



Cultural Diplomacy in Indonesian Sultanates: The Narratives on Inter-Kingdom Relations through the *Sasapton* Tradition of the 16th-17th Century Banten Sultanate

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[*Abstract*]

Existing historiography of the Banten Sultanate has largely emphasised its economic and political rise and decline in the 16th-17th centuries. Still, it has paid little attention to local traditions such as *Sasapton*, which played a crucial role in legitimizing authority and shaping external relations. This study addresses that gap by examining *Sasapton*, a traditional equestrian tournament initiated under Sultan Abdul Mufakir Mahmud Abdul Kadir (1596-1651) and further developed by Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa (1651–1672) as more than courtly entertainment. Drawing on archival

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records, oral traditions, archaeological data, and expert interviews, the research analyzes how *Sasapton* functioned as a form of proto-cultural diplomacy that projected Banten's cosmopolitan identity, consolidated political legitimacy, and facilitated diplomatic encounters with foreign traders and kingdoms across Southeast Asia's maritime networks. By conceptualizing *Sasapton* as an early practice of cultural diplomacy, this paper contributes to broader debates on the intersections of culture, power, and diplomacy in pre-modern Southeast Asia. It highlights the significance of local traditions in shaping regional and global interactions in the 16th-17th centuries.

Keywords: Banten, *Sasapton*, proto-cultural diplomacy, political legitimacy, Islamization, maritime trade

I . Introduction

In the 17th century, several Islamic Kingdoms in Nusantara (Indonesia) experienced a heyday across various domains, including government, culture, and the economy. In a broader context, this period also witnessed the prominence of major Islamic empires such as the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Empires. At the same time, in the Indonesian archipelago, the Sultanate of Banten emerged as a key maritime power. The Sultanate reached its golden age during the leadership of Sultan Abdul Mufakir Mahmud Abdul Kadir (1591-1651 AD) and Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa (1561-1672 AD) (van Bruinessen 1995:191; Rismawidiawati et al. 2023; Sadi 2011). The growth of spice ports in Banten, which conducted commerce with regions as far as China in the West Pacific and the Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean, demonstrated the heyday of the Sultanate (Rismawidiawati, 2023). The presence of traders from Persia, India, China, Turkey, Arabia, and Abyssinia intrigued Europeans, and further attention came from the Portuguese with Henrique Leme's fleet in 1522 and the Dutch under Cornelis de Houtman in 1596 (Fadilah 2021; Guillot, A., and D. 1990; Hall 2014; Lodewycksz 1915).

Rather than detailing every foreign connection, it is

important to note that Banten's international network, extending to Europe, the Middle East, and across Asia, made it one of the busiest ports in Southeast Asia (Ali 2021:283). Relations were also established with neighboring polities such as Lampung, Selebar, Cirebon, Kerawang, Sumdang, and Mataram (Tjandrasasmita, 1976:6). Despite this flourishing activity, much of the historiography views Banten's trajectory only in terms of rise, peak, and decline, focusing mainly on its economic and political dimensions (Colombijn 1989; Facal 2014; Guilot 2008; Hall 2014; Hutama 2003; Lubis et al. 2014; Yakin 2015). What is often overlooked is how local cultural traditions contributed to the Sultanate's legitimacy and diplomacy during this golden age.

One such tradition is *Sasapton*, a weekly equestrian tournament that originated during the reign of Sultan Abdul Mufakir and was further institutionalized under Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa (Djajadiningrat 1983:50-70; Guillot, 1993). While, at first glance, it may appear to be a folk game or a spectacle of agility, *Sasapton* served deeper political and diplomatic functions. It strengthened the bond between the Sultan and his people, served as a marker of legitimacy, and provided a performative arena where foreign visitors could witness Banten's cultural sophistication. This makes *Sasapton* not merely entertainment but a strategic practice of what can be termed proto-cultural diplomacy.

Yet, historiography has barely addressed *Sasapton*. References to it in historical sources are fragmentary, and modern scholarship has tended to repeat earlier depictions without deeper analysis. The tradition itself disappeared after the reign of Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa, leaving a significant gap in understanding how local cultural practices shaped Banten's power. This study, therefore, seeks to examine how *Sasapton* contributed to Banten's consolidation of political legitimacy, the Islamization process, and the strengthening of trade and diplomatic relations in the 16th-17th centuries.

Conceptually, this research positions *Sasapton* within the broader framework of cultural diplomacy and soft power (Chong 2022; Fouinna and Lafram 2023; Kyriakidis, AlDulaimi, and

Molaeb 2024). While cultural diplomacy is often associated with modern nation-states projecting influence through art, language, or education, *Sasapton* represents an earlier form of this practice, a “proto-cultural diplomacy” embedded in a pre-modern Southeast Asian context. By mobilizing performance, spectacle, and public ritual, the Banten Sultanate projected its authority both internally and externally, centuries before the term “cultural diplomacy” was formally coined. This conceptual framing underscores the relevance of *Sasapton* not only for Banten historiography but also for theoretical debates on how culture functions as a diplomatic resource across different historical periods.

In addition, this study highlights the significance of *Sasapton* for Southeast Asian studies. Historical evidence shows that ritualized performances were central to the projection of royal power across the region. In Aceh, for instance, court ceremonies and public processions functioned as spectacles that displayed wealth and authority to both subjects and foreign visitors (Chambert-Loir 2017). In Makassar, ritual exchanges and performative diplomacy accompanied trading encounters and negotiations with the Dutch and other foreign powers (Andaya 2004; Brigg 2011). Likewise, the court of Ayutthaya staged elaborate ceremonies to impress envoys and merchants, embedding diplomacy within ritual performance (Breazeale and Adulyadej 1999). Seen in this broader context, *Sasapton* illustrates how local traditions in Banten intersected with wider maritime networks and served a similar function, mediating power and diplomacy. By analyzing *Sasapton* alongside trade and diplomatic exchanges, this paper demonstrates that cultural practices were integral to the functioning of maritime polities, serving as tools of negotiation, legitimacy, and identity-making. This perspective contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Southeast Asia’s interconnected histories, where ritual performance and diplomacy were inseparable from commerce and politics.

Accordingly, the main research questions are: (1) How did the *Sasapton* tradition reinforce political legitimacy and religious authority within the Sultanate of Banten? (2) In what ways did

Sasapton function as a form of cultural diplomacy in Banten's engagement with regional and international networks? Methodologically, this study combines structured interviews, literature reviews, oral traditions, and archaeological data. By situating *Sasapton* within the framework of cultural diplomacy, this paper highlights how a local tradition served both as a tool of internal cohesion and as a means of external diplomacy.

II . Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach designed to capture the cultural, political, and symbolic dimensions of the *Sasapton* tradition. The research combined expert interviews, literature review, and historical sources to reconstruct both the practice itself and its role as a form of proto-cultural diplomacy in the Sultanate of Banten. Such a multi-layered strategy was necessary because written sources on *Sasapton* are fragmentary, while oral traditions and archaeological traces provide valuable yet dispersed insights that require careful integration.

The interviews were conducted with three experts who offered different perspectives on the topic: two historians specializing in Banten's history and one cultural practitioner with deep knowledge of the region's equestrian traditions. These informants were selected for their scholarly contributions and artistic expertise. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provide a balance between consistency and flexibility, allowing the researcher to ask guiding questions while remaining open to new themes (Kvale 1996). Questions focused on several key issues: the historical origins of *Sasapton*; its social, religious, and political functions; the extent to which foreign traders and visitors were involved as participants or audiences; its possible role in Islamization and political legitimization; and the symbolic meanings associated with the event for rulers, elites, and ordinary people alike. Ethical standards were carefully observed throughout the process. Informants were briefed about the purpose of the research and gave their consent both verbally and in writing for

their knowledge to be used for academic purposes. Confidentiality was maintained unless explicit permission for attribution was granted, and the overall research design followed established ethical guidelines in oral history and cultural studies.

A comprehensive review of both primary and secondary sources complemented the interviews. Archival records such as Dutch East India Company (VOC) documents, missionary writings, and local chronicles offered valuable insights into Banten's social and political environment. These were supplemented by modern scholarship on Banten's history and Southeast Asian diplomacy, which offered interpretive frameworks for situating *Sasapton* in broader regional contexts. In addition to oral and textual data, the study also considered archaeological evidence. Excavation and survey reports of Banten's palace complexes, *alun-alun* (public squares), and equestrian grounds were examined to understand the physical settings in which *Sasapton* would have been performed.

All collected material was analyzed using a thematic analysis approach, enabling the identification of recurring patterns and themes across the different sources. Thematic analysis was selected for its flexibility in identifying patterns in qualitative data, particularly in historical and cultural contexts (Braun and Clarke 2006). For example, accounts from informants describing the presence of foreign audiences were cross-checked with VOC travelogues and missionary reports of court ceremonies. At the same time, oral narratives about the Islamizing role of *Sasapton* were tested against existing historiography on Banten's political and religious expansion. This triangulated method not only improved the reliability of the findings but also allowed for a more nuanced interpretation of *Sasapton* as both cultural performance and diplomatic strategy. By weaving together interviews and archival research, the methodology establishes a strong foundation for analyzing *Sasapton* within Banten's golden age. The combination of sources ensures that the study is not dependent on any single form of evidence, but rather reflects the interplay of memory, text, and material culture in reconstructing the past

III. Analysis and Discussion

3.1. The Theoretical Framework of the Banten *Sasapton* Tradition as a Form of Proto-Cultural Diplomacy

Earnest Satow (2011) and KM Panikar (1964) view power diplomacy as a powerful strategy for convincing others to understand the position of power and justify the ruler's adopted point of view. In diplomacy, there are tactics, art, and communication skills. This ability prioritizes the state's interests or one power concerning the state and other authorities, not only now but also for a long time (Markey 2022). In short, as mentioned by Hashim Djalal (1990), "Diplomacy is an attempt to convince the other party or other countries to be able to understand and justify our views and, if possible, support our views, without the need to use force." Click or tap here to enter text. One of the essential aspects of diplomacy is communication, which in the context of the early modern world could occur directly—through court audiences, negotiations, and ritual encounters or indirectly through symbolic performances, festivals, and spectacles that conveyed political messages to both domestic and foreign observers (Kuus 2023). However, the direct application of these modern diplomatic theories risks anachronism when imposed on the 16th-17th-century Banten Sultanate. Instead of framing *Sasapton* through the vocabulary of contemporary diplomacy, this study positions it as a form of proto-cultural diplomacy or performative diplomacy, in which ritualized cultural practices function as symbolic negotiations of legitimacy and power.

In the view of some academics, especially Satow and Panikar, diplomacy still puts the country in a central position. Diplomacy seems possible only through the government, the holder of power. The view that puts the state in a primary or sole position in diplomacy and other aspects is common in the Islamic sultanate system, including in the archipelago. There is one adage known in the Islamic power system, including the Sultanate in the archipelago, which says *dinu arraiyah ala dini mulukihim* (folk religion is the religion adopted by the ruler). This adage, on the one hand, shows that the process of Islamization often stems from the ruler. If the king has embraced

one religion, the people will follow it.

On the other hand, the adage shows that the position of the king and the power he holds are so central. The king will fully regulate all matters related to the kingdom through the mechanism of control he possesses. However, in practice, diplomatic performance in Banten did not rest solely on the ruler but also required participation from the people as audience and performers, thereby blurring the line between state and non-state actors. In *Sasapton*, nobles and commoners together enacted a ritual of cohesion, projecting legitimacy both internally and externally.

The people also play a role in power diplomacy, not solely the ruler. Maintaining the relationship between the ruler and his people is urgently required in power diplomacy. The rulers, namely the Sultan and the noble class as state actors and the people (nonelite circles) as non-state actors, play an essential role in the sovereignty process. In the view of cultural diplomacy, Zamorano notes that the state can no longer dominate the agents of cultural diplomacy with the increasing activity of non-state actors who organize and promote cultural products (Zamorano 2016). It is common for non-state actors to move independently in cultural diplomacy activities to foster mutual understanding and maintain positive relations. It is relevant and contextual (La Porte 2012) to explanations that non-state actors can influence state policy. Similarly, in early modern Southeast Asia, royal courts often relied on ritual performances and spectacles to project authority and negotiate legitimacy. In Aceh, sources describe grand processions and public rituals under Sultan Iskandar Muda; in Makassar, feasts and ceremonial exchanges accompanied encounters with foreign traders; while in Ayutthaya, courtly performances and artistic displays impressed visiting envoys (Andaya 2004; Breazeale and Adulyadej 1999; Lombard 2005). Rather than resting solely on the figure of the ruler, legitimacy and persuasion often required the participation of broader society. This pattern is confirmed in the case of Banten. The *Sajarah Banten* recounts:

Sang Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa nuli medal ka paseban, sareng ratu lan para priyayi, nuli katemu rahayat akeh, kuda-kuda dipageuhan, lan para abdi sami atur sabung kuda. Sang Sultan nuli ngabagi arta lan hadiah. (Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa then appeared in the alun-alun with nobles and officials, where crowds of commoners gathered, horses were paraded, and attendants staged equestrian contests. The Sultan then distributed money and gifts.) (Pudjiastuti 1991)

Likewise, the VOC Daghregister (1644) notes:

In Banten is gehouden een groote feest, waerin den Coninck verscheenen is op den grooten aloon-aloon, met een menichte volck en vreemde coopluijden. Paerden wierden getoont, en veel geschenken werden uytgedeelt." (In Banten a great feast was held, where the King appeared on the grand alun-alun with a multitude of people and foreign merchants. Horses were displayed, and many gifts were distributed.) (Daghregister gehouden int Casteel Batavia 1644)

These testimonies suggest that *Sasapton* was not a mere pastime but a performative form of diplomacy, in which the Sultan staged generosity, strength, and unity in a space shared by nobles, commoners, and foreigners. By parading horses and distributing gifts, the Sultan enacted a symbolic language of power that reinforced internal cohesion while simultaneously impressing external observers. In this sense, *Sasapton* exemplifies what may be termed proto-cultural diplomacy, a ritualized negotiation of legitimacy where rulers and subjects together produced a political spectacle that was intelligible both locally and transnationally.

Thus, *Sasapton* can be understood as a practice of proto-cultural diplomacy. Within a theoretical framework (Cummings 2016), Cultural diplomacy is the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other artistic expressions that fosters mutual understanding. Applied with caution, this framework helps us read *Sasapton* as a symbolic medium of communication. Sultan Abdul Mufakir and Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa employed this tradition as a political language to reinforce ties with their subjects while simultaneously projecting order to the outside world.

Zaharna (2000) views cultural diplomacy as a form of public diplomacy, in which culture structures the message and shapes perceptions. Clarke (2016) adds that cultural diplomacy represents a potential strategy for the exercise of “soft power.” In line with the claim of Zamorano (2016), rapid socio-economic and geopolitical transformations have heightened the relevance of culture in international politics. During the golden age of free trade under Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa, culture-based diplomacy became a vital instrument for maintaining internal harmony and external competitiveness.

This theoretical perspective is reinforced by Lee and Hudson (2004), who argue that cultural diplomacy, whether undertaken directly by diplomatic authorities or in cooperation with them, promotes a state’s foreign policy interests. Pajtinka (2014) emphasizes that the core practices of cultural diplomacy include disseminating national culture and identity, facilitating the spread of national languages across borders, and articulating cultural values, while Kuitenbrouwer (2016) highlights its role in negotiating cultural cooperation agreements and sustaining international relations (Kuitenbrouwer 2016:17). Similarly, Ang, Isar, and Mar (2015) underscore that cultural diplomacy can be harnessed in service of national interests.

Nevertheless, cultural diplomacy is not free from the risk of being misinterpreted as propaganda. Jora (2013) and Nur Mutia and de Archellie (2023) show that cultural diplomacy is often deployed for specific political purposes. Umińska-Woroniecka (2016) further argues that cultural diplomacy is closely tied to state policy. In today’s Indonesian context, this can be compared to practices of nation branding through *batik* (Hartati, Anna 2017), diplomacy through martial arts (Catur Sutantri 2018; Irsyadi 2018), or other forms of cultural diplomacy.

Similarly, in the 16th-17th centuries, the Banten Sultanate used Sasapton as an instrument of cultural diplomacy. The tradition, practiced from the reign of Sultan Abdul Mufakir Mahmud Abdul Kadir (1596-1651) to that of Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa (1651-1672), involved not only the entire population of Banten but also foreign

merchants present in the region. Alongside the growth of commerce and the flourishing of Banten, *Sasapton* evolved into a political performance that reinforced internal legitimacy while articulating Banten's connectedness to wider international networks.

3.2. *Sasapton* Tradition: Local Tradition in the Practice of Banten Power Politics Diplomacy

The *Sasapton* tradition, consisting of a series of traditional games involving foreign merchants from various countries who happened to be in the bull government area at the time of its holding, introduces Banten culture to these foreign merchants. In this case, *Sasapton* is also a form of cultural diplomacy that the Sultan of Banten applied to foreign countries that established trade relations and cooperation with Banten in the 16th-17th centuries AD. This position aligns with the argument before, where *Sasapton* is interpreted as proto-cultural diplomacy: it served not only as entertainment but also as a symbolic bridge between Banten and the wider world.

The study examines the relationship between the Sultan and the nobles of the Banten Sultanate and their people, using the *Sasapton* tradition to explore their dynamics. It is to see whether the Sultan and nobles, who represent the upper class in the Banten Sultanate, have the instruments to establish relations with the people and nonelite groups during the reign of the Banten Sultanate. *Sasapton* tradition is a local Banten tradition that developed in the 16th-17th centuries AD, the time of Sultan Abdul Mufakir Mahmud Abdul Kadir. This tradition continued until the reign of Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa. In this sense, *Sasapton* becomes a test case of how elite people's relations were mediated through cultural performance, echoing Zaharna (2000) emphasis on culture as a structured diplomatic message.

The interviewee described *Sasapton* as a tradition that involves mastery, horseback riding, swordplay, and other games held every Saturday in the Sultanate Square. They explained that *Sasapton* is a horseback-riding game that involves equestrian skills and specific sports competitions.

So, any performance, for example, playing horses, playing swords and others, even performing dances and plays told in oral history and manuscripts. The game even involves foreign merchants who live in Banten, such as Chinese, Arab, Indian, and even European merchants, and perform during people's entertainment (Interview with Abah Yadi, Banten Culturalist, 2022).

This oral testimony highlights the inclusivity of *Sasapton*: it was not merely a royal spectacle but also an arena where foreign merchants could engage, thereby reinforcing Banten's cosmopolitan image.

In addition, historians note that the game of *Sasapton*, which matches horses and is very popular among nobles and commoners, is held almost every Saturday. Recorded in the Banten Sajarah, the magic gamelan is tabbed among others to accompany the Sultan after *Sasapton* (equestrian spear game) at the victory party of the Pagarage War in 1650 (Djajadiningrat 1983). This record demonstrates that *Sasapton* was more than a sport; it was embedded in victory celebrations and functioned as a medium of legitimating political sovereignty through cultural performance.

The field or square, known in Sanskrit as *Darparagi*, serves as a venue for various social activities, ceremonies, cultural and religious events, and royal parties. The square also hosts sports matches organised by the Palace (Reid 2014:97). The court artists played the gamelan before the start of the *Sasapton*. Sajarah Banten (pupuh 54) noted that the square was once the venue for *Sasapton*, a horse-racing tournament (Djajadiningrat 1983). The court symbolizes the authority of power in Islamic urban planning, as it marks the center of an Islamic city (Handoko 2015; Handoko et al. 2024; Rismawidiawati 2023). Thus, *Sasapton* was not an isolated cultural event but intertwined with urban design, power symbolism, and ritualised authority.

The Sultan attempted to embrace and open up space for his people to mingle with the court circles by involving *Sasapton*, which could be carried out by the nobility and ordinary people in the sultanate square as a symbol of the government's central

authority. Additionally, the Sultan interpreted the involvement of foreign merchants as an effort in cultural diplomacy to advance his power politics in establishing diplomatic relations with other nations to maintain trade cooperation. This practice demonstrates Clarke (2016) notion of soft power: by allowing ordinary subjects and foreigners alike to participate, the Sultan positioned *Sasapton* as a diplomatic theatre where internal cohesion and external recognition were simultaneously performed.

The people held *Sasapton* to commemorate the Banten troops' victory in the Pagarege or Pacirebonan event. The victory party's course is as follows: they placed the people and *pongawa* in their camps along the banks of the river and used gamelans as identifying signs (Djajadiningrat 1983). Here, *Sasapton* functioned as a ritualized commemoration of military triumph, projecting power both internally to subjects and externally to rivals. In the Sultanate of Banten, artists in dance, drama, and gamelan beaters also enliven royal ceremonies. During the equestrian tournament (*Sasapton*) in the Banten Sultanate, they played the sakati gamelan and mesa patra gamelan to accompany the event (Djajadiningrat 1983). Even in the Indian Office Record archives, as quoted by Guillot, it is recorded that in the palace square, the whole population came to salute the king and divide the gifts, which were obligations at the end of Ramadan (Guillot 1989). Finally, one can watch the king and the dignitaries face each other in an equestrian match on Saturday, known as *Sasapton* (Juliadi et al. 2019). Such descriptions reveal *Sasapton's* dual role: as a religious-cultural festivity and as a diplomatic display for foreign eyes.

Reputedly, Mangkubumi, who was also the stepfather of Sultan Muda (Abdul Mufakir Mahmud Abdul Kadir), was responsible for the education of the Sultan with great care and affection. He almost instantly left the young Sultan behind in both the presence and meetings with the *pongawa* and high-ranking palace officials. When assessing the city's state or during *Sasapton*, the young Sultan did not leave his lap. He raised the young Sultan Abdul Mufakir, and they often rode together. Consequently, people pay homage to Mangkubumi as if

he were the king. Furthermore, people always bow when they meet Mangkubumi because, indeed, a young Sultan is on his lap (Halwany and Chudari 1993).

In this context, what is depicted in history about Mangkubumi, in every *Sasapton* title, always holding Sultan Abdul Mufakir (young), is a symbolic language of cultural diplomacy to gain legitimacy for his political power during the time of “intermediate rule” as recorded in history. This suggests that *Sasapton* was not only a diplomatic tool outwardly but also a means of managing succession politics and legitimizing regency authority inwardly. Culturally, the attitude or treatment of the Mangkubumi towards the young Sultan, to gain political legitimacy, power, and recognition from the people of his patronage, reflects the power of the young Sultan. In addition, *Sasapton*, as a show, is a medium or space to gain legitimacy for that power. This view is inseparable from ancient times; the king was considered a figure identified with a deity (Tjandrasmita 1984:217). During the Islamic influence, these elements persisted, and people considered the Sultan a figure who controlled the living world and could connect it to the supernatural community. The granting of the title of prince, *susuhan*, *panembahan* is an influence of that ancient tradition (Permana 2004:114; Tjandrasmita 1984). Thus, *Sasapton* bridged pre-Islamic sacral kingship and Islamic political culture, reinforcing authority across temporal and spiritual registers.

Furthermore, until Sultan Abdul Mufakir became an adult and officially became the 4th Sultan of Banten, the *Sasapton* tradition continued; in history, this tradition is better known and began to develop during the reign of Sultan Abdul Mufakir Mahmud Abdul Kadir (1596–1651). This tradition continued until the reign of Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa. At that time, *Sasapton* became one of the markers of the Banten sultanate in diplomatic relations, both internally and externally. We can infer this explanation from how the Sultanate organises game performances every Saturday, known as *Sasapton* (Saturday’s tournament). *Sasapton*, in the History of Banten, pupuh 54, Pangeran Adipati, Putra Sultan Abdul Maali, also the grandson of Sultan Abdul

Mufakir Mahmud Abdulkadir, participated in the *Sasapton* (tournament) held in Banten. In the Sultanate of Banten, dance, drama, and beating artists also animated the royal ceremonies. They played the sakati gamelan and mesa patra gamelan to accompany the *Sasapton* during the equestrian tournament in the Banten Sultanate (Djajadiningrat 1983). The continuity of *Sasapton* across rulers demonstrates its institutionalization as a diplomatic and cultural practice, not merely a personal preference of a single Sultan.

During the 4th Sultanate of Banten, the Banten art form began to be described in history, although it was not as detailed as the written data in other regions. However, this brief description can break the deadlock on the past of art in Banten. There is fanfare from the sound of drums interlocking at the *Sasapton* event. This *Sasapton* ceremony is an expression of joy from Sultan Abul Mufakhir Abdul Kadir for the birth of his grandson, so a large-scale party is held every Saturday in front of the Surosowan Palace, and who becomes a nayaga (gamelan grower) from among the courtiers (warriors). It is possible because the Surosowan palace has room for artistic instruments called panayagan or gamelan growers (Mahdiduri and Ahyadi 2010:56). This detail again underscores *Sasapton's* embeddedness in the Sultanate's artistic and ceremonial infrastructures, reinforcing its function as a holistic cultural-diplomatic practice.

In the Sultanate of Banten, dance, drama, and the beating of artists also animated royal ceremonies. They played the sakati gamelan and mesa patra gamelan to accompany the *Sasapton* during the equestrian tournament in the Banten Sultanate. Other non-elite groups were fishermen, subordinate soldiers, religious people (kauman), and government officials from subordinate groups (little people). In the downtown area of the Banten Sultanate, the non-elite group of bureaucrats was generally those under orderlies, *tumenggung* or dukes, and courtiers (Djajadiningrat 1983). Hence, *Sasapton's* social inclusivity enabled different strata (elites, commoners, and even foreigners) to converge in a ritualised arena, effectively embodying Banten's soft power.

Thus, the *Sasapton* tradition is one of the local cultural entities, namely the traditional sport of equestrian agility, associated with other regional entities, namely art, royal ceremonies, and other local traditions. *Sasapton* is a form of local tradition developed in the community, and the Sultanate of Banten government organised it in the 16th-17th centuries AD. Similarly, the depiction of the *Sasapton* tradition, which took place every Saturday in the sultanate square, shows that it was also related to the administration of government at that time. In this context, the *Sasapton* tradition can be interpreted not merely as spectacle but as a form of cultural diplomacy of the Banten Sultanate, aligning with the broader theoretical framing in 3.1 that situates such practices as instruments of soft power and symbolic communication.

IV. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the *Sasapton* tradition functioned not merely as a form of entertainment but also as a proto-cultural diplomacy practice that embodied soft power in the Banten Sultanate. By bringing together nobles, commoners, and foreign merchants in ritualized equestrian tournaments, *Sasapton* served as a symbolic arena where political legitimacy was reinforced internally and Banten's sovereignty was projected externally. Its role in articulating authority and cosmopolitan identity highlights how local traditions could become strategic instruments in early modern diplomacy. The most original contribution of this study lies in showing how *Sasapton* illustrates a pre-modern Southeast Asian practice of soft power, where cultural performance was mobilized to sustain political legitimacy and diplomatic recognition. Rather than treating culture as secondary, this research underscores its centrality to the political economy of Banten's golden age.

At the same time, studying has limitations. The reliance on oral traditions and later chronicles (such as *Sajarah Banten*) provides interpretive richness but leaves gaps in empirical precision, especially regarding how foreign observers perceived *Sasapton*.

Further research could integrate VOC records, missionary accounts, or comparative studies of analogous practices in other regions to better situate *Sasapton* within the broader landscape of Southeast Asian cultural diplomacy. By situating *Sasapton* as a practice that combined local tradition with political symbolism, this study opens a pathway to rethinking cultural diplomacy not only as a modern statecraft tool but also as a deeply rooted, historically embedded practice in early modern Southeast Asia.

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