

A vibrant cosmic nebula with swirling clouds of gas and dust in shades of orange, red, and blue, set against a dark starry background. A central yellow rectangular box with light blue tabs on its left and right sides contains the title text.

*Rites and Rituals:
A Window into the Worldview of Women*

Linda Kay has been living in West Java, Indonesia, the heartland of the Sundanese, for over 20 years. During this time, I have made wonderful friends who have shared many aspects of their lives with me. We have engaged in lively cross-cultural discussions which helped us try to understand one another and how we see the world. As we shared our lives it became clear to me that women were intricately involved in the ritual realm in their communities. These experiences led me to design a research project to examine the role of rituals and the status of Sundanese women.

Abstract

This article seeks to show the importance of rites, rituals and ceremonies as it relates to understanding and engaging with women who live under Islam. The ritual world provides us with a marvellous entrance point into understanding a community and its culture. Attending rituals, especially lifecycle rituals, is a way to discover and engage the concerns, values and beliefs of a local culture. To demonstrate the possibilities, we will look at a local worldview, how it shapes ritual and daily life, and the role women play. Then a case study of a birth rite will be presented so we can see the richness of what can be seen and learned by participating in and being curious about rites and ceremonies.

Most cultures have lifecycle rituals; these are rituals to mark and transverse important stages of life. Examples of common lifecycle rituals are birth, coming of age (i.e., circumcision), marriage, pregnancy and death. More traditionally-oriented societies tend to have a more complex series of lifecycle ceremonies. Many societies in which Islam is the predominant religion are also shaped by traditions and rituals often referred to as Folk Islam. Folk Islam is a term used to describe forms of Islam that incorporate traditional (folk) beliefs and practices. In Indonesia, where I live, the majority of Muslims follow Folk Islam and integrate their Islamic beliefs with traditional beliefs and practices known as *adat*.

For most, Folk Islam and Islam are not distinguished but seen as one in the same or at least mutually compatible. In Indonesia, Islam is not a monolithic and homogenous force. There is recognition of different types of Muslims, from nominal adherents who tend to follow ancestral traditions to orthodox adherents who piously follow the five pillars of Islam and everyone in between. For example, I have had the privilege of living amongst the Sundanese, the largest ethnic group in West Java, for over 20 years. During my time here, I have learned that Islam and *adat* have mutually influenced and remoulded one another. The five tenets of Islam have been accepted along with daily practices such as five daily prayers, weekly worship, the fasting month and other Muslim calendrical holidays. At the same time, lifecycle rituals have been

retained along with a belief in spirits and the importance of taboos. Islamic beliefs and practices have been incorporated into *adat* and vice versa until many, including most of the participants in my research community, no longer mark a distinction between the two¹. For most, to be Sundanese is to be Muslim.

In trying to understand this dynamic, and what it means to be Sundanese, especially a Sundanese woman, I looked carefully at Sundanese lifecycle rituals, which are an integral part of Sundanese *adat*. What I discovered was that in my local culture, Sundanese *adat* is still the foundational belief system which incorporates and adapts Islamic and modern beliefs and practices to varying degrees². Thus, if I really want to understand Sundanese women, it is important to understand their *adat*.

Adat, which can generally be defined as traditional beliefs and customs, actually has a deeper meaning. Wessing defines *adat* as ‘rituals, usages, obligations, and prohibitions which are the guide to proper life.’³ According to Ibu Yanti, a Sundanese

¹ This is not to say that they have been synthesized into new form but rather that ritual life contains several elements of belief and practice concurrently. A Sundanese friend explained it like this, “Sundanese people sometimes wish to adapt something new, so it becomes a composite, it’s blended. What is Sunda is there and what is imitated from others is there, thus it becomes a composite.” She preferred the word for becoming a ‘composite’ rather than a ‘mixture’ to describe the process because a composite carries the idea that the items being blended are still identifiable as separate items.

² Much of this material came from research I did for my dissertation which focused on the status of Sundanese women which was then published in book form. Lentz, Linda. 2017. *The Compass of Life: Sundanese Lifecycle Rituals and the Status of Muslim Women in Indonesia*. Ritual Studies Monograph Series. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.

³ Wessing, Robert. 1978. *Cosmology and Social Behavior in a West Javanese Settlement*. Southeast Asia Series, No.47, Papers in International Studies. Athens, OH: Center for International Studies, Ohio University, 77.

Muslim friend, ‘The traditional pattern of thinking [following *adat*] is like this, you must, if you want your child to be safe and well [when he or she] steps into a new stage of life, you must have the proper ceremony.’ However, it is not just a series of rituals to guide one through life. *Adat* is also seen as an inheritance from the ancestors that is holy. Putting these ideas together, Rikin defines *adat* as ‘an ancestral inheritance which is proper and fitting to be kept and respected to reach life’s goals throughout the lifecycle.’⁴

In order to come to a more thorough understanding of the meaning of *adat* in the Sundanese social fabric, it is helpful to be aware of some foundational perceptions of the traditional Sundanese view of the cosmos and how the Sundanese fit into it; namely, their idea of boundaries, balance and cosmic power. The universe is understood as a closed system in which natural and supernatural entities and phenomena are inter-involved.⁵ Cosmic power is constant but it also constantly flows as part of the creative process that maintains the universe. The centre maintains the flow of power and vitality of the system. The function of the centre is to draw power

⁴ Rikin, Mintardja W. 1994. *Peranan Sunat dalam Pola Hidup Masyarakat Sunda*. Publisher Unknown, 11.

⁵ Wessing, 1978

from the cosmos in order to return it to the same cosmos. For example, a king is the centre of a kingdom. As king he draws power from the cosmos and then redistributes it throughout his kingdom. If he is unsuccessful in drawing on this power then his kingdom will decline.⁶ Thus, each person is a potential centre in which he or she draws on cosmic power and then distributes it in his or her own sphere of influence. The point being that whatever power flows into a person (as the centre) must be used or redistributed so that the level of cosmic power remains full and in balance. If the two are out of balance, bad luck or illness will result. The amount of power a person can accumulate (and redistribute) can expand through attaining specialized knowledge such as ritual or mystical knowledge. For example, a wedding planner will fast and meditate for 10 days before a wedding by which she gains cosmic power which she then shares with the bride so that the bride will glow with inner and outer beauty.

This idea of balance is another important concept. Garna explains it this way, in attaining life's goals, an important standard of measurement is that someone is in balance. In whatever goals a person wants to reach, he or she should do so while maintaining a state of equilibrium, not a state of lack or excess, if he or she wants to

⁶ Anderson, Benedict. 1972. "The Idea of Power in Javanese Culture". In *Culture and Power in Indonesia*, edited by Claire Holt. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. Cited in Wessing, Robert. 1978. *Cosmology and Social Behavior in a West Javanese Settlement*. Southeast Asia Series, No.47, Papers in International Studies. Athens, OH: Center for International Studies, Ohio University, 27.

obtain serenity, happiness, and a peaceful life free from heavy burdens. This idea is expressed in the Sundanese saying, *'hendaklah tidur sekedar menghilangkan kantuk, minum tuak sekedar menghilangkan haus, dan makan sekedar menghilangkan lapar, janganlah berlebih-lebihan,'* which means, sleep just enough to take away drowsiness, drink palm wine just enough to satisfy thirst, and eat just enough to satisfy hunger, do not be in excess.⁷ Even in day-to-day living it is important to live in a state of balance in order to be content and in harmony with one's environment.

This leads to the importance of boundaries and domains in one's environment. Domains can be people, entities, objects, or ideas that are grouped as belonging together. To return to the example of the king and his kingdom, the kingdom is the domain, not just physically but also relationally between the king and his subjects. To clarify further, young people can be grouped together as children (a domain), or the kitchen can be conceptualized as a female domain. Boundaries separate domains. As explained by Wessing,

*[T]he most significant, and often most dangerous, cosmic powers come into play on the border between two spheres (such as inside and outside the house). It is on the border between the river and the dry land that certain spirits live ... During festivities, such as weddings, borders are especially marked.*⁸

⁷ Garna, H. K. 2008, *Budaya Sunda: Melintasi Waktu Menantang Masa Depan*. Bandung: Lembaga Penelitian Unpad dan Judistira Garna Foundation, 187.

⁸ Wessing, 22

Borders, or boundaries, are ritually established so the ritual venue is set apart as a protected space during a transitional time. The lifecycle ceremonies mark a person going from one domain to another. The transition leaves a gap between domains, which is a dangerous situation since cosmic power is no longer contained within the boundaries of a domain. As a result, *adat* practitioners are needed to deal with this dangerous situation. Without them there to manage the power, the person going through the transition is exposed to the dangers of this power or deprived of its benefits. For example, a wedding planner will establish a protected, ritual space with mats on the floor covered in ritual offerings and incense. A wedding ritual will be performed within this space that helps the young bride and groom go through the transition from being in the life stage, or domain, of young singles to the domain of married adults in a state of blessing.

These ideas (cosmic power, domains and boundaries) are important notions in the Sundanese understanding of the structure of the universe. *Adat* has developed as a way to conduct oneself in harmony with the universe and to deal with the supernatural. From birth a Sundanese member of society learns to interpret and navigate his or her world by following the compass of life provided by *adat*. Lifecycle rituals, in particular, provide a safe and blessed way to move through the different stages of life in harmony with one's culture and community. Beyond the accepted lifecycle ceremonies, *adat* also provides a framework for dealing with specific life situations as will be seen below.

In West Java, the interaction of Folk *adat* with Hinduism and then Islam, has created diverse ritual practices that vary in style and complexity. It is through these ritual practices that Islam and *adat* are intertwined and formed as local religious

expression.⁹ The role of men and women in creating, maintaining, and (re)producing ritual practices can be seen as a reflection of gender roles within the local culture. For example, in describing *kejawen* Islam (a type of Folk Islam) as practiced in a Javanese village, Smith emphasizes the importance of women in maintaining and co-creating the village religious environment, which she defines as a religion of practice.

The notion of orthopraxy is key to understanding how women are absolutely significant to the village religious environment because it is religion that is practiced rather than thought, it is part of everyday experience. For example, women ‘practise’ their kejawen Islamic religiosities rather than ‘believing’ in them or subscribing to doctrine—they arrive at their religious understandings through praxis. This orthopraxis engages the otherworld, which is alive and is known and felt. Its existence is not questioned. And it is through this praxis or action, this knowing and participating in the forces of the cosmos, that women keep alive or (re)produce the religious life of the village.¹⁰

By viewing *kejawen* Islam as a religion of practice she is able to show how women are significant in maintaining and (re)producing village religion through the critical role they play in ritual practices. This notion of religion as practice can be applied to

⁹ This idea is explored more in depth in Beatty, Andrew. 1999. *Varieties of Javanese Religion: An Anthropological Account*. Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰ Smith, Bianca J. 2008. “Kejawen Islam as Gendered Praxis in Javanese Village Religiosity”. In *Indonesian Islam in a New Era: How Women Negotiate Their Muslim Identities*, edited by Susan Blackburn, Bianca J. Smith and Siti Syamsiyatun, 97-118. Clayton: Monash Asia Institute, 103.

Sundanese *adat*, which also provides a framework for living in and interacting with the cosmos in day to day practice. In Sundanese *adat* there are foundational principles that are clearly seen and maintained in religious ceremonies. These same principles are also put into practice in dealing with day to day problems and situations. There is more localized variation and flexibility in this kind of practice than there is in ceremonies. For example, a neighbour hit and killed a cat with his motorcycle. This act puts him in danger since he is now out of balance in the spiritual realm as a result of this negative, harmful act. Based on Sundanese *adat* he needs to rectify this situation. In this case, he went to a local *adat* practitioner to find out what he should do. He was told to wash the tire of his motorcycle with prayer water to wash away the negative and potentially harmful spiritual energy and thus bring things back into balance. Then he was instructed to hand out small amounts of money to the local children to put the spiritual forces back in his favour through this positive act. He was relieved to be able to do so. Thus, *adat* principles were locally interpreted and applied to an everyday problem. This is part of the ongoing power of *adat*, the ability to create meaning and provide practical solutions for daily life. As will be seen in the following Birth Rites, women play key roles, and thus have significant influence, in the ritual practices of the local form of religious expression.

Birth rites point to key values of a culture and provide a framework for understanding and managing the birth process. Childbearing is an integral system of beliefs, values and behaviour. In order to understand this system, customs associated with birth need to be placed within the larger cultural system. Birth rites are also a prevalent form for transforming a woman in readiness for her new stage of life, as well as introducing a new baby into the family and community. According to McClain (1982:36), 'There is recognition that certain inherent biological risks accompany

reproduction in most societies. This recognition may be responsible in part for the near universality of ritual observances surrounding childbearing in traditionally-oriented societies. Birth rituals not only dramatize status changes for the infant, the mother, the father and the family, but significantly, also celebrate a successful birth.¹¹

In Sundanese birth rites, the traditional midwife (*paraji*) is an important and influential ritual specialist. According to Soeganda, the *paraji*'s instructions are complied with because she is considered to have more knowledge about the spiritual forces. Through the acquisition of mystical knowledge the *paraji* gains cosmic power and the ability to deal with and manage spiritual entities for the protection and benefit of a pregnant woman.¹² In the rural and urban villages, *paraji* are still called on to oversee important parts of the birth process. They receive honour and respect as bearers of traditional skills and knowledge that can meet the physical and spiritual needs of pregnant women.

The Ceremonies

The birth rituals begin as soon as a Sundanese woman finds out she is pregnant and typically continue until 40-days after delivery. There are typically a series of ceremonies and customs to be followed: the Four-month Ceremony, Seven-month Ceremony, Pregnancy, Labour and Delivery,¹³ Afterbirth Ceremony, Umbilical Cord Ceremony, 40-day Ceremony, and Baby-weighing Ceremony. For this article, the

¹¹ McClain, C. 1982. "Toward a Comparative Framework for the Study of Childbirth: A Review of the Literature". In *Anthropology of Human Birth*, edited by Margarita Kay, 25-29. Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Co., 36.

¹² Soeganda, Akip P. 1982. *Upacara Adat di Pasundan*. Bandung: Sumur Bandung.

¹³ This is not a single ceremony but rather a description of the beliefs, taboos and ritual practices running throughout the pregnancy, birth and delivery.

Seven-month ceremony will be described, followed by a discussion of the ceremony and how it relates to relevant concepts.

Seven-month Ceremony

The Seven-month Ceremony (*Tingkeban*)¹⁴ celebrates the fact that the pregnant woman and the baby in her womb have made it safely to the seventh month and gives thanks to God that the foetus has become human and complete in its development, according to traditional beliefs. When I attended one such ceremony, a man was outside the house with a large mortar and pestle pounding the spices together for the spicy fruit salad called *rujak*. For the Seven-month Ceremony, *rujak* is made with seven kinds of fruit. Earlier in the morning, women had gathered together to cut the fruit which was now ready to be added to the spices. Inside, the pregnant woman, Tini,¹⁵ was with a traditional midwife and female relatives. When we entered, the *paraji* was rubbing an egg in circular motions around and then straight down Tini's stomach. Then she rubbed oil around and down her stomach. After that she tied a thread, which had been rubbed with turmeric, around Tini's stomach and attached a safety pin to her sarong as protection for the baby while saying prayers under her breath. The *paraji* then took some oil and rubbed it onto Tini's hair. On the floor was a bowl of burning incense. On a tray there was a bowl of uncooked rice with a few coins in it and glasses of coffee, *rujak*, banana, garlic and coconut. Tini was directed to drink some of the coffee. The

¹⁴The Seven-month ceremony is a traditional, Folk adat ceremony. The Four-month ceremony is an Islamic ceremony. Some muslim organizations, such as Mohammadiya, promote the Four-month ceremony, which is more recent ceremony, over the Seven-month ceremony. The largest muslim organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, allows for both. In my research communities, the Seven-month ceremony is the most prevalent while the Four-month ceremony is still seen as optional.

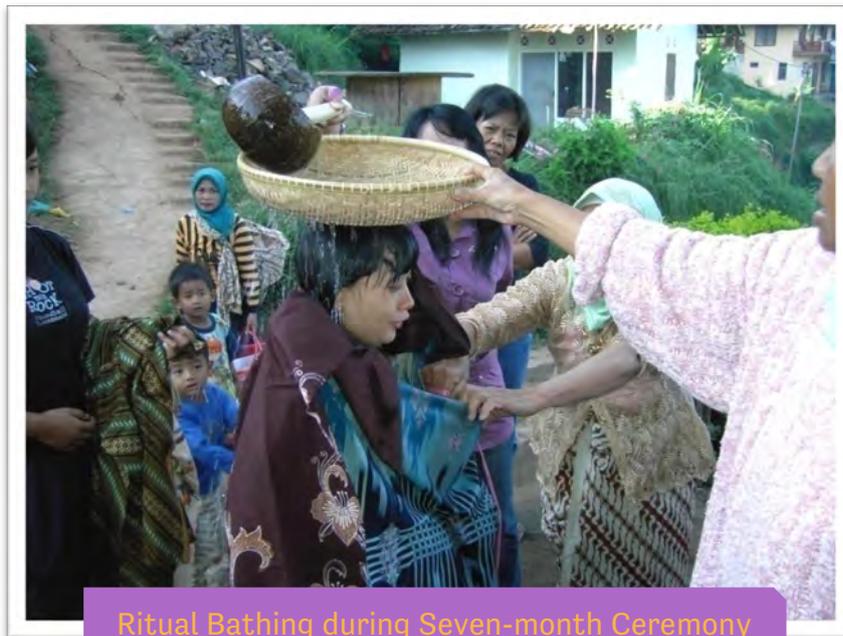
¹⁵ Names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

rest was an offering to her ancestors to inform them about the pregnancy and ask for their protection and blessing. She then went outside where family and neighbours had gathered.



On the porch there were seven new batik cloths. The *paraji* wrapped Tini in one of the batik cloths and led her into the yard where there was a bucket of water in which floated seven different kinds of flower petals. There was also a clay pot filled with flower petals, a gold bracelet, coins and two baby eels. The *paraji* called Tini's mother forward. Her mother dipped out some of the flower water and poured it over Tini's head while saying a prayer. Tini gasped as the cold water hit her and the women and children all laughed and made jokes. Then the *paraji* wrapped a second cloth around her and took off the first cloth and invited another female relative to pour the water over her. This process was repeated six times amid much laughter and conversation. The

seventh time, the *paraji* approached with the clay pot and Tini laughed nervously while the women shrieked with laughter. The *paraji* poured the water from the clay pot over her head and then smashed the clay pot on the ground so the bracelet, coins and baby eels splashed out. Tini was right to be nervous. In other seven-month ceremonies I've witnessed, the jewellery, coins and baby eels were also poured over the woman's head and the baby eels slithered down the woman's body.



Finally, the *paraji* dropped a coconut so it rolled down the woman's pregnant stomach and then caught it before it hit the ground. Tini's husband then split the coconut open down the middle with one blow. He gave the coconut to Tini so she could drink the water then she handed it back to him so he could drink and then it was passed on to some of the women.



Cutting Open the Coconut

The women brought out the *rujak* and explained that if it was too sour the baby would be haughty, if it was too spicy the baby would be mean and if it was too sweet the baby would be sweet-natured. Then the *rujak* was sold by Tini to neighbour women and children for a small amount of money. The women decided the taste was sweet. Tini's family also gave out seven combs and seven small mirrors. The neighbours stayed for a short time and then drifted away home.

Explanation of Seven-month Ceremony

As one might guess from this ceremony, the number seven is very important in Sundanese cosmology. This ceremony is held during the seventh month of pregnancy on the 7th, 17th or 27th day of the month. The *rujak* is made with seven kinds of fruit. The pregnant woman is wrapped in seven different batik cloths and bathed seven times with water gathered from seven different wells and containing petals from

seven different kinds of flowers. Although none of the women seemed to know the reason behind the importance of the number seven, it's likely that it came from a Sundanese legend with a Hindu origin about Dewi Sri, the rice goddess, throughout which the number seven crops up repeatedly.¹⁶ What is important currently is the idea of having the ritual acts organized around and unified by the number seven. To help ensure everything (e.g. the position of the baby, the development of the baby, the mental preparedness of the woman, the physical preparedness of the woman's body; the attention of ancestors) is as it should be in the seventh month of pregnancy the number seven is evoked. This is a critical time for mother and baby and all the physical and spiritual forces need to be brought in line to bring about the safe development of the pregnancy and a successful delivery.

Pregnancy is considered a dangerous time. High infant mortality and maternal mortality¹⁷ has probably influenced the felt need for special care and protection. The Sundanese believe that a pregnant woman gives off an odour that attracts malevolent spirits.¹⁸ Therefore, she needs to be protected. Religious imagery¹⁹ (invocation of the spirit world) is used to ensure her safety by appeasing or distracting the appropriate

¹⁶ For more on the Sundanese version of this myth, see Soeganda, 1982.

¹⁷ According to the *Survei Demografi dan Kesehatan Indonesia* (Indonesian Health Demography Survey), in West Java there were 39 infant deaths for every 1000 live births in 2007 and 321 maternal deaths for every 100,000 births as compared to 34 infant deaths for every 1000 live births and 228 maternal deaths for every 100,000 births in Indonesia in 2007.

¹⁸ There is one spirit in particular, called *Kuntil Anak*, who is the spirit of a woman who died in childbirth and now roams around looking for a replacement baby. She will try to take the baby of a pregnant woman and she is able to trick the woman and her family members into dangerous situations that will enable her to harm the baby. For example, she can make herself look like someone the woman knows and trick her into going out at night. *Kuntil Anak* is stronger at night and will be able to harm the woman or her baby if she catches her outside at night.

¹⁹ For a more detailed discussion of religious imagery see, Bates, Brian and Allison N. Turner. 2003. "Imagery and Symbolism in the Birth Practices of Traditional Cultures". In *The Manner Born: Birth Rites in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, edited by Lauren Dundes, 85-97. Walnut Creek, Lanham, New York and Oxford: Altimira Press.

spirits. The *paraji* will tie a thread around the pregnant woman's stomach to tie together the woman and her baby so they cannot be separated. She will pin *panglay*, an aromatic root similar to ginger, to her clothing as a protective object. The malignant spirits do not like sharp objects and the odour of the *panglay* will mask the odour of pregnancy. The pregnant woman also needs to enlist the help of her ancestors. She should honour them by announcing the imminent arrival of a new descendant and ask for their blessing and protection in the spiritual realm. The incense gets their attention and the offerings honour them. Throughout this process the *paraji* chants under her breath. She has special prayers that have been passed down to her which are considered powerful. She is praying to both the ancestors and to God and does not seem troubled by this ambiguity. If asked directly she will admit that she is asking the ancestors for their blessing but emphasizes that she is praying to God. The *paraji*, as an *adat* practitioner, has specialized knowledge that enables her to carry out the *adat* rituals and practices that will protect Tini from evil spirits, appease and appeal for help from her ancestors in this spiritual battle, and prepare her for delivery. This need for help and protection from the spiritual realm is a strong motivator for maintaining this ritual as an integral part of the birth rites.²⁰

²⁰ Folk *adat* is still the foundational belief system. Islamic rituals can be added, such as the Four-month ceremony, but they are still seen as optional. Islamic elements can be included in and adapted to traditional ceremonies but only if the defining ritual elements remain. *Adat* practitioners, like the *paraji*, are usually responsible for inclusions and adaptations which will satisfy most participants. It is more likely a ceremony will be discontinued rather than change significantly. For a more thorough discussion on *adat*, Islam and ritual change, see Beatty, Andrew. 1999. *Varieties of Javanese Religion: An Anthropological Account*. Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Lentz, 2011.

Bathing symbolizes spiritual cleansing in readiness for a new stage in life and prepares the woman for delivery. The use of simulative imagery (also known as sympathetic magic) is particularly prevalent in this ceremony.²¹ Thus, birth rituals focus on bodily functions with the aim that the simulative imagery will stimulate the physiological process. In this ceremony, the water flowing down her body, the baby eels slithering down her body, and the coconut rolling down her stomach represent the baby smoothly coming down the birth canal and exiting her body. The splitting of the coconut with one blow symbolizes the baby coming out quickly without being blocked by anything. For a woman trying to become a mother for the first time, and who thus does not have previous experience to help her, ritual bathing acknowledges this major change in her life and provides spiritual and psychological support.

This is a family-sponsored ceremony and there is an emphasis on family continuity and connectedness. The ancestors are invoked with incense and offerings, the idea being that they can still be contacted and are still concerned about their descendants. There is a fear that if they are not honoured with the news of an upcoming birth they may be offended and bring bad fortune on the new baby and family. Thus, they are still influential in the spiritual realm which can impact the physical realm. There is not a clear distinction between the two realms. This is not often articulated but the offerings are always present. Family connectedness, especially among the women, is also seen during the ritual bathing. It is the women in the family who have already given birth who do the bathing along with the *paraji*. They recognize that the pregnant

²¹ In their discussion on imagery and symbolism in birth practices of traditional cultures, Bates and Turner (2003, 85) explore more in-depth 'how images associated with childbirth can ease the experience.'

woman is in a transitional stage as she moves toward a significant change in status. In preparation for this change, she is welcomed into the ranks of women who have given birth and become mothers. She is inducted into the family line of women who have undergone the same ceremony and who are passing on their knowledge and support to help her get through the dangerous time of late pregnancy and birth. There is power in the unbroken line of keeping the traditions which have been passed down through the generations. Furthermore, Tini gets a stronger sense of what it means to be a Sundanese woman who is valued, cared for, and under the protection of her family (through their ritual intervention on her behalf) as she moves toward a new stage of life. The men in the family also help with some of the ritual preparations but are mainly absent from the ritual itself except when the husband is called on to cut the coconut. This is reflective of the minor, but important, role he plays in insuring a successful delivery. The birth rites, even more so than the other rites, are part of the women in the family's sphere of influence.

The Seven-month Ceremony is communal. Female family members, friends and neighbours bring their knives, graters and cutting boards to help prepare the *rujak*. There is a party atmosphere as the women work and joke around with one another. Family members, however, are responsible for mixing all the ingredients together at the end. It is believed that the baby will influence the taste of the *rujak* depending on his/her character. No matter how careful the family is, it is the baby in the womb who will determine the flavour of the *rujak*. The family's friends and neighbours will judge if the *rujak* is sweet, sour or spicy after they buy some and taste it. Friends and neighbours also return to watch the ritual bathing. By participating in the ceremony, they are adding to and sharing in the blessings and spiritual protection generated by the ritual. Thus, there is reciprocity between the family who sponsors the ceremony

and the friends and neighbours who help and participate in it. Along with this reciprocity is an expectation that the lifecycle rituals will be carried out. There is communal pressure in the sense that if something goes wrong later with the pregnancy or delivery, the family will be blamed, because they did not follow the traditional ways. Furthermore, carrying out these rituals plays an important role in keeping spiritual forces in balance, which affects the whole community. Women, then, have a significant responsibility in building these reciprocal relationships within the ritual realm which in turn impacts the well-being of the community.

Conclusion

Rituals, especially lifecycle rituals, are an integral part of a local culture. As community events, they are accessible venues in which we can participate, observe and learn from our friends and neighbours. In my experience, my Sundanese neighbours were delighted that I was curious and wanted to learn about their culture. They felt their views and practices were being valued and respected. We were able to engage in meaningful discourse that led to a deeper understanding of their primary concerns and values as well as their beliefs about how to understand and live together in this world.