

# *Sérén Taun* and *Sura'an* Rituals as Cultural Practices to Maintain Social Cohesiveness and Spiritual Solidarity in the AKUR Community of Kuningan, West Java, Indonesia

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## Abstract

*Sundanese indigenous community in Kuningan, West Java, Indonesia has been repeatedly marginalized by the political regimes since its formation in the 1870s. They had to live in exile due to its allegedly esoteric religious practices. However, in 1999, under the Indonesian Presidency of Gus Dur (Abdul Rahman Wahid), the Adat Karuhun Urang (AKUR) Community began to gain official recognition. They consolidated its social structure into two entities: the center (puseur), referring to the original settlement of the progenitors located in Cigugur; and the Satellite (waréh) where the community organized themselves in various locations across the West Java Province.*

*This study focuses on the strategic survival of this community. It employed a symbolic interaction approach and collected data by means of participatory observation, carried out from 2015 to 2019. Purposive interviews with the leader in the Center and the elders and functionaries from two selected Satellites were also conducted.*

*The analysis shows that the AKUR community mutually fortifies the nexus between the Center and the Satellites through meaningful social interfaces and alliances embedded in various ritual practices performed every year according to the Saka Sunda lunar calendar. The most important are the rituals of *Sérén Taun* held at the Center and the *Sura'an* held at all the Satellites. These paired rituals intensely reaffirm the close connection and inter-dependence between the Center and the Satellites and re-assert the collective commitment of the community to safeguard the cultural traditions and heritage.*

**Keywords:** the AKUR Community, center-satellite nexus, *puseur* – *waréh* entities, the ritual of *Sérén Taun*, the ritual of *Sura'an*

## 1. Introduction

The *Adat Karuhun Urang*, abbreviated as AKUR, is a distinctive indigenous community whose ancestors initially resided in a traditional settlement called *kabuyutan* in Cigugur, Kuningan, West Java, Indonesia. Members of this community are devotees of the indigenous Sundanese belief system, namely *Sunda Wiwitan*, particularly *Pikukuh Tilu* religious teaching. They share similar cultural ideals and values and are very adamant about safeguarding the traditions handed over by their predecessors. Since its formation in the 1870s, this community has been incessantly discriminated against by many political regimes. The colonial power and government of the Republic of Indonesia disliked its allegedly esoteric religious practices.

The political pressures exerted by the colonial government have disintegrated the social structure of this community, forcing it to break up into smaller groups and hence become spatially dispersed. Members of the community had to live separately in exile, scattered throughout the province of West Java. The disarrayed members then organized themselves and founded satellite communities in different locations. In 1925, when the colonial government endorsed the *Adat Recht* (customary law), the constituents of this community managed to reunite again. They established a new traditional body called *Igama Djawa Soenda Pasoendan* (IDSP). However, this organization was repeatedly ostracized and forced to adjust to the existing socio-political conditions. This traditional body had to transform its identity four times before becoming the AKUR community we recognize today.

However, in 1999, when Gus Dur (Abdul Rahman Wahid) ruled as the president of the Republic of Indonesia, this community began to gain official recognition from the government. The community consolidated its social structure and configured it into two entities: the Center (*puseur*), referring to the original settlement of the progenitors located in Cigugur, Kuningan, West Java; and the Satellite communities (*waréh*), where the members of the community organized themselves in various locations across the West Java Province. The AKUR community was originally comprised of 40 elder lineages. After losing a significant number of memberships in various locations, in 1982, these elder lineages had to be trimmed and transformed into 18 satellite communities. In 2012, the number of satellite communities had to be further reduced to ten satellite communities, which physically took the form of a kampong, a hamlet, a part of a village, or a part of a hamlet (Adisaputri and Widiastuti, 2015).

At the center's heart is situated the Paséban Tri Panca Tunggal compound, which serves as the sacred communal place for the AKUR community and the residence of their respected leader, called Rama Sepuh. Meanwhile, each Satellite community owns an assembly place called *balé saréséhan*.

As part of their cultural and religious practices, members of the AKUR community, perform various rituals throughout the year, to mark various significant socio-cultural activities, life cycle stages, and other momentous happenings, carried out at the center as well as at the Satellite communities. The AKUR community uses the *Saka Sunda* lunar calendar as a reference to arrange their communal ritual cycles. There are 8 (eight) significant rituals performed yearly; the biggest ones are the *Sérén Taun* held at the Center, paired with the ritual of *Sura'an* held at all the Satellites. The ritual of *Sérén Taun* takes place at the Center during the mid of the last month of the *Saka Sunda* calendar system, dedicated as an expression of gratitude to Dewi Sri (the goddess of rice and fertility) for the abundant harvest. In contrast, the ritual of *Sura'an* takes place at the Satellites during the new year's eve of the *Saka Sunda* calendar system; it yearns and pleads to the supreme powers for their safety and prosperity in the coming *Saka Sunda* year.

This study analyzes how the enactment of ritual *Sérén Taun* at the Center is emulated on a smaller scale and is adapted to the context by the Satellites in the form of ritual *Sura'an*. *Sérén Taun* and *Sura'an* affirm the close affiliation between the Center and the Satellites and reinvigorate the affinity between the Center and the Satellites. In this way, the mutual fortification of the nexus between the Center and the Satellites proceeds through meaningful social interface and alliance embedded in the ritual practices of *Sérén Taun* and *Sura'an*.

## Review of Literature

### Research Methodology

This research employs a symbolic interaction approach. Field data collection relies on the participatory observation method from 2015 to 2019 and purposive interviews with the leader in the Center, and the elders and functionaries from two selected Satellites, particularly Kampong Pasir Samarang in Garut Regency and Kampong Cireundeu in Cimahi, Bandung Regency.

### Findings and Discussion

#### 1. The Ritual of *Sérén Taun* at the Center (Puseur)

The ritual of *Sérén Taun* is an annual harvesting festival dedicated to the Goddess of rice and fertility. In line with the socio-cultural dynamics of the AKUR Community, over the years, this ritual has undergone various adjustments, including changes in name, order of the procession, allocated venues, and time duration. *Sérén Taun* took five to six days to complete, including visitation to ancestor's sacred sites, cemeteries and escorting the rice from cultivation grounds (*Huma*) and rice fields (*sawah*) to the holy granary (*Leuit si Rara Dénok*) at Paséban.

##### 1.1. Preparatory Stage

A hundred days before the ritual of *Sérén Taun*, the community members of the Satellites began to perform self-purification rituals at their residences, which can be discerned into two parts, namely *ngabeuti* and *mesék pare*. These self-purification rituals help the community members contemplate their origin and becoming, their meaning of life, their responsibility as community members, the sustainability of their socio-cultural values, and their devotion and attachment to the Center.

*Ngabeuti* is an act of self-mastery and self-awareness, exercised through dietary practices following the teaching of Sunda Wiwitan's *Pikukuh Tilu*, including consuming only tubers, grains, vegetables, and fruits sequentially, and at the end, consuming all those nutrients without meat. *Ngabeuti* is conducted in forty days, ten days for each sequence. *Mesék paré* is an act of self-meditation, exercised through peeling rice grains manually one after another for one hundred days.

Each family at the Satellites celebrated the end of self-purification rituals by making and consuming cone-shaped rice dishes with vegetables and a whole seasoned chicken inside (*tumpeng sabogana*) as an expression of gratitude to the self for being able to pass the whole rituals successfully. The ingredients of the cone-shaped rice dishes include dietary foods consumed during *ngabeuti* and rice grains during *mesék paré*. The surplus rice grains from the *mesék paré* procession belong to the sacred communal place (*Paséban*) at the Center.

##### 2.2. The Main Rituals

The main rituals of *Sérén Taun* usually took six days to accomplish. The overall processes comprised four distinctive thematic stages, namely:

Stage 1: The Commemoration of Origin and Self-purification

Stage 2: Cosmic Reaffirmation of Center and Satellites

Stage 3: Reconnecting with the Extended Land of Origin

Stage 4: Union of the Self, Community, and Cosmic Body of Consciousness

### Stage 1: Commemoration of the Origin and Self-purification

Day 1:

Stage 1 begins early in the morning with the ritual of *ngadegkeun Pwah Aci*, to summon the goddess of fertility to be present at the holy granary, to infuse the seeds prepared for the next planting season with her essence of fertility (Fig. 1). The ritual involves eleven pairs of elders representing ten pairs from the Satellites (*waréh*) and one pair from the Center (*puseur*). Each pair from the Satellites received a bamboo tray filled with a pair of tied rice straws and another crop produced, symbolizing the handing over of mandatory agricultural duty from the Center to the Satellites. The eleven pairs of elders then enter Balé Binarum at the Paséban's to continue with the ritual of rice-grains peeling (*mesék paré*). They begin the ritual with meditation before immersing themselves in silence while gently peeling the rice grains (Fig. 2). This ritual commemorates 'the moment of silence,' when the Government forbade the ritual of rice-pounding (*nutu*) from 1982 to 1998 and subsequently substituted secretly by the AKUR community with the ritual of rice grains peeling (*mesék paré*) (Adisaputri and Widiastuti, 2014;2015).



**Fig. 1:** The ritual of *Ngadegkeun Pwah Aci* in front of the holy granary.  
**Source:** Documentation of *Sérén Taun*, 2019.



**Fig. 2:** The ritual of *mesék paré* in Balé Binarum room, Paséban building.  
**Source:** Document of *Sérén Taun*, 2018.

In the afternoon, the leader of the AKUR community Rama Sepuh leads the ritual of communal purification (*siraman*), marked by the splashing of holy water taken from the sacred well (*Jalatunda*) at the *Paséban*, utilizing sacred plants dedicated by the Satellites to the Center

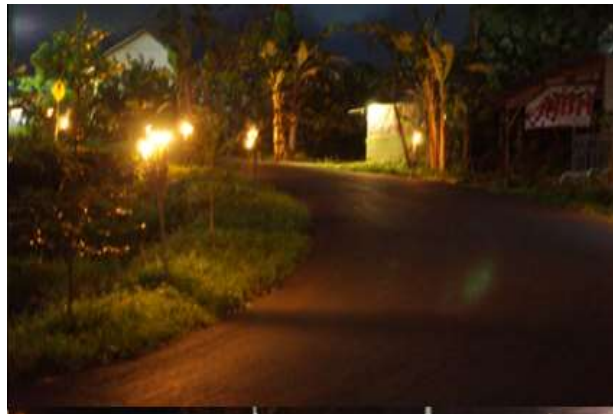
as splasher. At the closing session, several elders place forty offerings at the holy granary (Fig. 3), followed by communal meditation at the sacred Grand Hearth of Dapur Ageng in the Paséban to reinforce the community attachment and consciousness.



**Fig. 3:** Small offerings are devoted to the holy granary at Paséban.

**Source:** Documentation of *Sérén Taun*, 2017.

In the evening, the community performs the ritual of *damar séwu* to mark the opening of the *Sérén Taun* ritual by igniting torchlights at *Tugu Paséban* as the Center and carrying them in the procession along with all cardinal directions (Fig. 4). This procession symbolizes the Center as the origin of light (source of inner consciousness), disseminated to all the Satellites. In the procession, the community members chant sacred spells and poems as they pass their living places, such as paddy fields, farms, riverbanks, water springs, cemeteries, and sacred forests (Fig. 5).



**Fig. 4:** The torchlights during the ritual of *damar séwu*.

**Source:** Documentation of *Sérén Taun*, 2017.



**Fig. 5:** The incantations of sacred spells and poems during the ritual of *damar séwu*.

Source: Documentation of *Sérén Taun*, 2017.

## Stage 2: Cosmic Reaffirmation of the Center and the Satellite Settlements.

Day 2 to Day 4:

On day two, the ritual of *pesta dadung* occurred from morning to midday. It intends to purify all things before they resume their existential reality and where the guardian spirits reaffirm their place in the community's living environment (villages, paddy fields, farms, and sacred forest). The purification of paddy fields and farms is executed by symbolically returning the harmful agricultural pests and bugs to their original habitat (the sacred cleft of *Situ Hyang*). The reaffirmation of cosmic unity resulted from the purification of the relationship between humans and Nature. The reinforcement of social cohesiveness is executed by purifying fraternal relationships among the community members and the structural affiliation between the Center (*puseur*) and the Satellites (*waréh*).

Eleven pairs of grandfathers and grandsons from the Satellites danced to visualize the affiliation between the Center and the Satellites. The dancers positioned themselves in a circular formation facing a palanquin filled with pests and bugs belonging to the sacred cleft of *Situ Hyang*, a *dadung* rope made of bamboo fiber, assorted offerings, and a brazier with burnt myrrh (Fig. 6). The grandfathers hold the *dadung* rope while the grandsons act as cattle herders dancing in a circle outside the elder circle. The grandfather-grandson pairs confirm that maintenance of cultural values and inheritance runs in the male lines of the kindred. The *dadung* rope indicates that the community members are descendants of the same origin and that there is a close tie between the Center and the Satellites.



**Fig. 6:** A dance performed during the ritual of *Pesta Dadung*.  
Source: Documentation of *Sérén Taun*, 2018.

The ritual of *pesta dadung* is closed by the leader of the AKUR community Rama Sepuh denoted by a communal dancing (*ngibing*) participated by all elders from the Satellites and all participants, followed by a feast of cone-shape rice dish with vegetables and a whole seasoned chicken inside (*tumpeng sabogana*). Afterwards, all the participants rejoicefully walked to the Paséban accompanied by the music of traditional bamboo instruments (*kohkol*).

On day three and day four, various events are organized, including cultural dialogues and workshops in the daytime and spiritual arts performances at nighttime (Fig. 7).



**Fig. 7:** *Tarawangsa* is one of the spiritual art performances.

**Source:** Documentation of *Sérén Taun*, 2018.

### Stage 3: Reconnecting with the Extended Land of Origin

Day 5:

In the afternoon, a cultural parade (*helaran budaya*) is performed, participated by the community members and all external participants, to affirm their role as the inheritance and the keepers of the AKUR cultural wisdom and values. The decorations express a strong commitment to the sustainability of their living environment. The parade leads by eleven pairs of percussions and pennants representing the Center and the ten satellites (Fig. 8), followed by decorated carriages carrying various endemic plants and native snacks (*jajan pasar*). The parade takes a clockwise route, starting from *Tugu Paséban*, passing through the North Gate, the main roads of Kuningan, and then returning to *Paséban* through the South Gate.



**Fig. 8:** Cultural parade (*helaran budaya*) in the ritual of *Sérén Taun*.

**Source:** Documentation of *Sérén Taun*, 2019.

The ritual of “matrimony of the rice seeds” (*ngarérémakeun*), as an ancient ritual practice, is conducted at midnight, solemnly accompanied by the sacred dance of *Pwah Aci*. They place a pair of rice haulms collected by the chosen custodian during the harvest season at *Jinem’s* room in the *Paséban*. They laboriously decorate the ceremonial setting with a mountain of rice grain ties and a pair of dragons décor made from various fruits, rhizomes, and other crops collected from the ten satellites. The ritual is led by respected elders from the Kanékés Customary Village from South Banten, and their predecessor kins with exclusive authority to conduct the primordial ritual (Fig. 9).



**Fig. 9:** The ritual of *Ngarérémokeun* led by the elders of Kanékés Customary Village  
**Source:** Documentation of *Sérén Taun*, 2019.

#### **Stage 4: The Union of the Self, Community, and Cosmis Body of Consciousness**

Day 6:

The summit of the *Sérén Taun* ritual consisted of two consecutive rituals, namely the ritual of *ngajayak* (chaperoning the rice seeds) and *nutu* (rice pounding). In the ritual of *ngajayak*, they symbolically chaperoned rice seeds from the ten satellites from each agreed gathering place situated in all cardinal directions to *Tugu Paséban*, representing the Center (the origin of ancestors' settlement). The parade march along with eleven pairs of bamboo instruments and kettle drum players (*angklung buncis*), eleven pairs of a teenager carrying rice knots, a variety of crops, foods, offerings, and sculptures of each satellite's main icons (*méméron*) (Fig. 10). Number eleven and cardinal orientation symbolize the lineage between the Satellites and the Center and the four elements of life (earth, water, wind, and fire). The rice knots, foods, crops, and offerings signify the adherence and attachment of the Satellites to the Center.



**Fig. 10:** *Ngajayak*, the ritual of chaperoning rice seeds from the Satellites to the Center.  
**Source:** Documentation of *Sérén Taun*, 2019.

The encounter of parade lines from four cardinal directions at *Tugu Paséban* marked the cosmic reunion between the Satellites and the Center. They hailed the encounter joyfully with the traditional performance of *angklung* and percussion ensembles (*angklung buncis*). The



musical harmony and dance choreography reverberate the spiritual bonding among the AKUR community members.

The leader of the AKUR community Rama Sepuh initiated the rice-pounding ritual (*nutu*) at *Taman Sari Paséban* after completing the *ngajayak* ritual. The rice to be pounded amounted to 220 kilograms. The number 22 signifies the number of the human body parts that incarnate into male and female as the sources of new life creation. This number also represents the summation of pairs from the Satellites and the center. The pounded rice is then donated to the poor and the orphanages and shared amongst the community members. The rice-pounding ritual (*nutu*) marked the end of the *Sérén Taun* ritual.

## 2. The Ritual of *Sura'an* at the Center, the Individual Residence, and the Satellites (*Waréh*)

The term *sura* refers to the first month of the *Saka Sunda* calendar system, which denotes the end of an old-time cycle and the beginning of a new one. In parallel, the ritual of *Sura'an* signifies the closing of an old and the opening of a new *Saka Sunda* year. This particular event is celebrated consecutively in three different localities: the Center (*Paséban*), the individual residences, and the Satellites (*balé saréséhan*).

### *Sura'an* at the Center

The ritual of *Sura'an* at the Center occurred on the first night of Sura month, attended by elders from the Center and representatives from the Satellites. Their task is to give responses to the prophecy (*dawuh*) disclosed by the leader of the AKUR community *Rama Sepuh*, to agree on a new consensus proposed by the elders, to practice communal meditation (*olah rasa*), and conclusively to close the event with a big feast. They served eleven units of *tumpang sabogana* and other specific side dishes prepared by members of the AKUR community at the Center and the Satellites. Forty offerings consist of twenty-two small ones representing pairs at the Center and ten satellites, and eighteen large ones representing pairs of nine sacred planes (*mandala panta-panta*) traversed by the human being in the process of life from birth to death. Ultimately, the ritual of *Sura'an* epitomizes the genesis of human beings and the formation of the universe.

### *Sura'an* at the Individual Residence

Right after the ritual of *Sura'an* at Paséban, the community members at the Satellites celebrate the event with a small festivity (*selamatan*) at their premises. They prepare several kinds of cone-shaped rice dishes (*tumpang sabogana*), symbolizing the harmonious way of life in the universe. They send offerings to the granary (*goah*) and hearth (*hawu*) of their elderly members to signify that they are the rightful successive generations from each respective satellite. The granaries and hearths notably represent the kinship network system in the AKUR community.

### *Sura'an* at the Satellites

The elders and residents of the Satellite determine the rightful time for conducting the ritual of *Sura'an* at the Satellites, but it must be during the month of Sura. The ritual took place at the communal place (*Balé Saréséhan*), led by the elders of the Satellite. The community members prepared many cone-shaped rice dishes (*tumpang sabogana*) according to the number of families affiliated as members of the Satellite community. In this ritual, they send offerings to *Balé Saréséhan* and other sacred places such as ancestors' historical sites, cemeteries, granaries, and water springs that uphold the sustainability of their livelihood.

The ritual of *Sura'an* at the Satellites is performed in three days period, repeating the pattern of the *Sérén Taun* ritual but in simplified ways and more adapted to the local context. The ritual of *Sura'an* ultimately expresses the close attachment and heavy reliance of the Satellites on the Center. It comprises three basic episodes, namely: *Bubuka*, *The art performances and sacred sites pilgrimage*, and *Ngajayak*.

### ***Bubuka***

The *Sura'an* ritual at the Satellites begins with *bubuka*, the rite of the new *Saka Sunda* annual cycle opening (*bubuka*), a simplified version of *damar séwu* of the *Sérén Taun* ritual performed at the Center (Fig. 11). Community members prepared different dishes for the offerings based on the available staple food at each satellite to summon the goddess of fertility to reside in the satellite's holy granary (*ngadegkeun indung leuit*). They uttered sacred incantations (*rajah*) to bid the ancestral and the guardian spirits to safeguard the sacred places and living environment of the community at the satellite. Each satellite has its own ancestral and guardian spirits, although they also have the ancestral and guardian spirits at the Center.



**Fig. 11:** *Bubuka*, a simplified version of *damar séwu*, performed the ritual of *Sura'an* at the satellite.

**Source:** Documentation of *Sura'an*, 2018.

In the evening, the community members ignite lamps and torches at *balé saréséhan*, to be carried along with all cardinal directions of the satellite by several married couples who already had children. Upon returning to *balé saréséhan*, these married couples consecutively ignite candles of the community members starting from the oldest to the youngest, symbolizing that the tradition and moral values they inherited from their ancestors at the center will be cherished and passed from generation to the generation. In return, as a token of gratitude, they will dedicate their livelihood to the welfare and sustainability of the AKUR community.

### ***The Arts Performances and Sacred Sites Pilgrimage***

After the rite of *bubuka*, on the first and second nights, sacred art performances and poem recitations are staged to consolidate and purify the relationship between the community life and the cosmic. On the second day, the community members visit ancestor's sacred places, including the cemeteries, the water spring, and sacred forests. The sacred art performances most frequently shown are *tarawangsa* – a dance to summon the ancestors' spirit, *karinding* – music played by instruments made of bamboo, *tutunggulan* – rice-pounding simulation dance, and *réog/angklung buncis* – a theatrical bamboo instruments ensemble.

### ***Ngajayak and Angklung Buncis***

On the third day of the ritual of *Sura'an*, community members implement a simplified *ngajayak* procession. The parade escorts mountain-shape foods and offerings from the entrance of the kampong and all cardinal directions to the *balé saréséhan*, accompanied by *angklung buncis* - music from the bamboo instruments and kettle drums (Fig. 12). The *ngajayak* procession reaffirms the *gumulung* or spiritual embodiment of the Satellites and the Center. If *ngajayak* procession in the ritual of *Sérén Taun* at the Center occurred under the direction of a chosen elder, at the Satellite, *ngajayak* occurred under the direction of *léngsér*s who have a lower social position in the community (Fig. 13).



**Fig. 12:** *Angklung Buncis* - music from the bamboo instruments and kettle drums  
**Source:** Documentation of *Sura'an* 2018.

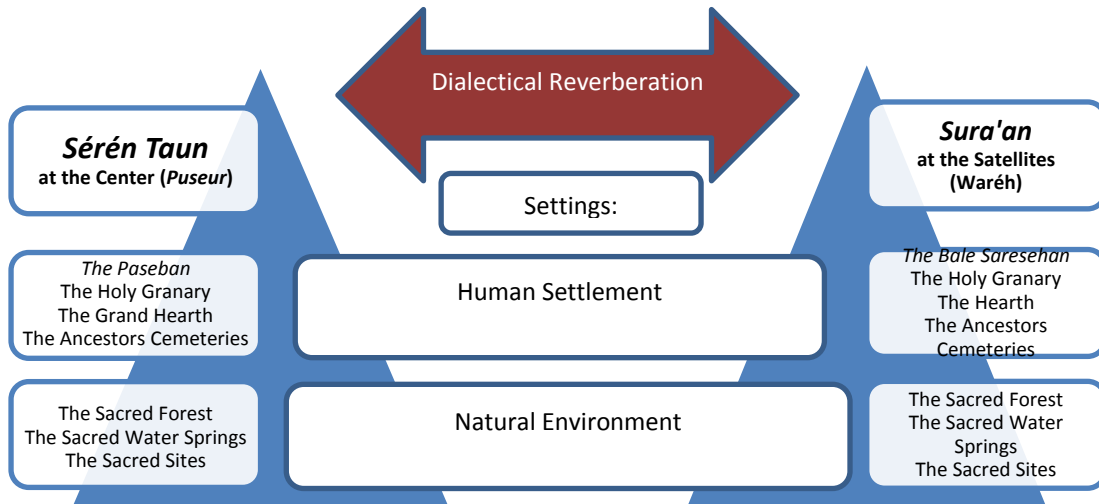


**Fig. 13:** *Léngsér*s lead the *ngajayak* procession at the Satellite  
**Source:** Documentation of *Sura'an* 2018.

### 3. The ‘Mirroring’ between the Center (*puseur*) and the Satellites (*waréh*)

Comparative analysis between *Séréén Taun* at the Center and the ritual of *Sura'an* at the Satellites show a similar activity pattern and symbolic connotation but difference in order, hierarchy, and scale. In the ritual of *Séréén Taun*, the AKUR community collectively recalls their cultural origin, discloses their line of descent, reaffirms their commitment to the ideals and tenets imparted by their ancestors, and fortifies their social identity and cohesiveness. The Satellites reiterate the cultural message from the ritual of *Séréén Taun* dutifully. Accordingly, the Satellites emulate the ritual of *Séréén Taun* but on a smaller scale and more adapted to the local context. Through the ritual of *Sura'an*, community members at the Satellites reaffirm their close affiliation, intimate affinity, and enormous dependency on the Center. In this way, the nexus between the Center and the Satellites is mutually invigorated through meaningful social interfaces and alliances embedded in the ritual practices of *Séréén Taun* and *Sura'an*.

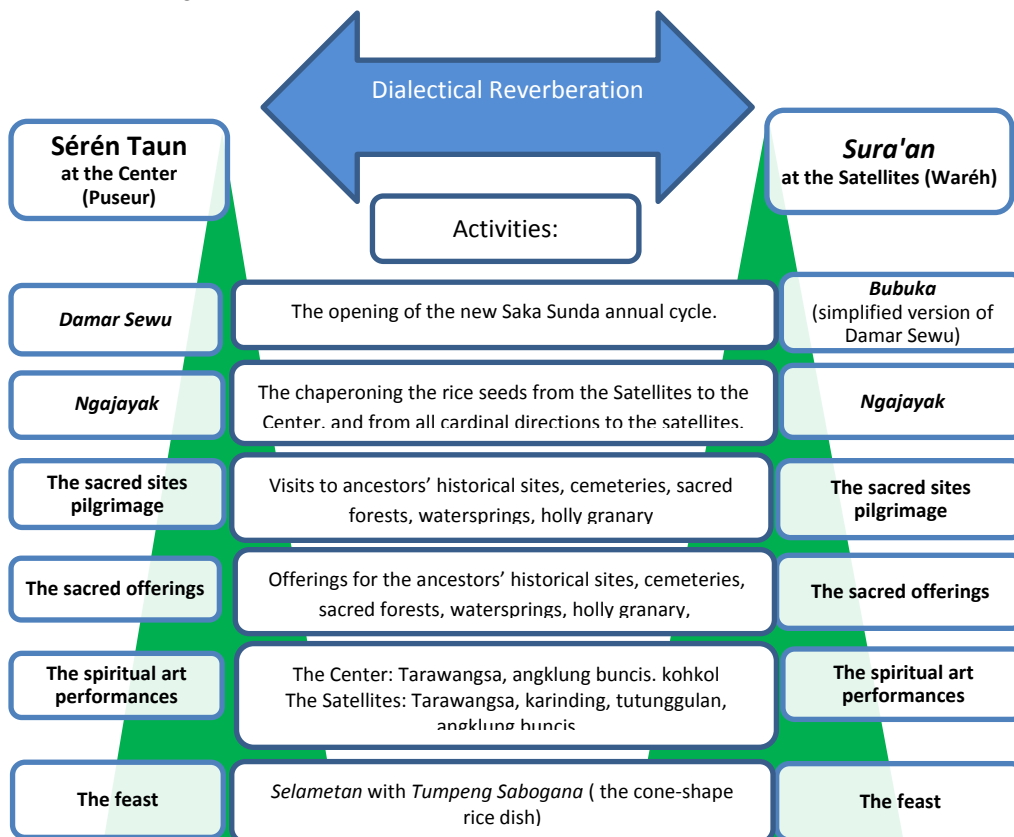
The dialectical reverberation and mirroring between the Center and the Satellites are observable in the parallelism of settings of the ritual of *Séréén Taun* and *Sura'an*, as shown in Fig. 14.



**Fig. 14:** The parallelism of settings in the ritual of *Sérén Taun* and the ritual of *Sura'an*.

The parallelism of settings in *Sérén Taun* and *Sura'an* occurred at the level of human settlement and natural settings. The Center and the Satellites are both characterized by the existence of the *Paseban/Bale Saresehan*, the holy granary, the hearth, the ancestors' cemeteries at the human settlement level, and the sacred forest, the sacred water springs, and the sacred sites at the level of natural settings.

The parallelism of activities in *Sérén Taun* and *Sura'an* occurred at the various stages as shown in Fig. 15.



**Fig. 15:** The parallelism of settings in the ritual of *Sérén Taun* and the ritual of *Sura'an*.

## Conclusion

The ritual of *Sérén Taun* held at the Center, paired with the ritual of *Sura'an* held at all the Satellites are among the events that mutually reaffirm the close connection and interdependence between the Center (*puseur*) and the Satellites (*waréh*). Both reassert the collective commitment of the community to safeguard the cultural tradition and heritage inherited by the ancestors.

For the AKUR community, a permanent physical reunion at Kabuyutan Cigugur in Kuningan West Java is no longer possible. However, to maintain their social cohesiveness and spiritual solidarity, they can organize consolidation agendas such as recurrent significant cultural events and rituals that bring together the community members from different places throughout the year at the Center and the Satellites.

Facing the dynamic and hostile challenges from the external world, the outlook for the AKUR community members to maintain their existence and survival is somewhat arduous but worth fighting. The sustainability of the AKUR community depends on many delicate aspects; some need attention cautiously and sensitively since these are beyond their control, and some may need solid response and support from the community to solve. The loyalty and commitment of the AKUR community will be put to the test perpetually until the end of time.

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