

# Introduction to the Arts of Cirebon

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## Where is Cirebon?

The ancient Javanese kingdom of Cirebon is an important cultural area within the modern nation of Indonesia, located on the *Pasisir*, or north coast of the island of Java in the modern-day Indonesian province of West Java. In the 1400's a string of a dozen or so kingdoms were established along the Pasisir by a group of *Sufi* (Islamic mystic) saints. Due to lucrative trade with India, China and Arabia, these coastal kingdoms prospered and gradually became important cultural and political centers.



Map of Indonesia. Cirebon is shown at inset to the left.

Cirebon is the last of these Javanese Pasisir kingdoms still in existence. Its palaces are still inhabited by the descendants of their first Sultan, Sunan Gunung Jati. Founded in 1478, Cirebon is sometimes referred to as the “Grandfather of Java’s royal houses.”

Cirebon is the main city of a Javanese-speaking area on the north coast of the otherwise Sundanese province of West Java. (See map below) Today Cirebon is a mid-sized Indonesian city (Kotamadya Cirebon) with a population of over 200,000 people in the Indonesian province of West Java. The official motto for the city of Cirebon is Gemah Ripa Loh Jinawi, an old Javanese phrase from the wayang puppet theater meaning “very prosperous and fertile.”



Map of Java showing language areas, from Wikipedia.  
 Cirebon is in the Javanese-speaking region of Java's north coast.

Cirebon is also the name of a regency (similar to a county), Kabupaten Cirebon, a large area with a population of about 2.5 million people. Kabupaten Cirebon is currently in negotiations with the government of Indonesia to possibly break away from West Java and form a separate province - just as Cirebon's sister city Banten (also founded by Sunan Gunung Jati) did in 2000.



Official Symbol of the Kabupaten (Regency) of Cirebon.

The Kabupaten of Cirebon has its own motto as well: Rame ing Gawe, Suci ing Pamrih, a Javanese phrase meaning "Diligent in Work, Pure of Heart." Their official government symbol includes pictorial representations of a gapura palace gateway; a magic kujang weapon floating in the air between the palace gates; Cirebon's volcanic Mount Ciremai, said to be the "guardian" of Cirebon; waves representing the all-important ocean for Cirebon's fishing and trade; and a garland of the fragrant and highly prized melati

jasmine flowers; - all surrounded by nine stars symbolizing the Wali Sanga, the Nine Saints who brought the Islamic faith to Java at the time of Cirebon's founding. One of the nine, Sunan Gunung Jati, was Cirebon's first sultan. He is the revered ancestor of all members of the Cirebon royal family, and his shrine is a place of pilgrimage for people from throughout Indonesia.



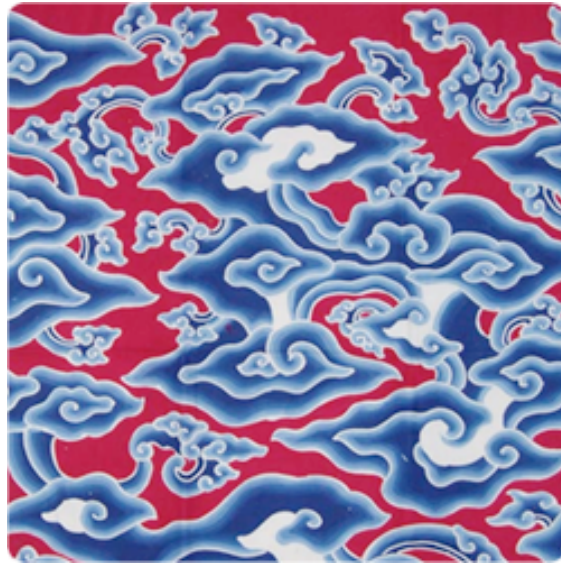
Pilgrims at the shrine of the first Sultan of Cirebon, Sunan Gunung Jati.  
(photo R. North)

### **What's in a Name?**

Throughout history, Cirebon has called by a bewildering number of names and spellings by different groups of people: Charabom (Portuguese); Tjeribon and Cheribon (Dutch); Tjirebon and Cirebon (Sundanese); Tjaruban, Caruban, Tjarbon, Carbon, and Cerbon (Cirebon Javanese). The official Indonesian spelling is currently Cirebon (CHEE-ray-bone), meaning "shrimp waters", due to the abundance of small fresh water shrimp ("rebon") found in local rivers ("ci"). These shrimp are the main ingredient in a popular fermented shrimp condiment (terasi) for which Cirebon is famous, accounting for Cirebon's nickname of Kota Udang: "Shrimp Town".

The Cirebon people refer to their area as Cerbon (CHER-bone), a word meaning "mixture" in reference to the mixture of Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic artistic and spiritual traditions that is the inspiration of Cirebon art and culture. I tend to use the Indonesian name, unless the context is in the Cirebon Javanese language.

## Cirebon Arts: Ancient and Modern



Cirebon batik of the famous Mega Mendung (Rain Cloud) motif, showing typically bright colors.

The number of art forms in the small area of Cirebon is truly amazing. To quote Cirebon scholar Matthew Isaac Cohen's 2005 article *The Arts of Cirebon*, "...the sheer amount of artistic activity in Cirebon is rivaled in Indonesia only by Bali – all the more remarkable as Cirebon (unlike Bali) has little tourist industry to speak of."

Cirebon has its own unique classical architecture, batik textile, woodcarving, and reverse glass painting traditions. Cirebon music includes (among other genres) two kinds of gamelan: *prawa* and *pelog*; plus three archaic "proto gamelan" ensembles: *gong renteng*, *denggung*, and *gong sekati*. Cirebon is also known for its ancient *topeng* masked dance tradition, as well as two kinds of puppet theater: the *wayang kulit* shadow puppets, and the *wayang golek* rod puppets, sometimes called *wayang cepak* to differentiate it from the south central Javanese and Sundanese *wayang golek* traditions.

According to oral tradition, groups of traveling artists from East Java migrated westward along Java's north coast some 700 years ago, ultimately settling in Cirebon. They organized themselves into artists' guilds, forming the basis for artist families that have safeguarded these arts—which they regard as *pusaka*, or sacred heirlooms-- to the present day. Scholars feel the arts of Cirebon offer us a window into the past of Java's venerable artistic history. While maintaining these old traditions, Cirebon artists today are also reinterpreting these ancient art forms, such as their dance, puppet theater, batik and painting, in new ways—a process that has probably been going on for centuries.



Lukisan Kaca (reverse glass painting) by Cirebon artist Bambang Sonjaya. [left]  
Mask of Kelana, one of the five main characters of Topeng Cirebon. (photo R. North) [right]

But for all this unique culture and historical importance, the arts of Cirebon thus far have remained little more than a footnote to most studies of Javanese culture. Since the Dutch colonial era, foreign and Indonesian researchers have largely focused their attention on the arts of south Central Java and Bali, while the arts of Cirebon remained relatively unknown outside of their home area.

### **Cirebon Arts: Crisis and Opportunity**

Over the last 700 years Cirebon has evolved into a virtual treasure house of Javanese culture. Artistic knowledge was traditionally considered to be sacred, and for centuries was kept secret within artist's families in Cirebon's rural villages or within the walls of Cirebon's three Keraton, or royal courts. This closed system has sometimes resulted in artistic knowledge not being passed on to the next generation. An alarming number of Cirebon's ancient art forms now appear to be on the verge of extinction, a fact which has recently received some notice in the Indonesian press. An increasing number of Cirebon artists have now realized the gravity of the situation, and have decided to open up this previously secret knowledge, as they say-- "Dari pada puna"-- rather than face extinction.



Contemporary Cirebon woodcarving of wayang characters and Javanese script at Kacirebonan Palace. (photo R. North)

## Indonesian Artists and Scholars

Among trailblazing Indonesian scholars and documenters of Cirebon arts is **Pak Enoch Atmadibrata**, whose magazines *Buletin Kebudayaan Jawa Barat* and *Kawit* in the 1970's and 80's surveyed the multitude of traditional arts of West Java—including many from Cirebon's villages and royal courts. I was lucky enough to be a guest in Pak Enoch's home for five months in 1976, during which time he instilled in me his fascination with Cirebon as an ancient source of Indonesian culture.

Another luminary is **Endo Suanda**, an amazing polymath from Majalengka, on the border of the Cirebon region. Pak Endo studied and mastered the arts of Cirebon gamelan music, topeng (masked dancing), mask carving, and wayang kulit (shadow puppet theater.) His 1983 thesis is the most comprehensive work on Topeng Cirebon to date, and he has a dissertation on Cirebon wayang kulit in progress. Pak Endo is currently director of an ambitious wide-ranging project of teaching art in Indonesian schools, and is a tireless advocate for traditional artists in modern Indonesia



Cirebon scholar, musician, shadow puppeteer, mask carver and dancer Endo Suanda performing the Kelana character of Topeng Cirebon. (photo: John Crispin, New York Times)

A slim paperback book from 1982 entitled Cerbon edited by the late **Paramita Abdurachman** was very instrumental in exposing Indonesia and the world to Cirebon's rich cultural heritage. Profusely illustrated and written in both Indonesian and English, it was the first widely-available survey of the spectrum of Cirebon's visual and performing arts.

Noted Cirebon cultural expert and novelist **T. D. Sudjana** has written widely on the subjects of Cirebon history, wayang, and culture. In 2001 he published a dictionary of Cirebon Javanese. Also worthy of mention is author and scholar **Lalan Ramlan**, who teaches dance at the STSI academy in Bandung. He has written about *topeng* Cirebon, Cirebon religious practices, *tayuban* social dance at Keraton Kasepuhan and the sacred *Bedaya Rimbe* dance of Keraton Kanoman.

### **Cirebon's Royal Courts**

Visitors to Cirebon's ancient keraton (royal courts) sometimes have the sense they have stepped back in time. The visual impact of the palace architecture is startling. With their dramatic gapura split gates and numerous ornately carved pagoda-like pavilions surrounded by mortarless red brick walls with inset Ming Dynasty Chinese plates, the Cirebon Keraton seem much closer to colorful Balinese Hindu temples than to the staid Muslim palaces of central Java. This is not surprising since they date back to the last days of Java's Hindu era in the 1400's. In fact, scholars believe Cirebon's royal courts are a kind of "missing link" to Java's Hindu past.



Hindu-Javanese architecture of Keraton Kasepuhan. (photo: R. North) [left]  
Entrance to the Sultan's residence at Keraton Kasepuhan. (photo: R. North) [right]

Since ancient times the rural villages surrounding Cirebon have been the living centers of the traditional arts, a fact that is still very true today. In addition, as Cohen mentions in his 2002 article *Multiculturalism and Performance in Colonial Cirebon*, “There is ample evidence demonstrating that the kraton (royal courts) were important centers for the refined arts in the past”. In the last century or so the artistic activities of the Cirebon palaces decreased, due in part to “their desperate financial straits.” Recently however, all three of Cirebon’s kraton have once again become active in the perpetuation of Cirebon arts.

**Keraton Kasepuhan** is generally considered the oldest of Cirebon’s three palaces. located at the site of the 15th century Pakung Wati, the palace of Cirebon’s first sultan, Sunan Gunung Jati. The palace maintains an impressive museum displaying the sultans’ iconic royal carriages (*kereta kencana*), heirloom keris daggers, dazzling woodcarvings, and several gamelan orchestras, the most important of which—the Gong Sekati, or Sekaten—is played twice a year in one of the numerous ancient Javanese pavilions on the palace grounds. The Yayasan Keraton Kasepuhan organization under **P.R. Arief Natadiningrat** has embarked on various programs to help promote and preserve Cirebon’s cultural heritage, including hosting Cirebon’s participants in the periodic national Keraton Festival.

**Keraton Kanoman** is walking distance from Kasepuhan and boasts equal claims to antiquity and cultural importance. Along with its ancient Hindu-Javanese pavilions and gateways, Kanoman too has a museum displaying ancient Cirebon carriages, keris and gamelan, although their venerable Gong Sekati orchestra is not on public display. Keraton Kanoman has an active sanggar (art group) called Klapa Jajar, under the direction of **Pangeran Agus Djoni**.



Pangeran Djoni (with yellow scarf) dancing tayuban style at the annual “birthday” of the Keraton Kanoman sanggar, Klapa Jajar in 2006. (photo R. North)

But it is the smallest and youngest of the Cirebon three royal courts—**Keraton Kacirebonan**—that has really taken the lead in opening up and preserving Cirebon’s previously restricted royal cultural treasures. The late **Pangeran Haji Yusuf Dendabrata**, more well-known as Elang Yusuf, was a virtual renaissance man of Cirebon culture. In addition to being the Lurah Seni (Arts Director) and Patih (second in command to the Sultan) of his palace, Elang Yusuf was personally active in the revival of the Cirebon arts of gamelan music, traditional dance, wood carving, glass painting, batik cloth, Cirebon architecture, and shadow puppet theater, performing as dalang (puppet master) in the Kacirebonan Palace shortly before his death in 2000.



Pangeran Yusuf Dendabrata alm. demonstrating a Cirebon dance movement at his home in the Kacirebonan Palace in 2000. (photo Jacques Brunet)

Elang Yusuf's eldest son, **Pangeran Haji Tomi Dendabrata**, is the current Lurah Seni and Patih of Keraton Kacirebonan, and has continued in his father's footsteps. Haji Tomi is the founder of the Sanggar Sekar Pandan, whose members are ubiquitous at performances in all three of Cirebon's keraton, as well as at other venues in Cirebon. Haji Tomi has been placed in charge of numerous events featuring Cirebon arts, including the Cirebon group in the Festival Keraton Indonesia showcasing the arts of Indonesia's 23 recognized royal courts. He has been very active in getting official support of the Cirebon dialect of Javanese, Jawa Cerbon, in the curriculum of local schools. As a choreographer with a degree in traditional dance, he has created new court dances for his palace. Haji Tomi's other projects include helping to revive the three ancient gong ensembles of Cirebon: gong renteng, denggung, and gong sekati.



Pangeran Haji Tomi Dendabrata at the Kacirebonan Palace in 2006 demonstrating movements of a character from the wayang golek (rod puppet theater), thought to have originated in Cirebon and spread to other parts of Java. (photo R. North)

Haji Tomi's younger brother **Elang Iyan Arifudin**, in addition to being a prominent member of the palace sanggar, is actively involved in documenting and preserving Cirebon arts. He is currently studying the art of Cirebon-style batik in the "batik village" of Trusmi, and has apprenticed himself to the official court puppeteer at Keraton Kacirebonan, Ki Kurnadi. Elang Iyan had his "pengukuhan", or official debut as a dalang, at Keraton Kacirebonan in August of 2006.



Elang Iyan performing wayang kulit at Keraton Kacirebonan in 2006. (photo R. North)

### Foreign Documenters

Foreigners active in the field include **Dr. Michael Richard Wright**, whose seminal book *The Music Culture of Cirebon* (1978) gave the first detailed analysis of the classical gamelan traditions of Cirebon. (It was he who introduced me to my teacher, the late P.H.Yusuf Dendabrata.) Dr. Wright's writings were preceded by the work of the Dutch-born **Bernard Suryabrata**, who lived in the Cirebon area and wrote numerous articles on Cirebon music.

**Pamela Rogers-Aguiniga** (who first introduced me to Cirebon gamelan and topeng in 1974), studied Topeng Cirebon with the legendary Bi Dasih of Ciluwung village in the 1970's, and later with Pa Sujana Arja—the dynamic dalang topeng from Slangit village. Her 1986 thesis is a detailed documentation of the Slangit version of Topeng Cirebon.

**Dr. Michael Ewing**, currently a professor of linguistics at the University of Melbourne, Australia has published several works on the Cirebon dialect of Javanese. A long-time student of master topeng dancer Pak Sujana Arja, he learned to perform all five of the classical Topeng Cirebon characters. In addition to his professorial duties, Michael is leader of the Cirebon gamelan and dance ensemble "Putra Panji Asmara" in Melbourne.



Melbourne's Gamelan Putra Panji Asmara, with Dr. Michael Ewing playing kendang (drums.)

**Chad Bailey Nielson** has studied gamelan music at Seattle's Cornish College of the Arts and at the College of Santa Fe in New Mexico, which possesses a 150-year old Cirebon gamelan. In 2005 he travelled to Cirebon to record and document one of the last living players of the rapidly disappearing Cirebon gendér. Chad recently launched the website [www.gamelancirebon.org](http://www.gamelancirebon.org) as an online resource devoted to the classical gamelan of Cirebon. It includes an illustrated list of the instruments of the gamelan, as well as a glossary of Cirebon gamelan terms.



Chad Nielson's gendér teacher Ibu Anggariwati at Kacirebonan palace in 2005.  
(photo C. B. Nielson)

**Dr. Matthew Isaac Cohen** is probably the most prolific writer on Cirebon today. His numerous articles and books (over 30 at my last count!) shed new light and help clear up many misconceptions about the place of Cirebon in the context of Indonesian culture. His doctoral dissertation on Cirebon wayang kulit is a virtual encyclopedia of Cirebon cultural detail. Matthew is an accomplished Cirebon shadow puppeteer, and is currently a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Drama and Theatre at the Royal Holloway University of London.



Matthew Cohen performing Cirebon-style wayang kulit with Gamelan Puloganti at the Picture Gallery, Royal Holloway University of London, 2006

## **An Invitation**

Cirebon's artist families, realizing that their culture is under threat of disappearing, are now opening up to outsiders to an unprecedented degree. This challenging and dynamic time for Cirebon culture is a rare opportunity for musicians, dancers, puppeteers, woodcarvers, painters or other artists or scholars--Indonesian and foreign--to learn about and participate in these previously inaccessible art forms.

A series of photo essays on the ancient and colorful arts of Cirebon are currently in progress. (See below) Please visit [www.CirebonArts.com](http://www.CirebonArts.com) as these essays begin to take shape. If you have any comments or suggestions please feel free to contact me at [gamelaninsb@aol.com](mailto:gamelaninsb@aol.com) .

It is hoped that exposure to the depth and variety of Cirebon arts will help stimulate interest and encourage studies of these rare and in some cases endangered art forms--and will help in some small way to give Cirebon artists the recognition and support they need to help keep their rich but fragile culture alive. Matur kesuwun.

Richard North  
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Santa Barbara, California, USA

**Photos essays in progress:**

The 3 Royal Palaces of Cirebon: Kasepuhan, Kanoman and Kacirebonan

Cirebon Batik Textiles

Lukisan Kaca: Cirebon Reverse Glass Painting

Cirebon Woodcarving

Keris: The Magic Dagger of Cirebon

Sacred Architecture of Cirebon

Classical Gamelan Music of Cirebon

3 Ancient Cirebon Gong Ensembles: Gong Renteng, Denggung & Gong Sekati

Topeng: Cirebon Masked Dancing

Cirebon Puppet Theater: Wayang Kulit and Wayang Golek

**Other Future Articles:**

Cirebon: Java's Last Pasisir Kingdom

P.H. Yusup Dendabrata: Cirebon Renaissance Man

A Cirebon Gamelan in Yogyakarta: Kyai Mega Mendung

Kereta Kencana: The "Golden Carriages", Icons of Cirebon Culture

The Historic Gamelans of Sumedang

The Gender of Cirebon