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When the Centre Moves: Spatial Negotiations Along *Ngalalakon* from Ciptagelar to Gelaralam

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Abstract

The twentieth *Ngalalakon* (2022) relocated Banten Kidul's customary centre from Ciptagelar to Gelaralam, but how residents' interpretations and decisions shape its continuing effects on both settlements remains underexplored. This environment–behaviour study examines spatial transformations through customary interpretations, negotiations, and dwelling practices. Ethnographic observations, interviews, architectural documentation, and comparative spatial analysis trace changes in Gelaralam (as *Kasepuhan*) and Ciptagelar (as an inhabited *Tari Kolot*). Findings reveal that spatial configurations in both are continually negotiated, reconsidered, and reconfigured through customary interpretations and dwelling decisions. Thus, *Ngalalakon* is a transition within continuing settlement-making, where customary principles and dwelling decisions co-produce spatial change.

Keywords: Environment-Behaviour Studies; *Ngalalakon*; Spatial Negotiations; Customary Settlements; Dwelling Culture; Spatial Transformation.

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1.0 Introduction

A centre is commonly imagined as a fixed point of reference. But what happens when it moves while remaining guided by enduring principles? For the Banten Kidul Customary Community, relocation has long been part of dwelling culture. Through *Ngalalakon*, the customary centre moves in response to ancestral guidance (wangsit). The community traces this practice to 1368, when Cipatat Urug became its first customary centre (Figure 1). *Ngalalakon* carries cultural and spiritual meanings associated with customary principles and rice culture (Kusdiwanggo, 2013; Kusdiwanggo & Sumardjo, 2016). These principles continue to shape how the community understands its relationship with settlement space.

In 2022, the twentieth *Ngalalakon* moved the customary centre from Ciptagelar to Gelaralam. Gelaralam became the new *Kasepuhan* (customary centre), while Ciptagelar remained inhabited as Tari Kolot (former customary centre) (Kafila, 2024). Following the relocation, differing interpretations of customary principles shaped many spatial decisions. Customary buildings were further adjusted the following year, indicating that arrangements remained open to reconsideration. How do customary principles, environmental conditions, and dwelling needs inform spatial decisions?

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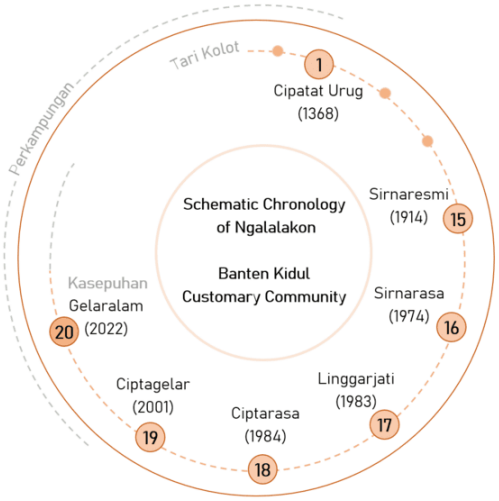


Fig. 1: Schematic chronology of *Ngalalakon* in the Banten Kidul Customary Community.
(Source: Author, 2026)

Previous research has documented continuity and change between Ciptarasa and Ciptagelar (Nuryanto, 2006), spatial principles of Kasepuhan Ciptagelar (Kusdiwanggo, 2016), and vernacular architectural transformations following the 2022 Ngalalakon (Kafila, 2024). Less understood is how residents and customary actors interpret customary principles, negotiate spatial decisions, and reconsider arrangements after relocation. Examining these processes across the former and new centres clarifies how settlement space continues to be made and remade.

This study aims to understand how spatial transformations unfold after the 2022 Ngalalakon through interpretations of customary principles, spatial negotiations, and everyday dwelling practices. Its objectives are to (1) identify changes in the status and spatial configuration of Ciptagelar and Gelaralam; (2) examine how residents and customary actors interpret customary principles alongside environmental conditions and dwelling needs in spatial decisions; and (3) trace how spatial arrangements are adjusted and reconsidered after relocation.

This study considers relocation as an ongoing relationship between communities and their inhabited environments. Comparing the inhabited former centre and new centre offers an environment–behaviour perspective on how distinct settlement circumstances inform spatial decisions. Drawing on cultural interpretations of built environments (Rapoport, 1982; Oliver, 2006) and negotiated social arrangements (Strauss, 1978), it uses ongoing settlement-making to examine how customary principles and dwelling decisions shape settlement space. The study focuses on documented spatial changes after the 2022 Ngalalakon in Ciptagelar and Gelaralam, with earlier relocations as historical context. It distinguishes documented negotiations from observed spatial changes without assuming identical mechanisms across both settlements.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 The Banten Kidul Customary Community and the Tradition of Ngalalakon

Rice culture shapes both material arrangements and symbolic relationships in Banten Kidul customary settlements. Agricultural land, granaries, and customary buildings form an interconnected spatial order rather than serving merely separate functions. In Ciptagelar, paparakoan huma links settlement organisation to the cosmology of rice cultivation (Kusdiwanggo, 2016), while Leuit Jimat embodies meanings beyond grain storage (Kusdiwanggo, 2020). The principle of sakuren expresses complementary relationships within rice culture (Kusdiwanggo & Sumardjo, 2016), and the indung–pangawasa orientation conveys cosmological meanings through spatial direction (Kafila & Kusdiwanggo, 2021).

These relationships are expressed in settlement arrangements and in practices that define and animate space. In Sinar Resmi, the surrounding landscape and circulation are connected to building arrangements and domestic spaces (Mawaddahni, 2017). In Ciptagelar, sawen and prah-prahan link settlement boundaries and access with ritual protection (Pratiwi & Kusdiwanggo, 2018), while ngariung is associated with spatial arrangements for communal activities (Nurhalid & Kusdiwanggo, 2021). Spatial order therefore involves not only where buildings stand, but also how territories are marked and how spaces are collectively used.

When the customary centre relocates, inherited principles inform the formation of a new centre without requiring identical physical arrangements. The 2001 *Ngalalakon* from Ciptarasa established Ciptagelar as the new centre, accompanied by continuity and modification in kampung and house patterns (Nuryanto, 2006). In

2022, Gelaralam became the new *Kasepuhan*, while Ciptagelar remained inhabited as Tari Kolot. Customary structures and other spatial elements were variously transferred, retained, or adjusted across the two settlements (Kafila, 2024). Successive relocations thus establish new customary centres while allowing former centres, such as Ciptagelar, to retain their spatial and social life.

2.2 Environment–Behaviour and Spatial Negotiation

Built environments reflect relationships among cultural meanings, human activities, and physical settings. Cultural meanings inform spatial organisation and human–environment interactions (Rapoport, 1982, 2005), while vernacular architecture responds to local traditions, environmental conditions, and dwelling needs (Oliver, 2006). These perspectives frame customary principles, environmental conditions, and dwelling needs as interconnected considerations in forming settlement space.

In this study, reconciling these considerations through spatial decisions is understood as spatial negotiation. Negotiation involves establishing, maintaining, and adjusting social arrangements without necessarily requiring overt conflict or formal bargaining (Strauss, 1978). In settlement-making, community members interpret customary principles, respond to environmental conditions, and accommodate dwelling needs when organising space. Such decisions shape the built environment, while resulting spatial conditions may prompt further adjustments. Spatial negotiation is thus an ongoing process through which settlement space is made and remade.

2.3 Research Synthesis and Conceptual Framework

Previous studies have addressed the cultural foundations of customary spatial organisation (Kusdiwanggo, 2016) and architectural changes associated with *Ngalalakon* (Nuryanto, 2006; Kafila, 2024). Together with environment–behaviour perspectives (Rapoport, 2005; Oliver, 2006) and negotiated social arrangements (Strauss, 1978), they inform an examination of how inherited principles are interpreted amid changing circumstances and translated into spatial decisions.

Across Ciptagelar and Gelaralam, settlement-making is examined through interactions among customary principles, environmental conditions, and dwelling needs. Attention turns to how these considerations enter community deliberations, decisions, and reconsiderations, and how these processes relate to the placement or adjustment of buildings, land use, spatial relationships, and everyday practices. Spatial arrangements resulting from earlier decisions may also call for further adjustments, allowing the relationship between negotiation and spatial transformation to be traced in both directions (Figure 2).

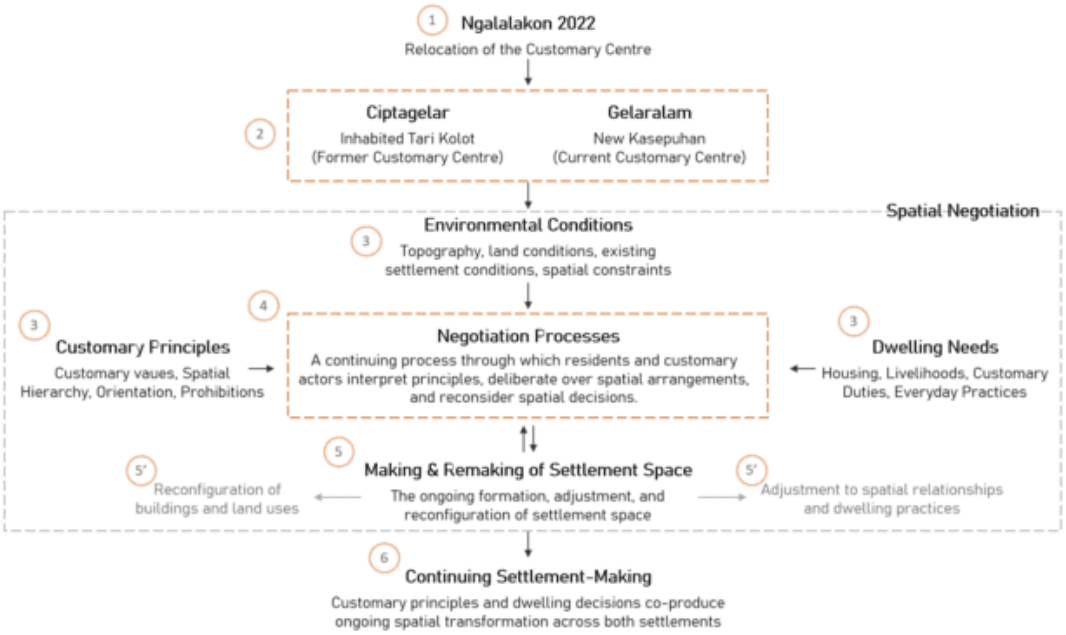


Fig. 2: Conceptual framework of spatial negotiation and continuing settlement-making following *Ngalalakon* 2022. *(Source: Author, 2026)*

3.0 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, exploratory and inductive ethnographic design to examine spatial negotiation following the 2022 Ngalalakon. It investigates how spatial changes were interpreted, discussed, decided upon, and reconsidered through everyday and ritual practices and residents' accounts (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Spradley, 1980). The exploratory and inductive approach allows differing perspectives to emerge from empirical

material rather than predetermined variables. The principal unit of analysis is a spatial negotiation, examined through identifiable spatial arrangements or transformations alongside available accounts of their circumstances and associated decisions. The study focuses on Ciptagelar and Gelaralam within Kesatuan Adat Banten Kidul, a network of Sundanese customary settlements across the Kendeng Mountains in western Java. Both settlements were directly involved in the twentieth Ngalalakon in 2022, allowing comparisons of ongoing spatial adjustments. Earlier relocations provide historical context rather than additional case studies.

Empirical material derives from two grand tours conducted during 2023–2025 and one mini tour in 2026, involving participant and non-participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation of customary practices, everyday activities, and settlement conditions (Creswell, 2018; Spradley, 1979). Purposive and subsequent snowball sampling (Noy, 2008) yielded 22 individually documented informants. Separately, two gatekeepers facilitated community access, while Abah Ugi Sugriana, the customary leader, served as a key person for cultural validation. These roles were distinguished from those of the documented informants. Fieldwork generated 52 audio recordings of interviews, incidental conversations, and spontaneous group discussions, including participants beyond the 22 informants. The recordings therefore represent different field encounters rather than 52 separate interviews or participants. Field notes, photographs, architectural sketches, and earlier research and community documentation complemented these records (Emerson et al., 2011). Only material relevant to Ciptagelar and Gelaralam was selected for analysis.

The analysis combines descriptive-narrative spatial comparison with ethnographic interpretation. Interview and observational materials were organized by informant, recording context, and documented spatial changes. Spatial documentation was compared to identify continuities and transformations in building placement, orientation, land use, and settlement relationships, informed by fixed, semi-fixed, and non-fixed features (Rapoport, 1982). Ethnographic interpretation examines how customary principles, environmental conditions, and dwelling needs inform spatial decisions through relevant cultural domains and relationships (Spradley, 1979). Interview accounts were examined alongside spatial documentation to distinguish documented negotiations from observed physical changes without evidence of their decision-making processes. Interpretations were triangulated across interviews, observations, and documentary sources, then culturally validated through consultation with Abah Ugi Sugriana. Differing perspectives were retained, while restrictions on culturally sensitive information were respected.

4.0 Findings

4.1 Spatial Reconfiguration of Ciptagelar and Gelaralam

Comparative aerial imagery and field documentation reveal distinct spatial transformations in Ciptagelar and Gelaralam following the 2022 *Ngalalakon*. In Ciptagelar, the relocation altered the former customary centre while residential occupation continued. Gelaralam, previously comprising cultivated land, developed into a new settlement organised around Imah gede and associated customary facilities. Although both settlements remain connected through the same customary system, their spatial configurations reflect different conditions following the relocation (Figure 3).



Fig. 3: Comparative aerial views of Ciptagelar and Gelaralam before and after the 2022 *Ngalalakon*.
(Source: (a) Google Earth imagery (2022); (b) Author's drone photographs (2023). Spatial annotations by the author (2026)

At the architectural scale, the transformation is evident in the differing conditions of principal customary buildings. In Ciptagelar, parts of Imah gede and associated structures remain, while the former location of *Leuit si jimat* is still marked by a fenced area. Other customary-building sites have become vacant or are used for cultivation. In Gelaralam, Imah gede, Bale Sosial, ajeng, granaries, and supporting buildings constitute the newly established customary core. The comparison reveals differences between surviving structures, identifiable traces, and the re-established buildings and functions of the new centre (Figure 4).

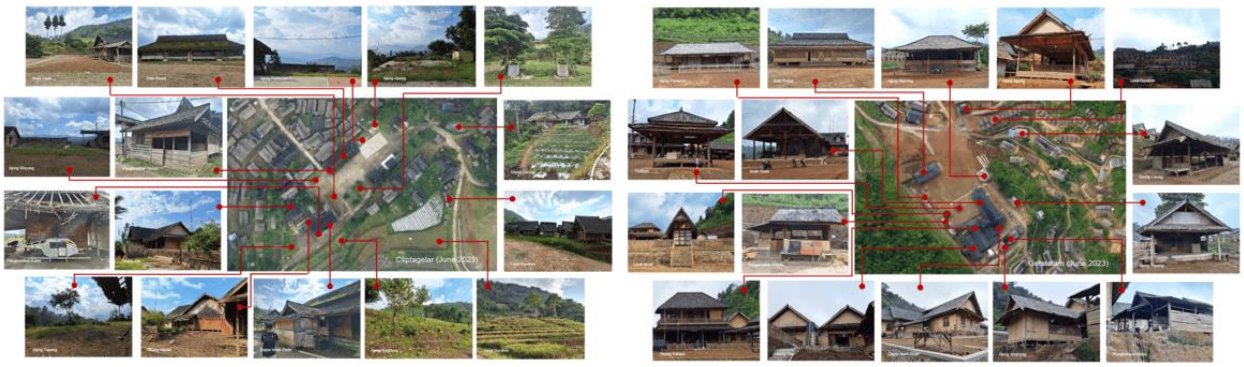


Fig. 4: Principal customary buildings and remaining architectural traces in Ciptagelar & Gelaralam.
(Source:Aauthor's drone photographs (2023). Spatial annotations by the author (2026)

4.2 Negotiating Residential Placement in Gelaralam

The spatial arrangement of Gelaralam differs from that of Ciptagelar, particularly in the placement of residents' houses relative to Imah gede. While houses in the former customary centre were predominantly situated north of Imah gede, the new settlement accommodates residential areas on both its northern and southern sides. This difference is closely associated with varying interpretations of customary principles concerning land occupation. Gelaralam was established on cultivated land adjoining leuweung awisan, an area of entrusted forest whose conditions for future use were understood differently among residents.

Some residents maintained that leuweung awisan should remain undisturbed while other cultivable land was still available. They therefore sought permission to build north of Imah gede, consistent with the understanding that the customary residence should occupy the indung, or southernmost position. Others interpreted the wangsit directing the relocation as allowing a reconsideration of this restriction. They requested permission to establish houses south of Imah gede, which was granted by the customary leader. This interpretation placed greater emphasis on the elevated position of Imah gede relative to surrounding houses than on its location at the southern end of the settlement (Figure 5).

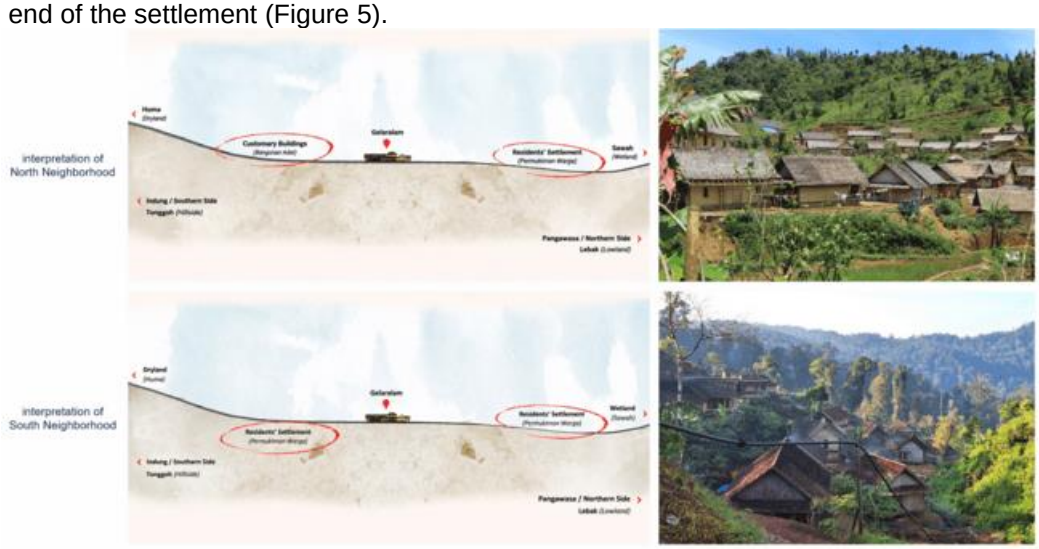


Fig. 5: Interpretations of customary spatial order and the resulting northern and southern residential areas in Gelaralam.
(Source: Author, 2026)

The resulting residential areas also display marked physical differences. In the northern cluster, houses occupy a broader area where the existing contours were largely used as they were, allowing settlement expansion and access routes to develop with relatively greater flexibility. In the southern cluster, by contrast,

residents modified the terrain through substantial land filling so that houses could be positioned below Imah gede rather than level with it. This area is more constrained by its proximity to *tonggoh* and therefore appears denser, with steeper access routes and narrower circulation space. Differing interpretations of customary spatial order were expressed not only in residential position, but also in contrasting ways of shaping terrain, access, and settlement density.

4.3 Dwelling Adjustments and Everyday Practices

The relocation of the customary centre did not require all residents with customary responsibilities to move to Gelaralam. Some, including members of Rendang Kande, continued to live in Ciptagelar while fulfilling their duties at Imah gede in the new centre. Their customary responsibilities consequently required travel between the two settlements, requiring adjustments to routines previously organized around the former centre. These changes were particularly apparent in everyday mobility. During morning observations, groups of schoolchildren traveled from Gelaralam to schools in Ciptagelar, while women undertaking customary duties moved in the opposite direction. Earlier departures had to be accommodated alongside childcare, household responsibilities, and agricultural activities. Some mothers brought their younger children when attending to their duties, reflecting the practical considerations involved in maintaining customary obligations alongside family life.

Adjustments were also evident in the organization of activities at Imah Gede. Previously, residents could be called upon when their assistance was needed. In Gelaralam, attendance became more structured through a written daily schedule, introduced to prevent an uneven distribution of helpers, with too many attending on some days and too few on others. The arrangement reflects a practical response to the changing relationship between where people live and where they carry out their customary responsibilities.

4.4 Subsequent Reconfiguration of Customary Structures

Spatial adjustments in Gelaralam continued after the customary centre was established in 2022. One notable change involved *Leuit si jimat*, the principal customary rice granary that accompanies successive *Ngalalakon*. In its initial arrangement, the granary stood directly in front of Imah gede, facing north, as it had in Ciptagelar. By 2025, its position and orientation had changed: *Leuit si jimat* was relocated across from Imah gede, with its entrance facing south towards the customary residence. This adjustment was accompanied by changes to other customary structures. The *Leuit rurukan*, which accommodate rice associated with the customary institution, were reoriented, while *Saung lisung*, the rice-pounding shelter, was also relocated. The documented differences between 2022 and 2025 show that the arrangement of Gelaralam's principal customary buildings continued to change after the initial relocation (Figure 6).



Fig. 6: Position and orientation of *Leuit si jimat* and associated customary structures in Gelaralam.
(Source: Author, 2026)

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Negotiating Customary Order through Spatial Practice

The emergence of residential areas on both sides of Imah Gede in Gelaralam raises questions about how customary spatial order is maintained under different environmental conditions. Both groups of residents recognized Imah Gede's significance within the settlement hierarchy but differed in its spatial interpretation. Some maintained its southernmost position associated with indung and leuweung awisan, while others emphasized its elevation above neighboring houses rather than its southernmost location. These interpretations

informed residential placement requests, subject to the customary leader's permission. The resulting configuration thus reflects customary principles, environmental conditions, and decisions within the community.

Physical differences between the northern and southern areas further illustrate these considerations. Northern residents occupied broader terrain requiring limited modification, while restricted space near Tonggoh and the intention to maintain houses below Imah Gede required extensive ground modification in the south, resulting in denser arrangements and more difficult access. These differences also reflect land availability, slope conditions, and circulation requirements rather than customary interpretations alone.

Earlier studies identify the cultural foundations of Kasepuhan spatial organisation through paparakoan and rice-culture principles (Kusdiwanggo, 2016), and relationships between communal spaces and ritual activities (Nuryanto et al., 2020). The present findings extend these discussions by showing how shared customary principles informed different residential placement decisions during Gelaralam's establishment. Through Rapoport's (1982) understanding of built environments as expressions of cultural meaning, residential positions relative to Imah Gede reflect differing interpretations of customary hierarchy. However, these decisions remained within the customary authority described by Asep (2000). Negotiation involved interpreting customary boundaries and seeking permission rather than abandoning established principles. It neither implies unlimited flexibility nor equal authority among interpretations. Moreover, permission for a particular arrangement did not necessarily prevent its reconsideration as settlement life continued.

5.2 Continuity through Ongoing Settlement-Making

The comparison between Ciptagelar and Gelaralam highlights the distinction between the persistence of architectural forms and the continuation of customary life. Following relocation, Ciptagelar retained inhabited houses, remnants of customary buildings, and recognizable sites associated with its former Kasepuhan status, while Gelaralam became the new Kasepuhan on previously cultivated land. Residents remaining in Ciptagelar continued their customary responsibilities, indicating that customary activities and relationships were not confined to the new centre.

This complicates an understanding of Ngalalakon as the replacement of one settlement by another. Saputro and Wibisono (2023) documented land-use changes in Ciptagelar between 2001 and 2022, influenced by Ngalalakon and cultural responses to changing circumstances. The present study extends this discussion by examining the subsequent relationship between Ciptagelar as an inhabited Tari Kolot and Gelaralam as the new Kasepuhan. Continuity was expressed through relationships between places rather than solely through the persistence of buildings, consistent with Oliver's (1997) understanding of vernacular architecture in relation to community practices and circumstances.

Everyday dwelling adjustments further demonstrate these relationships. Travel between settlements became part of customary duties, schooling, and household responsibilities, while changes in activities at Imah Gede required new practical arrangements. Kristiadi (2025) highlights continuing customary roles and social relationships among older residents adapting to Gelaralam, while Kusdiwanggo and Ridjal (2025) examine post-relocation spatial attachment and cultural memory. The present findings extend these discussions through everyday movement and activities connecting both settlements. Meanwhile, Gelaralam's southern residential area continued developing, although some residents later moved elsewhere, describing discomfort or perceived inappropriateness in their living circumstances. These accounts reflect residents' perceptions rather than established causes. Abah Ugi Sugriana explained that rearranging customary structures formed part of an ongoing effort to address perceived irregularities in customary order, with adjustments undertaken progressively despite uncertainty about their causes.

The repositioning and reorientation of Leuit Si Jimat in 2025 further illustrate these adjustments. Kusdiwanggo (2020) emphasizes understanding leuit through relationships among space, time, actors, and cultural practices beyond physical form. Spatial interpretation suggests that the reorientation changed the direction faced during activities inside Leuit Si Jimat, from the southern residential area towards the surrounding hills, recalling the relationship between ritual orientation and tonggoh in Ciptagelar. Considering the significance of rice and Sri Nyi Pohaci, this offers a possible interpretation rather than an established explanation. The changes also involved Leuit Rurukan, reoriented by 180 degrees to align with Leuit Si Jimat, and Saung Lisung, relocated closer to it. Their functional and ritual relationships indicate a broader reconfiguration of the rice-culture spatial system, consistent with the relational principles of sakuren discussed by Kusdiwanggo and Sumardjo (2016).

These developments suggest an iterative dimension of spatial negotiation. Customary interpretations inform initial decisions, while lived experiences and perceived irregularities may prompt subsequent reconsideration. Settlement-making thus involves establishing, examining, and adjusting spatial arrangements over time. Although not every alteration can be attributed to the same negotiation process, documented decisions, experiences, and subsequent changes suggest that spatial negotiation may continue beyond the initial establishment of a customary centre.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

This study examined how the 2022 Ngalalakon affected spatial arrangements and dwelling practices in Ciptagelar and Gelaralam. Ethnographic accounts and architectural documentation show that relocating the customary centre did not entail the complete transfer of settlement life. Ciptagelar remained inhabited as Tari Kolot, retaining architectural traces and customary responsibilities, while Gelaralam became the new Kasepuhan. Both remained connected through customary activities. In Gelaralam, residential placement north and south of Imah Gede reflected differing interpretations of customary hierarchy, permission from customary authority, and terrain conditions. Ground modification, residential density, and access difficulties in the south reflect these spatial differences, which were also shaped by topography and land availability.

Relocation also altered everyday responsibilities, including travel for customary duties, schooling, childcare, and activities at Imah Gede. Subsequent adjustments to Leuit Si Jimat, Leuit Rurukan, and Saung Lisung indicate that spatial arrangements continued evolving after 2022. Abah Ugi described these changes as efforts to address perceived irregularities whose causes remained uncertain. The relationship between ritual orientation and the surrounding landscape therefore remains an interpretation rather than a confirmed explanation. These findings suggest that spatial negotiation may continue as residents experience and reconsider arrangements beyond initial customary decisions. The study contributes to environment–behaviour and vernacular architecture research by examining how inherited principles, customary authority, environmental conditions, and everyday practices interact in ongoing settlement transformation. It also highlights the importance of documenting spatial decisions and relationships between settlements alongside physical buildings. Limited to the Ciptagelar–Gelaralam transition and its aftermath, the study recommends further ethnographic investigation of subsequent spatial adjustments, particularly sacred structures, through culturally appropriate consultation and respect for customary knowledge restrictions.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study contributes to environment–behaviour research by examining spatial negotiation as part of the continuing formation of customary settlements following *Ngalalakon*. Through the Ciptagelar–Gelaralam transition, it demonstrates how inherited spatial principles are interpreted through customary decisions and everyday dwelling practices rather than reproduced as fixed settlement arrangements. The study further highlights the relationship between changes in the customary centre, the continuing occupation of its former location, and subsequent spatial adjustments. These findings extend architectural understandings of customary relocation by connecting spatial transformation with the decisions, activities, and cultural relationships through which settlement life continues.

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