

# Banana Plants as a Cultural Resource in Javanese Culture

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## Abstract

Banana plants attain a position of central importance within Javanese culture: as a source of food and beverages, for cooking and containing material for daily life, and also as offerings for numerous ceremonies and rituals. The role and functions of banana plants in Javanese culture also imply philosophical meanings and wisdom of Javanese who perceive the plants as a resemblance of human beings.

This article describes the role and functions of banana plants in Javanese rituals and analyses their philosophical meanings. The findings would contribute to the continuity in usage and functions of banana plants among Javanese people, and may affect the villagers who are deeply involved with the use of banana plants, by deepening their knowledge on the philosophical meanings of banana plants, to preserve and accommodate this material culture into their future life.

**Keywords:** banana plants, Javanese, material culture, Indonesia

## 1. Banana Plants in Javanese Rituals and Customs

This study takes qualitative methods to examine the use of banana plants in traditional Javanese customs, their symbolism in linguistic expressions during ceremonies, and how they contribute to the transmission of values in Javanese culture. The primary data for this chapter was obtained from in-depth interviews with 18 informants consisting of performers of Javanese rituals, elders or chiefs of a community.

The secondary data was obtained from books and articles including those from Javanese magazines. The description and explanation of rituals by Geertz (1960) is based on his anthropological fieldwork done in Modjokuto, a city of East Java in the 1950s, and so might be a reliable supplement of the author's observations and interview data. Javanese anthropologist Koentjaraningrat's book is on

Javanese culture as a whole. Poerwadarminta's book is also on Javanese culture in general. Bratawidjaja's is a guidebook on traditional Javanese rituals as a whole. The author has not found fundamental differences between the author's own data and those found in the books above.

Data about traditional Javanese rituals starts the discussion in this paper to illustrate the connections between human and non-human objects in a detailed life-cycle process. In the explanations of each process, mentions about the involvement of banana plants will highlight each epoch of a life cycle.

Koentjaraningrat (1987: 187) states that tradition is as similar as customs, concepts, and rules that are integrated into the cultural system, and regulates human actions in society. Traditional Javanese culture is a variety of knowledge and customs that are passed down traditionally by Javanese society and become a routine habit, such as the traditional feast called *selametan*.

According to Geertz, "At the center of the whole Javanese religious system lies a simple, formal, undramatic, almost furtive, little ritual: the *selametan* (also sometimes called a *kenduren*). The *selametan* is the Javanese version of what is perhaps the world's most common religious ritual, the communal feast, and, as almost everywhere, it symbolizes the mystic and social unity of those who are participating in it" (Geertz 1960: 11).

Geertz (1960: 11) states that *selametan* is the basic core ritual of Javanese culture. It is an event of gathering family and neighbors to eat together in Javanese traditional customs where all the participants are treated equally despite their social class in the society. *Selametan* is derived from the Javanese word *selamet* which means being safe from unwanted incidents, happy, and content. This ritual is often referred to as a communal feast, whether for individual celebration events for pregnancy, birth, weddings, funeral events, or large events involving the whole village. Some large ceremonies include a ritual before the rice planting season, *Bersih Desa*, or village cleansing, and *resik kubur*, or cleaning the ancestor's graveyard. These two different types of *selametan* are derived from the Javanese philosophy about how the cycle of life has a close relationship with the macro cosmos and micro cosmos. According to one elderly informant in my research, the micro cosmos represents the life of each individual person, while the macro cosmos refers to humankind as it relates to their environment. According to the interview, a good micro cosmos is represented in a healthy pregnancy, birth, joyful marriage, and happiness, while a bad micro cosmos is represented in miscarriage, illness, divorce, and death. On the other hand, a good macro cosmos relates to a good harvest and sufficient rain for the crops, while a bad macro cosmos is represented in natural disasters, plague or disease. Javanese people perform *selametan* in order to achieve

prosperity, protection, happiness, and God's blessings. Geertz (1960: 14) states that the goals of holding *selametan* are psychological, which is to hope for the absence of emotional disturbance or aggressiveness toward others.

Javanese ritual practices are heavily induced with symbolism through the offerings, particularly in the *mitoni* or *tingkeban* ritual as one of the most important ceremonies in Javanese culture (Geertz, 1960: 41), as explained further later in the sections below. The purpose of almost all Javanese rituals is to rebuild the connection between the community and the guardian spirits and nature. Most of the time, these ceremonies – whether individual or large scale – give more attention to the distribution of food called *berkat* that is believed to be blessed by the ritual performer's chanting, and the villagers attend these feasts to get the blessed food. Then gradually, *selametan* transforms its meaning as a concept and ritual in a wider scope that includes the creation of rules and collective agreement to conduct orders and precautions in ensuring the community's safety. Below are explanations about some important Javanese customs to illustrate the significance of each provision that will lead us to the use and functions of banana plants in traditional Javanese rituals.

## **1.1 Life-Cycle Rituals**

### **Pregnancy**

In Javanese tradition, a pregnant woman ought to do several rituals. Traditional rituals or ceremonies for a pregnant woman have been passed on for generations in Javanese society. Those traditions are meant to pray for the baby to be delivered safely and to receive blessings and happiness in life. The ceremonies or rituals take place in the second month, fourth month, seventh month, and ninth month of pregnancy. One of the special pregnancy rituals is held in the seventh-month of pregnancy called *mitoni*.

*Mitoni*, or *tingkeban* as it is often called, is the traditional ceremony for first-time pregnancies at the seventh-month period of pregnancy. It is a ritual that one can hold in a pre-arranged and certain time and has been passed down for generations. The symbolic meaning of utensils and components in the *mitoni* ritual is to ask Allah God Almighty for security and protection for the prospective mother, the infant, participants of the ritual and the whole community.

This *Mitoni* ceremony is considered the most special ceremonial event during pregnancy, because of its philosophical meanings and ritual complexities in welcoming the baby. *Mitoni* is derived

from the word *pitu*, which means “seven.” A Javanese woman that is having her first pregnancy ought to do this ritual in her seventh month of pregnancy (Poerwadarminta 1939: 534). In this ceremony, the pregnant woman is bathed with *air kembang setaman*, water from seven different water sources mixed with flowers such as rose, *kenanga* and *kantil* in the bathing ceremony called *siraman*. Several amenities for *mitoni* ceremony include a chair for the pregnant woman during the bathing ceremony, the water from seven water sources filled with flowers or *air kembang setaman* put inside a *bokor* (traditional water jug made of copper), and *siwur* made of coconut shell for the purpose of pouring the water. Alongside that, other amenities are *boreh* or particular flowers of white color replacing regular soap to be applied on the pregnant woman’s body; *kendi* or a traditional Javanese water jug made of clay for the last step of the bathing ritual; hen’s egg; two ivory coconuts or *kelapa gading* with an illustration of Kamajaya, the god of masculinity in Javanese belief, and his wife Kamaratih, the god of beauty; and seven long batik cloths.

The *mitoni* ceremony also has requirements concerning the involvement of banana plants in the food to be served. The detailed summary of the required food for a *mitoni* ritual provided by Bratawidjaja (1988: 26-31) and Geertz (1960: 38-45) is as follows:

*Tumpeng kuat* (“strong” conic rice).

To make this kind of conic rice, traditional ways of cooking by using *dandang* are used. On a wide banana leaf, the largest conic rice will be placed in the center, surrounded by six smaller conic rice. The side dishes consist of non-spicy cooked vegetables, 35 boiled eggs, salted fish that are fried only using a small amount of coconut oil, tofu, tempeh, and big chili peppers with eggplant as garnish. This set of conic rice is meant for praying for the baby to be a healthy and vigorous individual later in life.

Various traditional market snacks placed on a bamboo-weaving tray covered by banana leaf, for example: *wajik*, *kue lapis*, *jadah*, *mendut*, *onde-onde*, *bolu*, and other snacks such as cucumber, milk tuber, rambutan, banana, salacca, and boiled peanuts.

*Dawet* that are made of grass jelly and poured next to coconut milk, palm sugar, and *pandan* (screw pine) leaves.

*Rujak legi*, as it has refreshing effects, made of mixed fruits such as cucumber, mango, star fruit, milk tuber, water guava, and banana poured next to spicy palm sugar sauce. It also has another meaning as it symbolizes a prayer for the baby to refresh the heart of the family. According to Geertz (1960: 40), *rujak* is the most distinctive element of *mitoni*, because *rujak* does not occur in other *selametans*. It is said

that if the *rujak* tastes spicy for the prospective mother she will have a girl, but if it tastes flat to her she will have a boy.

*Keleman*, or foods made of seven kinds of bulbous plants, or food plants that grow below the ground such as yams, potatoes, carrots, cassava, parsnips, arrowroot, and sweet potatoes.

A pair of *ayam bekakak* or *ayam ingkung*, a traditional Javanese roasted chicken, served on banana leaf, represents the baby while in the fetal position.



Fig 1. *Ayam Ingkung* and conic rice for *mitoni*.  
Source: Ethnographic research by the author.

Three kinds of rice mush: *bubur putih* or white porridge, *bubur merah* or red porridge (made so by adding coconut sugar), and *bubur sengkala* or literally “misfortune porridge” as the combination of the two. The white porridge represents the “water” of the mother, the red the “water” of the father, and their mixture (*bubur sengkala*) is considered especially efficacious for preventing the entrance of harmful spirits. All of the three porridges are served in bowls made of folded banana leaf called *takir plonthong*, white around the outside and red in the center of the dish.

*Ketupat lepet* and *penyon* or *pleret* (a traditional snack made of steamed rice flour, divided and made into five colors – red, yellow, green, white, and black – then served with coconut shreds on top of them) as a complementary provision.

*Nasi kuning* or turmeric rice poured next to *telur dadar*, or omelet, *teri goreng*, or fried anchovy, *rempah* (a traditional Javanese side dish made of fried tempeh mixed with shrimp paste and other ingredients), and fried chicken.



Fig 2. *Bubur merah putih* and *bubur sengkala* for *mitoni*.  
Source: Ethnographic research by the author.

### Weddings

The traditional Javanese wedding ceremony, or *mantu*, is a major event that requires a complicated process, starting with *lamaran*, or the proposal, *nontoni*, or “the looking over,” where the family of the groom visits the bride’s house and is served tea by the bride-to-be, followed by *kepanggih*, or the meeting between the bride and the groom. At the moment of *kepanggih*, the bride emerges from the house followed by two virgin girls carrying *kembang mayang*, or mock plants made of young coconut leaves. *Kembang mayang* – “blossoming flower(s)” are large composite plants; their stems are made of banana-tree trunk representing the virginity of the bride and the groom, two being constructed for each of them. These *kembang mayang* of the bride will be exchanged with *kembang mayang* carried by two virgin boys that accompany the groom.



Fig 3. A Javanese bride with a pair of *kembang mayang*.  
Source: The author’s documentation

Traditionally, the bride and the groom (both are called *manten* in the ceremony) dress as a pair of royalty, as on their wedding day they ought to be thought of as a king and a queen. This section only explains the role of banana plants as a prominent plant in provisioning the wedding ritual.

### **Banana Plants in *Tuwuhan***

Before the wedding day, the parents of the bride and groom will put *bleketepe* in front of the wedding venue. *Bleketepe* is a decorative weaving made of old coconut leaves and complemented by *tuwuhan* on the left and right sides of the front gate. The father, with the help of the mother and their other child, frame the *bleketepe* and open the cover of *tuwuhan* on both the right and left of the front gate. *Tuwuhan* consists of *pisang raja*, or king banana; black sugar cane; *kelapa gading*, or ivory coconut; paddies; and various kinds of leaves such as *kluwih*, *dadap srep*, and *beringin* leaves to symbolize the hope for the couple to have a safe, respectful, fulfilling and joyful life and wishes for the couple to be wise in their journey to come.



Fig 4. The father placing paddies to complete the *tuwuhan*.  
Source: The author's documentation

In figure 4, the parents put a handful of paddies to complete the *tuwuhan* ceremony and symbolize their hope that the couple will soon conceive children. *Tuwuhan* consists of:

#### **1. *Pisang Raja***

The king banana tree is the crucial part of *tuwuhan*. Both of the banana plants on the right and left sides should be the whole tree complete with their ripe fruits. This particular tree represents the hope and wishes for the bride and groom to become regal as king and queen on their wedding day. The trees

should also possess ripe bananas to symbolize the hope of maturity in the bride and groom's way of thinking in life, and that the couple will be as wise as a king and queen in ruling their household.



Fig 5. *Tuwuhan* in the front gate of the bride's house.  
Source: The author's documentation

2. Black sugar cane, on both the right and left sides of *tuwuhan*

The black sugar cane, or *tebu wulung*, is required to be whole, to symbolize the hope of *anteping kalbu*, or the certainty of the heart of the bride and groom to embrace their life together.

3. *Cengkir Gading*, or ivory coconut

*Cengkir* is a young coconut in a light color; thus it is called ivory. The coconut symbolizes the purity of the couple's love and willingness to help others in need.

4. *Ron randu*, or cotton leaf, and *pari sewuli*, or a handful of paddy

*Ron randu* represents clothing, and *pari sewuli* represents food. This combination symbolizes the hope for the wealth of the bride and groom later in life. Some informants mentioned that paddies also symbolize the hope for the couple to be helpful to their surroundings.

5. *Janur* or young coconut leaves

*Janur* symbolizes the hope for the couple to look extravagant and bright on their wedding day. One informant also explained that *janur* represents the hope to get *nur* or a light of guidance from God.



## Funeral

The *selametan* cycle is also an essence of the traditional Javanese funeral, and they will hold a series of commemorative *selametans* within a certain interval. Geertz (1957: 40) declared that these *selametans* are a medium for the mourning family to produce the feeling of *ikhlas*, or letting go of the deceased without emotional disturbance, and also for the neighborhood group it is said to produce *rukun*, or communal harmony. Geertz also mentioned that of all the Javanese rituals, the funeral process probably carries the biggest obligation on attendance as an unavoidable duty (1960: 69). In the traditional Javanese funeral process, *selametan* is a genuine sacred symbol to provide a framework for facing the loss caused by death. As stated by Geertz (1960: 72), “They will hold *selametans* at three, seven, forty, and one hundred days after death; on the first and second anniversary of death; and finally on the thousandth day, when the corpse is considered to have turned to dust and the gap between the living and the dead to have become absolute.”



Fig 6. Illustration of Bathing Ritual for Funeral

Source: Indonesian Ministry of Religion (<http://kalsel.kemenag.go.id/index.php?a=berita&id=122020>, retrieved on September 30th, 2015)

When there is a death in a Javanese community, the whole neighbourhood will start the burial activities together. The banana tree is necessary for the traditional Javanese funeral, particularly in the bathing process. In the bathing rituals, to clean the body of the deceased, five cuts of banana trunks are needed, one each for the head, back or torso, hip, knee, and feet. The corpse is placed on top of the trunks

of the tree, and there is a hole in the trunk covered by banana leaf for the head area. These trunks are halved, with the flat part used as the bed for the body.

On some peculiar occasions, if a person who is known to have committed Javanese black magic dies, their body and soul are said to be taken by the spirits, leaving only the banana tree that looks like a regular body in normal human sight. These symbolisms found in the funeral process tend to strengthen the values that the Javanese people share in common.

## **1.2 Village Rituals**

The large-scale village rituals have often required the participation and involvement of the whole village. According to the informants in the study area, these rituals imply the need to maintain the harmony of the macro cosmos. Javanese people often perceive macro cosmos as events related to health, wealth, and prosperity of the village in general. In this case, the villagers prepare *selametan* on several occasions related to their environment. This sub-section explains about the roles of banana plants in three village rituals.

### **Planting and Harvesting Season**

Rituals surrounding the agricultural cycle are commonly held to seek the correct day to start cultivating the land for crops. According to Geertz (1960: 80), the crop *selametan*s are given only in connection with the cultivation of rice, not for the cultivation of dry crops, although sometimes someone will put out a small offering in connection with an onion or soybean crop. These *selametan*s use the same patterns as in pregnancy rituals, where the rice-growing season is treated as similar to a woman's pregnancy. Thus there are several small scales of *selametan*s involved during the rice-planting season. The most important crop ritual is the *selametan* for harvesting called *selametan metik*, or "to pluck," which is still often carried out on a fairly elaborate scale in the villages. In this specific *selametan*, the king banana fruit (*pisang raja*) takes part as one provision complementing other offerings such as incense, rice stalks, and flowers that are placed on banana-leaf baskets.

### **Village Cleansing or *Bersih Desa***

According to Geertz (1960:82), the *Bersih Desa* or "cleansing of the village" *selametan* is concerned with sanctifying relationships in space and with defining and celebrating one of the basic

territorial units of Javanese social structure – the village. The ritual purpose is to cleanse the village of dangerous spirits. To accomplish this purpose, the villagers hold a village-cleansing *selametan*, where they offer food to the guardian spirits of the village. In this *selametan*, each family in the village is supposed to contribute food, and the adult head of each family is obligated to attend. According to the informants of my research, the feast for this ritual can be held in the burial ground of the guardian of the village, or at the house of the village chief. The villagers will prepare offerings along with the food for the feast. The offerings consist of *kembang setaman*, or one set of flowers; incense; king banana fruits; and traditional market snacks, all placed on a banana-leaf basket. Some informants from the area of the western part of East Java or near the border of Central Java also said that it requires a pair of whole king banana trees similar with *tuwuhan* for the main gate of the ceremonial place, but informants from the eastern part of the region did not mention about this requirement.

#### **Graveyard Cleansing, or *Resik Kubur***

Similar to the village cleansing, the graveyard cleansing ritual is usually held to offer food for the guardian spirits by placing food on trays covered by banana leaf on the burial ground. The practice of this *selametan* is also similar with the village cleansing ritual, where the village chief will give a very brief speech, followed by the *modin*, or the spiritual leader, who recites an Arabic prayer, continuing with the feast of the attendees who will take a bite or two of the food, and ending with the cleansing of the graves of weeds. The purpose of the cleansing ritual is to bring well-being to the village through the means of traditional gathering events. The roles of banana plants in these ceremonies are also similar, as a provision in the food offerings.

### **1.3 The Role of Banana Plants in Javanese Rituals**

Historical traces of the use of banana plants in traditional Javanese rituals are mentioned in “Serat Centhini.” Written in 1814 by Paku Alam V of Surakarta Kingdom, this manuscript describes the Javanese way of life and wisdom and also mentions the importance of banana plants in Javanese traditional ceremonies and gathering dining events (*kenduri* or *selametan*), which accentuates the role of banana plants as a symbol of Javanese heritage. To summarize the role of banana plants in traditional Javanese rituals and the change in contemporary days, Table 1 below comprises the ethnographical data of the section above:

**Table 1.** The Role of Banana Plants in Javanese Rituals

Type of the ritual	The Use of Banana Plants				The Change
<b>Individual Ceremony</b> <b>Pregnancy</b> Second Month Fourth Month Seventh Month Ninth Month <b>Birth</b> <i>Mendhem Ari-ari</i> <i>Babaran</i> <i>Sepasaran</i> <i>Puputan</i> <i>Aqeqah</i> <i>Selapanan</i> <i>Telung Lapanan</i> <i>Tedhak Siten</i> <i>Setahunan</i> <b>Wedding</b> <i>Tuwuhan</i> <b>Funeral</b>	Cooking	Serving	Packaging	Offering	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Banana leaf mainly functions as the food container of every selamatan, and also provides a packaging to bring home the food after the feast. In contemporary Javanese society, this packaging is often replaced by other materials such as paper or plastic.</li> <li>In some birth selamatan where there are not so many guests invited, banana leaves are not strictly used in serving and packaging process.</li> <li>In a traditional Javanese funeral, banana plants are a necessity in the bathing process. This practice still prevails in villages, but Javanese people in urban areas prefer to use the service of modern hospitals for this process.</li> </ul>
	√	√	√	√ (fruits)	
	√	√	√	√ (fruits)	
	√	√	√	√ (fruits)	
	√	√	√	√ (fruits)	
	√	√	√	√ (fruits)	
	√	-	√	√	
	√	√	√	√	
	√	√	√	√	
	√	-	√	√	
	√	√	√	√	
	√	√	√	√	
	√	√	√	√	
	√	-	-	√	
	√	√	√	√	
	-	-	-	√	
<b>Large-Scale Ceremony</b> Planting & Harvesting Village Cleansing Graveyard Cleansing	Cooking	Serving	Packaging	Offering	These large-scale rituals are getting rare in contemporary Javanese society, except in some villages.
	√	√	√	√	
	√	-	√	√	
	√	-	√	√	

From the explanations of various *selamatan* cycles in Javanese ritual tradition, there is a shared knowledge about how to prepare certain provisions – such as the conic rice, or a particular type of banana – as a crucial element of the ritual. The prepared meals in the communal feast, each symbolic of a particular religious concept, are considered as food for the spirits in order to pacify them so they will not disturb the living (Geertz 1960: 14). It is said that the spirits consume the food from the scent or aroma of the food, as a Javanese put in an interview passage by Geertz (1960: 15):

At a *selametan* all kinds of invisible beings come and sit with us and they also eat the food. That is why the food and not the prayer is the heart of the *selametan*. The spirit eats the aroma of the food. It's like this banana. I smell it but it doesn't disappear. That is why the food is left for us after the spirit has already eaten it.

As Geertz (1960: 41) mentions, in all *selametans* – particularly in the *tingkeban* – in addition to the food itself, the joint offering to both the spirits and one's neighbors, there is a special offering for the spirits taken in their totality: the *sadjen* or *sesajen*. More or less constant in its composition, the *sesajen* appears in nearly all Javanese rituals and often appears by itself without a ceremony. The *sesajen*, the meaning of whose composing items is largely lost, is – along with the spell – the simplest and most elemental component of Javanese religious acts and as such finds a place in almost every aspect of their daily life (Geertz 1960: 42).

All the *sesajen* are always placed in a large banana-leaf basket lined with bananas. Using banana plants in every aspect of life is a common thing for Javanese people, but no one mentioned why the rituals require banana leaf and not coconut or teak tree leaf, although those other leaves are also commonly found in Java. According to my informants as the performers of traditional Javanese rituals, the shared value concerning the importance of banana plants in Javanese culture roots back to the philosophical and symbolical meanings of the plants in their resemblance to human beings.

## **2. The Philosophical Value of Banana Plants in Javanese Culture**

### **2.1 Javanese Philosophy and its Basis**

Javanese people believe that following the rules and paying gratitude to the spirit realm will guarantee guides and protections from the Greater power. This philosophy shifts and transforms due to Islamic influences, but has still been well-kept through conducting traditional rituals. The whole process of a traditional Javanese ritual is a passed-on knowledge undertaken by all members of the community, which gradually engulfs their daily life. Contemporary Javanese often see traditional Javanese rituals as impractical due to many symbols within each action and provision. Gathering from my interviews, contemporary Javanese still believe that the symbolic actions such as preparing the *sesajen* represent hope and prayer and ensure the purpose of the ritual. But, they face challenges from modernity and religiosity. Due to the strong influence of Islamic religion that often bashes the practice of performing rituals

nowadays, contemporary Javanese choose to select only some of the ritual practices and actions that are less risky in interpretation. As an example, one informant follows the rules from the passed-on traditional Javanese wedding practice but leaves behind the action of preparing *sesajen* because the elder of the family thinks it is against Islamic beliefs. The large-scale village rituals are also becoming rare nowadays in the more urban contexts where geographical proximity is less important than ideological commitment or differences in social status. Geertz (1957: 51) also mentions about how *selametan*s “now tend to be marked by anxious discussions of the various elements in the ritual, of what their ‘real’ significance is; by arguments as to whether a particular practice is essential or optional.” Nevertheless, Javanese people are still keen to use symbolical meaning in various occasions, and they still maintain the essence of *selametan* despite the changes that happen around them. Related to the unchanged values of *selametan*, various symbolical meanings also enriched the use of banana plants as an element in the Javanese *selametan*s cycle, such as the different use of the banana leaf’s side as a provision in the birth ritual distinguishing it from the funeral ritual. In the birth ritual, the side of the leaf that is dark green and layered with natural wax is used to serve the food, to symbolize happiness, growth, and to welcome the new addition to the family. Meanwhile, the funeral ritual mainly uses the other side of the leaf that is usually dull, to symbolize the grief of losing a family member. The close connection between banana plants and Javanese ritual tradition expresses the bond between humans and their culture with nature, particularly where banana plants as a material also maintain their irreplaceable roles within traditional rituals. Nowadays, there are still several important plants related to Javanese traditional elements that continue to be utilized through the cultural transformation influenced by the modern Islamic religion, and these include banana plants.

Based on the ethnographical data, I tried to demonstrate that traditional Javanese rituals require complicated steps and provisions where banana plants are one of its prominent elements. This article provides comprehensive and actual evidence of the roles of banana plants in traditional Javanese rituals, thus supports the idea about the duty of Javanese people in maintaining the harmony between nature and culture.

The majority of informants of this research are Javanese people who are still believing in and upholding spiritual culture. Living in various cities with multiple backgrounds, they have faith in God as shown through the practice of religions (most of them are Moslem and some are Christian). Some informants’ families still exhibit their belief in spirits of their ancestors and of supernatural powers by

providing a small tray of offerings in certain places and times. Also, some of the informants still believe in the power of their material belongings or family heirlooms, as shown by their particular ritual called *jamasan* where they ought to wash and “feed the spirits” of their Javanese traditional weapons such as *keris* and *tombak*. They believe that uneventful situations, sickness, calamities, and evil deeds that occur in life are caused by the imbalance between the physical and the spiritual worlds. It is necessary to make relations with the spirit world through some rituals to keep the balance, to obtain security, and to avoid disasters. This belief of the existence of a spirit world and the power of ancestor heirlooms in their surroundings is rooted strongly in Javanese cultural tradition, and it cannot be removed from their contemporary life although their lifestyle is partially changed, modified, or transformed.

As one effort to achieve secure conditions and happiness, the Javanese people perform ritual ceremonies related to life and death events. Geertz (1960: 38) explains that the Javanese rites of passage emphasize both the continuity and the underlying identity of all aspects of life and the special transitions and phases through which it passes. The Javanese people have confidence that the rituals they perform can prevent potential troubles. On the other hand, if they fail to perform them, disasters would surely come. This premonition is a myth that still exists in Javanese communities who trust in the sacredness of nature, heirloom, and spirits of their ancestors.

Historically, the animistic belief of Javanese culture has been acculturated with new components from different influences, such as religions. The Javanese are rapidly entering the mainstream of modern civilization, yet the traditional value orientation is still preserved by the higher-class society. Koentjaraningrat (1985) states in his hypothesis: “whenever a culture or subculture in a particular class of the society concerned has an established ancient tradition and therefore a vested interest in protecting the great tradition, it will show greater resistance towards change than cultures or subcultures with few such traditions” (Koentjaraningrat 1985: 462). Landon (1949) cited in Geertz (1957: 35) states that the religious tradition of Java, particularly of the peasantry, is a composite of Indian, Islamic, and indigenous Southeast Asian elements. Javanese people are open-minded and willing to accept the different ideas as long as those alternatives can be adapted into the harmony of their life. The flexibility in accepting aspects of new customs without neglecting the existing culture gave a way to spread Islam by acculturating Islamic values into traditional Javanese rituals, with the emerging of Islam *Kejawen* as an example. Still, Javanese people highly value harmony and balance where they live, whether in the social relations of the community or in the relationships between humans and their surrounding nature.

## 2.2 Evolving Role and Meanings of Banana Plants in Javanese Culture

In “Serat Centhini,” the explanations about the Javanese way of life include details of traditional Javanese food culture. This particular subject is concerned with the cooking process, the way of serving, and mostly the ingredients. Three prominent plants in Javanese culture always exist in traditional rituals, which are coconut, banana, and paddy. The existence of these three plants is closely related to each other, and although they share the similar symbolism as “the tree of life” for Javanese people, each has their philosophical meanings and importance. Coconut trees provide various benefits for Javanese people, as reflected in the proverb “the advantages of one coconut tree are equal to the number of days in a year.” Paddy is for Javanese people a staple food and contains various meanings in rituals. Meanwhile, banana plants in a particular sense are supposed to resemble a living human being with a genuine purpose in life.

Banana plants are one vital element of offerings in traditional Javanese rituals. The symbolical meaning of the function as offerings for guardian spirits around the village is to protect the safety of the villagers during and after the ceremony or ritual. There are several symbolical meanings concerning banana plants in Javanese culture, and they become a source of wisdom or guidelines as one informant also mentioned that the word *pisang* (or “banana” in the Indonesian language) means *pitedahing gesang* (or “guidelines in life” in the Javanese language). The informants in this research came from various backgrounds and live in different cities but somehow, they came up with shared similarities when asked about their interpretations of banana plants. The symbolical meanings of banana plants are explained below.

Banana plants always grow in clumps or groups. It symbolizes the community and the strength of living together in harmony.

Every part of banana plants is useful for daily life and ritual necessities. It shows that Javanese people ought to make use of their healthy body and mind to be beneficial for their surroundings, just as banana plants do.

Banana plants can grow anywhere without any special treatment or intervention. It teaches Javanese people to be independent without leaving their responsibility in social life and community.

Banana plants are strong and have high durability in any weather. It implies that Javanese people should have the ability to be adaptable and resilient.



Banana plants only wither and die after they bear fruits and grow their adolescents. It motivates Javanese people not to leave the world before dedicating their best efforts in raising the youth to ensure the continuity of the cycle.

In sum, banana plants show consistency in being strong in a group, adaptable, persistent, durable to any weather and terrain, and bring benefits in their short lifespan. Those characteristics make banana plants a symbol of motivation, resilience, togetherness, strong will, regeneration in a continuous cycle, and of having genuine intentions to be beneficial for the surroundings.

### **3. Toward Steady Succession of Javanese Culture**

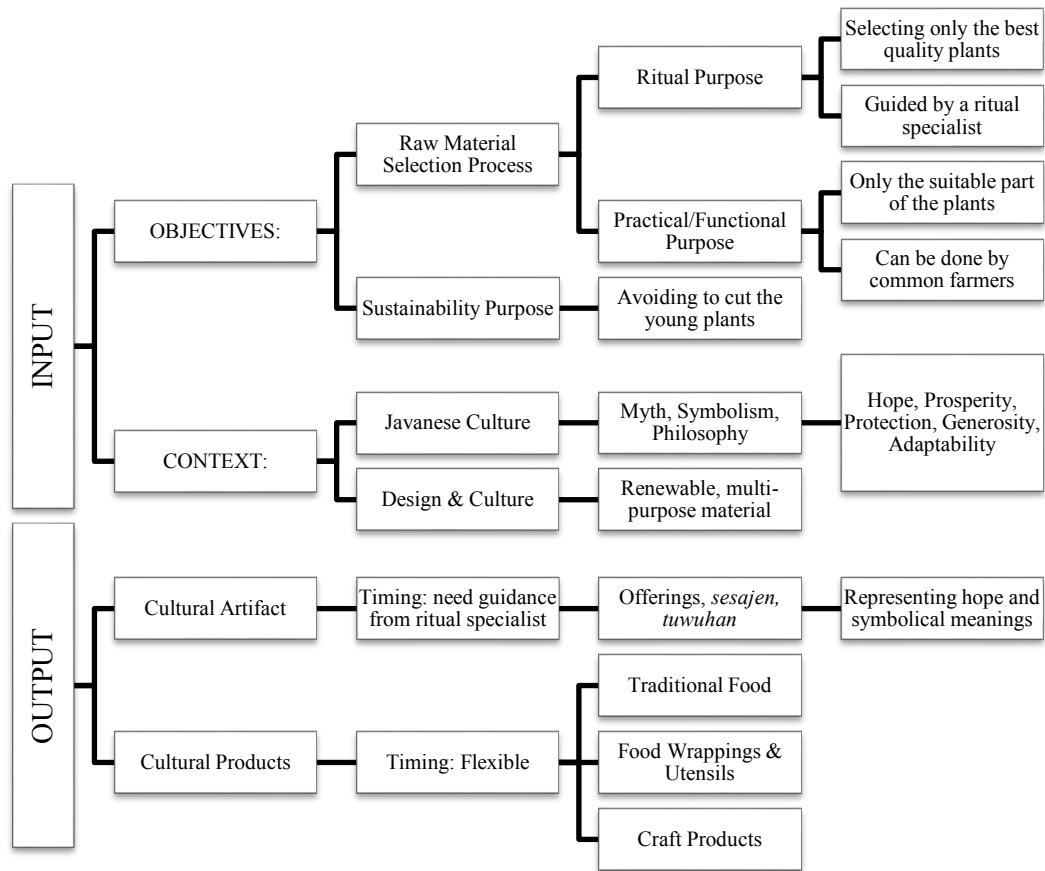
#### **3.1 Banana Plants as a Material Culture**

The purpose of documenting and analyzing banana plants as a material culture in the realm of science is to make valid predictions based on interpretations of social actors involved in the ethnographic research fieldwork.

In particular, the analysis in viewing banana plants as a material culture aims to understand how banana plants as an object have various symbolic meanings for Javanese people, substantial in structuring, transmitting, and producing culture through various rituals and daily customs.

#### **3.2 Banana Plants in Traditional Knowledge Succession**

The processes of utilizing banana plants in Javanese culture into cultural products should be documented in a clear and comprehensive way because the way of treating the plant as a material culture can be excerpted from traditional knowledge. In the understanding of the value of banana plants as a cultural product in Javanese rituals, the author came up with an analysis method to produce meanings for banana plants. The input process is the act of preparing banana plants as a cultural product, whether as an offering for the spirits (*tuwuhan*), or as an actant in craft products. The output is the symbolic products or artifacts made of banana plants. The input, or act to prepare banana plants as an offering in *tuwuhan*, employs symbols of communication and relationship with the spirit and starts with the process of selecting the raw materials – mostly using *pisang Raja* for the ritual purpose, and *pisang Kepok* for the functional purpose. It continues with the objectives of the artifact production, the time of the production of meaning, and the utilization of the artifacts.



**Fig 7.** Analysis Method in Producing Meanings of Banana Plants  
Source: The author's interpretation

Cultural comparison of how banana plants are used in various cultures is indispensable to measure the further steps to utilize the plants. As an example, in Japan, banana cultivation for clothing and household use dates back to at least the 13th century (Hendricks 2007: 188). In the Japanese fiber extraction system, leaves and shoots are cut from the plant periodically to ensure softness. Then, the harvested shoots are first boiled in lye to prepare fibers for yarn making. These banana shoots produce fibers of varying degrees of softness, yielding yarns and textiles with differing qualities for specific uses, from tablecloths to kimono. This traditional Japanese cloth-making process requires many steps, all performed by hand, as shown in the article “Traditional Crafts of Japan – *Kijoka* Banana Fiber Cloth”. Meanwhile, as noted in “An Entrepreneur Story – Turning Waste from Banana Harvests into Silk Fiber for the Textile Industry,” in India, a banana fiber separator machine has been developed, which takes the agricultural waste of local banana harvests and extracts strands of the fiber.

Another use of banana fiber other than for textile is in the production of banana paper. Banana paper is created with two different aims: a paper made from the banana bark mainly for artistic and decorative purposes, and paper made from banana fiber, obtained by an industrialized process from the stem and the non-usable fruits. The paper itself can be either hand-made or using an industrial processes.

The term sustainability is not only necessary in the context of craft and cultural artefacts as mentioned above, but is also closely related to Javanese culture. Javanese people often look to the wisdoms that are passed down through the generations as a life guide to serve the right purpose in life.

*“Memayu hayuning bawana”*

This ancient Javanese wisdom is passed down through the generations, and it is unclear when this Javanese philosophy was first mentioned in writing. The ancient wisdom literally means, “to beautify nature in the world.” Gathered from informants’ knowledge about the core attitude of *Kejawen*, the general interpretations of this Javanese proverb are “to preserve the beauty of the world, to embellish and balance the universe – physically and spiritually – to achieve happiness and safety for all nature and mankind.” It is also a reminder for Javanese people to fulfill their duty to maintain nature. Nature is the place where Javanese people came to after birth, the place they are living right now, and will become the place they will come back to after death. Javanese people ought to live in harmony with nature, and have an important role to take care of the continuity of nature and human co-existence. This wisdom implies that Javanese people should not see nature and culture as opposite ideas, but instead to live in balance between nature and culture, and cultural development should coexist in harmony with what belongs to nature.

In Java, the coexistence between nature and the formation of Javanese culture dated back to the naming of the island itself, Java as from *jawawut* or a type of paddy that has been planted on the island long before Hindu culture arrived in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC (Koentjaraningrat 1984: 37). Javanese artifacts and temples are often filled with reliefs containing glimpses of ancient civilizations, the King’s spiritual beliefs, and the society’s way of life, including their culture related to cultivating rice (Koentjaraningrat 1976: 21-23).

The close relationship of Javanese culture with nature can be seen in the use of prominent plants in daily and ritual necessities. Based on the main occupation of the people as farmers who plant rice as their staple food, most Javanese rituals performed are concerned with rice plants. In the rice planting and harvesting season, Javanese people will perform a village ritual to worship “Dewi Sri,” the deity that

protects the rice plants as an assimilation product of Hindu influence and Javanese animism beliefs (Sri Mulyono 1978: 36). As one of the plants of the Javanese ritual provisions, rice or paddy is also essential in various ways such as being processed as the main food source, or as an offering to symbolize wealth and prosperity.

Another important plant that can be found in every Javanese ritual necessity besides rice and banana plants is coconut. Similar to rice and banana plants, coconuts are utilized in various ways, but unlike the two previous plants, the latter particularly produces fruits that are used in the cooking process in traditional Javanese foods.

Traditional Javanese rituals with all their complexity represent a form of wisdom using local plants as an important element with a unique value. Banana plant as one of the prominent plants in Javanese culture is often taken for granted due to its abundance and familiarity. Gradually, its significant impacts on social culture and cultural transmission –particularly in the study area where banana plants are heavily involved in the past and the present time usage – will hold a crucial role as a passed-on traditional knowledge and a vital aspect in maintaining the continuity of Javanese culture in the future.

## **Conclusion**

The relationship between banana plants and Javanese people is a close-knit connection that affects many aspects of their life. Banana plants also have a dynamic function and implications depending on the necessities of the place. This study highlights the traditions of collective action in Javanese culture, particularly in close relationships between the people and nature in conducting the *selametan* communal feast as their core ritual. Regarding this issue, Geertz (1960: 61) stated that Javanese culture emphasizes the common value and the conviction that people ought to cooperate and help one another in giving *selametans*. In preparing the provisions of *selametan*, the Javanese share many universal cultural values regarding the use of banana plants in the cooking and serving process, also in using banana-leaf dishes and wrappers. From the in-depth interviews on how Javanese people perceive banana plants, I also found some common conceptions of the philosophical meanings and wisdom of banana plants as having a resemblance to human beings.

Banana plants also attain a position of central importance within Javanese culture: as a source of food and beverages, daily life usage, and numerous ceremonial and ritual uses. The significance and

functions of banana plants also implied the persistence of associating banana plants to Javanese people's life goal – which is to be beneficial for others. Banana plants can endure not only many kinds of terrains but any kind of weather, and although we cut them they will still grow as long as they still have their roots attached to the soil. As they will only die after growing new stems, they show us that they are making sure to create new generations before leaving the world. Javanese people also present banana fruits in offerings because it is perceived to be sacred with its purpose in the *Kejawen* proverb: “*moksartham jagadhita yaca ithi dharma*,” which means “to free the pure self from the world and come back to the soul owner/God.” Also, it is the Javanese wisdom that states the primary duty of Javanese people to maintain the harmony of nature and culture. In contemporary anthropological studies, the concept of nature and culture sparks debate as to whether they are intertwined or should be redefined due to the tensions between their divisions. This research initially planned to understand the significant value behind the use of banana as one local plant as a necessity in traditional, ritual, and daily use. However, the multidisciplinary methods in this study have discovered the importance of traditional wisdom that acts as a fundamental belief of the people to ensure the harmonious relationships between nature and culture.

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