

# News from Asia

## Endangered guardians of the Sacred Forest

Alexandra Landmann



ETHNICALLY, the *Kanekes* (or *Baduy* forest-dwellers) are Sundanese. The group dwells within a sacrosanct primeval forest area, but their origins remain a mystery. They have occupied their ancestral domain (*tanah hak ulayat*<sup>1</sup>) for at least 500 years, probably longer. Remarkably, they are among the few Indonesian tribal communities that have been granted significant self-governance and jurisdiction over their ancestral domain, as stated by district-law No.32 (2011). This is a rare privilege indeed; elsewhere in Indonesia, this prerogative is a point of intense debate as it involves ownership of, and control over, natural resources. Consequently, despite its small population (about 11,500 individuals), the *Kanekes* group form an interesting case study; their self-imposed isolation, their practice of strict ancestral rules (*Pikukuh Karuhun*<sup>2</sup>) and their Sunda Faith of Origin (*Jatisunda* or *Agama Sunda Wiwitan*<sup>3</sup>) have given them a unique position in pre-colonial, colonial, and modern Indonesian politics and society.

### The forbidden forest

The *Kanekes*' 5000 hectare ancestral domain is located within the remote forests of Mount Kendeng. A terraced forest sanctuary is situated within the elevated central and southern part of the area, surrounded by a 3000 hectare 'forbidden forest'.<sup>4</sup> Except for a few selected elders who perform an annual fertility and forecasting ritual in situ, ancestral principles (*pikukuh karuhun*) prohibit other *Kanekes* and all outsiders from approaching or setting foot in the sanctuary located in the forbidden forest. Some accounts depict the *Kanekes* as an isolated tribe, living deep in the dangerous forests, excluding all outsiders, rejecting all cultural change, and refusing to explain their traditions. Elsewhere they have been described as an anomaly: a people surviving on tribal lands, observing stern customs with manifold taboos – located only 120 km southwest of the megacity Jakarta!

Stone inscriptions and texts on palm-leaf manuscripts recovered in the Sunda region, and dated between the 11th and 15th centuries, mention sacred places located in upstream lands with established borders. The king prohibited, by punishment of death, the disturbance of their residents, who were considered the king's guardians of the royal *kabuyutan* (places of ancestral worship). In the Western part of Java, several such *kabuyutan*-communities would have been found, but it seems that the *Kanekes* are the only ones to have survived into the present. Since pre-Islamic times, they have reinforced bonds with political elites in the lowlands through peculiar ritualized diplomatic relations during the annual *seba* festival. While the Hindu Kingdoms and Islamic Sultanates in the Western part of Java have become chapters in the history books, the oral traditions of the *Kanekes* continue to live on.

The group is spatially, socially, and legally bipartite: the inner group (*kajeroan*) resides in three settlements in the elevated core area of the ancestral domain and the outer group's (*panamping*) sixty-three settlements encircle this core. Where as the inner group complies closely with *pikukuh karuhun*, the outer group is less strict. For example, both groups are prohibited from using electricity, or establishing wet rice fields, mosques, or Western-style schools within the entire domain. The inner group is interdicted from wearing machine-manufactured clothes or shoes, to use any kind of technological devices or means of transportation. Polygamy, wearing gold, and using modern cosmetics are, among other things,

strictly forbidden for the inner group. In contrast, some outer group individuals wear modern clothes, use mobile phones and Facebook, and enjoy prodigious success in the produce market. Most likely, the outer group serves as a cultural buffer and filtering zone for the inner group, as they are the first to encounter visitors, new artefacts, and ideas. Undoubtedly, the inner group is quite resilient to processes of social acculturation or the assimilation of modernity. It is precisely this resilience that continues to fascinate travellers, journalists, students, and scholars from both within Indonesia and abroad.

### Guardians of the forest

According to the *Kanekes* myth of origin, the group's apical ancestor, who established *pikukuh karuhun*, was the first human being on earth, born at their terraced sanctuary. Because of this myth, they regard themselves as the oldest genealogical human line – all other Sundanese, or ethnic groups, constitute their 'younger siblings'. *Pikukuh karuhun* distinguishes between the responsibilities of *Kanekes* and the activities of humanity. Their mode of living follows the mechanism of 'ancestral command-communication-oral news on events' (*Carek-lisan-khabar*), whereas 'expand-write-paint' (*coret-tulis-gambar*) regulates the activities of humanity at large. Consequently, *Kanekes* culture remains oral and unwritten: values, norms, and rules are transmitted by storytelling or informal teaching in regular gatherings. Teaching, literacy, and transmission of knowledge are in themselves by no means rejected; yet, formal schooling is. Where the *Kanekes* remain, so to speak, at their 'point of origin', and guard the functioning of the ecosystem, their 'younger siblings' have moved into the world and have founded autonomous socio-political units.

Their core philosophy, 'We are the guardians of the forest, aquatic resources, and soil, and hence responsible for the destiny of the world', reveals a strikingly topical indigenous perspective on the ecosystem, sustainability, environmental protection and the conservation of natural resources and biodiversity. According to *Kanekes* elders, their forest constitutes the backbone of the water resources of West Java. Their eco-systemic core principle bans deforestation and degradation or alteration of land, water, and biodiversity within the primeval forest. Evidently, forest conservation safeguards the hydrological cycle, prevents water hazards and other environmental problems.

### External challenges

At present, their way of life is becoming increasingly endangered. A 2003 provincial regulation opened the previously restricted area to local mass tourism. School and university students now arrive daily for fieldtrips to visit the 'odd megalithic people living in the forests'. The *Kanekes* do not profit from such trips – whether culturally, environmentally, or economically. They must now deal with rubbish (plastic), and concomitantly, an increased contact with a 'predatory' monetary economy. In addition to mass tourism, they have attracted the attention of activists operating in the political, religious, social, legal and environmental fields; even though such activism is done with good intentions, it could prove detrimental to the *Kanekes*' culture and way of life.

The *Kanekes* are registered as *Agama Sunda Wiwitan* on their identity cards, but this is not recognised as a religion, and thus that column is left blank – a situation which leads to social, civic, political, and legal discrimination. For example, *Kanekes*



Left: Natural panorama – Baduy Ancestral Domain. ([wiwitan.org](http://wiwitan.org), [facebook.com/savebaduy](https://facebook.com/savebaduy))

Below: Inner Baduy – father and son returning to their ancestral domain. ([wiwitan.org](http://wiwitan.org))

individuals who leave the ancestral domain, yet do not convert to Islam,<sup>5</sup> cannot be employed as police, military or civil servants; only citizens that adhere to one of the six state-funded religions are able to find employment in these areas. In 2011, assisted by lawyers, *Kanekes* representatives wrote to the Lebak district government and the Ministry of Religions to request the acknowledgement of *Agama Sunda Wiwitan* as an official religion. There has been no response to this day.

In 2011, a Swedish-Australian joint venture was granted a permit for natural gas and oil exploration at the Rangkas onshore block in Banten. In the centre of this 3000 km<sup>2</sup> block lies the *Kanekes*' ancestral domain. Test results proved that the area is rich in natural resources; although mining permits have yet to be issued, it is likely they will be soon. The forbidden forest has already been infiltrated by illegal logging activities, which men of the inner group are trying to combat with night patrols. Illegal logging and future mining activities constitute serious threats to the existence of the ancestral domain, and also to the quality and quantity of aquatic resources. The seemingly uncontrollable external challenges damage *Kanekes* socio-cultural cohesion and impel the group to deal with previously unimaginable situations at a more rapid pace than they might be able to cope with. In the past couple of years, they have witnessed internal confusion, unrest, and conflicts, while external lobbies fragment the group into different factions for their own political or economic ends. Predatory political and economic policies jeopardise the group's constitutional rights as citizens and as an indigenous community, as well as the legal status of their ancestral domain.

### Hope for preservation

The *Kanekes* are clear about what they would like to see happen. First, only 2000 hectares of their domain are eligible for shifting cultivation and for settlements; besides rice subsidies, they hope to receive a state allocation of land situated in the vicinity of their ancestral domain for the production of crops. Second, they request a limited amount of essential modern technology, such as hoses for water supplies and flashlights for forest patrols. Third, they need healthcare/emergency centres with modern equipment close to the inner area, but located outside the domain itself, as the inner group is banned from using vehicles to travel to lowland hospitals. As *pikukuh karuhun* prohibits the use of modern medicines, one village leader has requested the Health Ministry to develop vaccines and contraceptives in the form of *jamu* (traditional medicine) so the people may benefit from modern medicinal developments without deviating from *pikukuh karuhun*. The research and development section of the Ministry is working on that request. Here we see the creativity of the *Kanekes*, and the flexibility of *pikukuh karuhun*, despite often being labelled 'megalithic'.

Once mining companies are allowed to enter the vicinity of the ancestral domain, the damage to nature and culture will be irreversible. It is hoped that Indonesian authorities and civil society will recognise the uniqueness of the *Kanekes* community and take steps to preserve their way of life.

**Alexandra Landmann is based at the Indonesian Hindu University (Denpasar) and the Institut Titian Perdamaian (Jakarta) and works on Indonesian Hinduism and traditional legal systems. ([wiwitan.org](http://wiwitan.org))**

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Tanah hak ulayat* has been translated as 'tribal lands', but I prefer to use the term 'ancestral domain' as it comprises territory, economic resources, and governance of indigenous peoples. 'Domain' refers to the soil, rivers, creeks, seas or lakes, mountains, hills, forests and natural resources contained therein, including wild game.
- <sup>2</sup> *Pikukuh Karuhun* comprises the unwritten ancestral traditions of the *Kanekes*, which form their moral, religious, and legal framework, as well as dictate the practices and sanctions that bind and unite the group as a cultural and jural community.
- <sup>3</sup> '*Wiwitan*' denotes the ancestral mandate bestowed upon the *Kanekes* assigning them the task to perpetuate the situation of origin.
- <sup>4</sup> The 'forbidden forest' refers to an upstream primeval forest area believed to be sacred. Manifold prohibitions apply for entering the area and the utilization of its soil, water, and wood. In modern terms, it is the religiously legitimised protected area of an ancient biosphere reserve.
- <sup>5</sup> Based on an agreement between *Kanekes* and the former Sultan of Banten, *Kanekes* who leave the domain may only embrace Islam and no other faith.

The articles in the 'News from Asia' pages were compiled and edited by Lee Hock Guan and Ten Leu-Jiun, from our partner institution, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore. If you would like to contribute to this section in a future issue, please send your submission to [iias\\_iseas@iseas.edu.sg](mailto:iias_iseas@iseas.edu.sg)