hinterlands of Banten. By applying Central Place Theory and drawing upon various archaeological and historical lines of evidence, we can examine whether the aspects discussed in this book point toward a long-term history regarding the origins of these village communities—whether they emerged from migration routes that began along the

northern coast of Banten, or through a diaspora moving from the eastern part toward the western reaches of the region referred to in Dutch literature as *Soenda-landen*.

Second, the description of customary institutions is consistently framed as the application of *pikukuh* (customary principles) within communal life. The data and information gathered by the authors serve as a valuable reference for understanding the "political void" that persisted from the era of the Islamic Sultanate of Banten through the implementation of formal legal policies under the colonial regime; at least within the jurisdiction of the *regenschap* of Lebak and its subordinate administrative units (*district en onderdistricten*). These local governance practices likely reflect a form of "local genius" that has endured to the present day.

Third, there remains a certain terminological bias in the thematic categorization of rituals, indigenous communities, customs, and oral traditions. This may stem from the absence of a consistent conceptual definition applied across these various fields of study. Although it does not affect the overall structure of the text, including a glossary in an appendix will be very helpful for readers in understanding the various local terms used.
