

The Tabut: Mainstreaming Marginalized Religious Festival through Collective Memory

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Abstract

Tabut Bencoolen (abbreviated here on as “Tabut”) is a religious festival in Bengkulu, located in the western coast of South Sumatra, which marks the 10th day of the Islamic month of Muharram, hence the name “Ashura” in other contexts. The Tabut has been performed in Bengkulu for at least five centuries, in memory of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein bin Ali, who is the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who was massacred along with his family in the fields of Karbala, now Iraq. Imam Hussein’s head was decapitated and brought to Damascus before the repugnant caliph Yazid bin Mu’awiyah, which later symbolized and ultimately crystalized the conflict between the Sunnis and Shias until this very day. But the religious festival is not unique to Bengkulu. Throughout the Islamic world, most parts of Muslim Southeast Asia and Indonesia, that are overwhelmingly Sunnis, the religious festival is called *Ashura* or *Muharram* (Java), *Tabuik* or *Hoyak Hussein* (West Sumatra), *Ma’atenu* (North Maluku) and other names (see Sofjan 2013). This paper argues that while the Tabut festival has been mainstream in Bengkulu, with the support of the local government and people, the “collective memory” (Durkheim 1912, Halbwachs 1925 and 1992, Olick and Robbins 1998 and Green 2004), of the participants toward the essential lessons of Imam Hussein’s martyrdom in Karbala had long been lost to the tourism industry, which ardently supports the commodification of the festival. Even the history of the festival or ritual itself, brought about by Syaikh Burhanuddin or Imam Senggolo, is no longer recorded in the collective memory of the local Muslims in Bengkulu. The research questions posed in this paper therefore center on how the Tabut is linked to the Shia tradition, notably on what Formichi and Feener (2015) call “Alid piety”; and how the festival has been used to revive the Muslim collective memory and the reification of the essential struggle against politico-religious oppression.

Keywords: Tabut, Bengkulu, religious festival, Muharram, Imam Hussein, Sunni-Shia, collective memory

Abstrak

Tabut Bencoolen (selanjutnya disingkat “Tabut”) adalah festival religius di Bengkulu, terletak di Pantai Barat Sumatera Selatan, setiap 10 Muharram dalam penanggalan Islam,

karena itu disebut “Asyura” dalam konteks lain. Tabut telah diselenggarakan di Bengkulu lebih dari lima abad, untuk mengenang mati syahid Imam Hussein bin Ali, cucu Nabi Muhammad yang dibantai bersama keluarganya di padang Karbala, sekarang Irak. Kepala Imam Hussein dipenggal dan dibawa ke Damaskus kepada khalifah keji Yazid bin Mu’awiyah, yang kemudian menjadi simbol dan kristalisasi utama konflik antara Sunni dan Syiah sampai saat ini. Namun, festival religius ini bukan hanya ciri khas Bengkulu. Di dunia Islam, sebagian besar Muslim Asia Tenggara dan Indonesia, yang lebih banyak penganut Sunni, festival religius ini disebut *Asyura* atau *Muharam* (Jawa), *Tabuik* atau *Hoyak Hussein* (Sumatera Barat), *Ma’atenu* (Maluku Utara), dan sebutan lainnya (Sofjan, 2013). Paper ini berargumentasi, ketika Festival Tabut menjadi arus utama di Bengkulu, yang didukung oleh pemerintah dan masyarakat, pelajaran paling esensi mengenai mati syahid Imam Hussein di Karbala sudah lama hilang dari ingatan kolektif (*collective memory*) (Durkheim, 1912; Halbwachs, 1925 dan 1992; Olick dan Robbins, 1998; dan Green, 2004) para partisipan, karena industri pariwisata, yang mengkomodifikasi festival. Bahkan, festival atau ritual itu sendiri, yang dibawa oleh Syekh Burhanuddin atau Imam Senggolo, tidak lagi tercatat dalam ingatan kolektif umat Muslim lokal di Bengkulu. Oleh sebab itu, *Research Questions* dalam paper ini adalah bagaimana Tabut dikaitkan dengan tradisi Syiah, terutama pada apa yang Formichi dan Feener (2015) sebut dengan “Alid piety”; dan bagaimana festival telah digunakan untuk membangkitkan *collective memory* umat Muslim dan reifikasi dari esensi perjuangan melawan tekanan politik-religius.

Kata kunci: Tabut, Bengkulu, festival religius, Muharram, Imam Hussein, Sunni-Syiah, *collective memory*

1. Introduction

The Tabut ritual has been celebrated in Bengkulu since 14th century. It was first brought by Maulana Ichsad, from Iraq to Bengkulu through Punjab, India in 1336 AD. Then it was spread out by Syeikh Burhanuddin (Imam Senggolo), Ichsad’s follower.¹ The ritual was then inherited to the grand children of Imam Senggolo and his followers who had assimilated with the native people in Bengkulu. They acculturated the Tabut ritual with the Malay culture in Bengkulu. Nowadays, it is considered as a ritual of the Bengkulu people.

Tabut ritual is a Shias tradition to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussein bin Ali bin Ali Thalib in the battle of Karbala dessert, Iraq, on 10th Muharram 61 Hijriah. The battle involved two troops of Imam Hussein against Yazid bin Muawiyah bin Abi

¹ Interview with Achmat Syaifril Syahboeddin, the head of the Harmony of Tabutbencoolen Community, July 26, 2016.

Sufyan. In the battle, Imam Hussain, one of the most loved grandsons of the Prophet Muhammad, was tragically killed. His arms and head were dicapitated. His body was found by his followers who managed to escape the battle. They used tabut² to collect the pieces of his body. Since then, the split between Shias and Sunnis deepens. This event provided the Shia with the concepts of martyrdom and the rituals of grieving.

The Tabut ritual is continued by the Harmony of Tabutbencoolen Community (*Keluarga Kerukunan Tabut – KKT*). The members of the KKT are mainly the descendants of Imam Senggolo. They are also the groups who have participated in the Tabut ritual since Bencoolen was under the British administration. Currently, the head of the KKT is a seventh generation descendant of Imam Senggolo. In order to commemorate Imam Hussein's and his followers' death in the Karbala desert, the KKT builds beautiful tabut for the 10 days during the Muharram month.

“The Tabut tradition's recent renaissance has been closely linked to the activities of the Department of Education and Culture, which has been active in both sponsoring aspects of tabut performances and producing published works in the subject since 1970s.”³ The government and the KKT contribute mutual benefits. On the one side, KKT was facilitated with infrastructure and financial support by the government (the mayor and the governor). On the other side, the activities in the Tabut ritual gives contribution to the government programs and performances. With the provincial government's supports, the Tabut ritual was reconstructed as a kind of cultural fair in which its cultural symbols of identity are exhibited and communicated to both local participants and external observers.⁴ Since 1992, there are two kinds of activities associated with the Tabut, namely the Tabut ritual and the Tabut festival. According to Razie Jachya, the provincial governor of Bengkulu who gave a speech in the opening of the Tabut festivities in 1992, the ceremony

² The term “Tabut” comes from the Arabic word means “wooden box”.

³ R. Michael Feener. “Alid Piety and State-sponsored Spectacle. Tabot Tradition in Bengkulu, Sumatera” in Chiara Formichi and R. Michael Feener (eds.). *Shi'ism in South East Asia: 'Alid Peity and Sectarian Constructions*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p 189.

⁴ *Idem*, p.194.

of Tabut is not religious services, but only a means for the preservation and development of a local culture. He asserted that people should not mix-up the tabut with religion.⁵

The commodification of the Tabut ritual then raises a question, is the religious essence remaining in the collective memory of the society? How is the Tabut linked to the Shia tradition? How has the festival or ritual been used to revive the Muslim collective memory and reification of the essential struggle against politico-religious oppression?

2. Collective Memory about the Tabut in Bengkulu

“The concept of collective memory originated with the work of the sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs.”⁶ He developed a theory of memory that continues to shape contemporary memory studies. His research shifted the understanding of memory from a ‘biological framework into a cultural one’. He agrees that memory is a mental faculty that can only exist within the individual. He believes that not everybody within a group remember with the same intensity. He then suggested that the need for an ‘effective community’ ensures individuals to primarily remember those memories which are ‘in harmony’ with those of others. Therefore, the memories of the individual became merged, and submerged within group, or in a collective memory.⁷ From the recent survey in Bengkulu, turns out there are several collective memories about the Tabut.

First, the sacred meaning of the Tabut has been lost. In a survey to 507 people in Bengkulu,⁸ majority remember the Tabut festival more than its ritual. When the people were asked whether they know what Tabut is, they answered that it relates with cultural performances, arts, percussion instruments’ contest (dhol), and ritual repellent reinforcements. Only 0,09% of the people know that Tabut relates with Imam Hussein.

⁵ *Idem*, p.195.

⁶ Anna Green. Individual Remembering and ‘Collective Memory’: Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates in Vol. 32, No. 2, *Memory and Society* (Egham: Oral History Society, Autumn, 2004), p. 37.

⁷ *Idem*, p.38

⁸ The people who were surveyed, 68 % are 20-39 years old, 21% are 40-59 years old, 8% are under 19 years old, and 3% are above 60 years old.

It also happened to the members of the KKT. Not everyone in the community has the same memory about the Tabut history and purposes. According to the head of the KKT, the Tabut purposes are to remember and pray for all who have suffered martyrdom in the fields of Karbala on 10th Muharram 61 H, especially Imam Hussein bin Ali; to remember the glory of Islam between 7th and 13th centuries; to celebrate the New Year of Hijriyah; and to glorify and honor Ahl Al-Bayt which has been purified from sin.⁹ The focus is on Imam Hussein, not Imam Senggolo. For the members of the KTT, when performing Tabut, they connect it more to Imam Senggolo and his followers than on Imam Hussein afterwards. They know the reason behind the performance, namely to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, but they also connect it with Imam Senggolo. Meanwhile, the KTT's members who were being possessed during the ritual,¹⁰ said that they let themselves as a medium to convey the message of their ancestor, the Habaayib.

Second, the Tabut is no longer recognized as the Shias tradition, but as a local genius of Bengkulu.¹¹ When the people were asked whether they know about Imam Hussein, mostly, about 85% answered that they do not know about him. The rest, 15% answered that Imam Hussein is the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. That fact relates him with Ahl al-Bayt, or Islam. A similar result occurs when they were asked whether they know about Ahl al-Bayt, 95 % answered that they do not know. The same thing take place, when they were asked about Shia, 82% of them answered they have no idea about it.

As pointed out above, the sacred meaning of the Tabut has been lost. It is no longer linked to the Shias tradition either. There is an effort from the KKT to bring the memory of the society back to the essence of the Tabut.

⁹ Achmad Syafril Syahboeddin, *Buku Putih the Tabutbencoolen* (Jakarta: the Harmony of Tabutbencoolen Community, 2016), p. 3.

¹⁰ Conversation with Adi on October 6, 2016 and Lukman on October 7, 2016. Both of them were being possessed during the ritual of *Duduk Penja Tabut Imam* on October 5, 2016.

¹¹ *Op.cit*, Feener, p. 197.

3. An effort to revive the Muslim collective memory and the reification of the essential struggle against politico-religious oppression.

When the Tabut later on emerged and penetrated the Bengkulu's community that had been mostly influenced by Sunni, it was not recognized as the Shias tradition. It was more about cultural performance than ritual. Afterwards, the descendants continue to carry it out as their responsibility to keep and converse the ancestors' heritage. From the ritual's point of view, the "connectedness" and "discontinuity" of the Tabut with the Shia traditions are displayed on its commodification by the people and government of Bengkulu though it still shows reification element of this ritual.¹²

The obstacle to perform the original Tabut ritual is due to the belief of *syirik* in using the incense, being possessed, or offering certain kinds of food (a white and red porridge, black coffee, serobat water, fresh milk, etc.) Syahboeddin, the head of KKT, gave the explanation by using his book to answer the objection.¹³ He stated that the incense is not for calling demons, worshipping him or asking something to the one who is not Allah. It is instead used to eliminate or neutralize odors. Being possessed does not only happen in the Tabut ritual, but can occur anywhere, anytime, and to anyone. Offering the food is not to be disposed of, but to be consumed after the procession. Ulama Syakirin Endar Ali gave a statement that the Tabut ritual is not considered as *syirik*, but as cultural ornament.¹⁴

4. Conclusion

The essence of the Tabut is to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, which links to the Shia tradition. However, in Bengkulu it intertwines with other interests (economics, politics, etc.). Therefore, most of the people in Bengkulu understand the Tabut merely as a local tradition or part of a culture of Bengkulu. The Tabut ritual has

¹² Catherine Bell (ed.). *Teaching Ritual*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 254.

¹³ *Op.cit.*, Syahboeddin, p.5.

¹⁴ Ulama Ali stated the statement in the "Bengkulu Berdialog" which is broadcasted by RBTB, the local TV station.

been commodified and reconstructed to festival. To some extent it gives benefits to both the society and the government. But, on the other hand, it downgrades the sacredness of the Tabut ritual. The Tabut should be about a cosmic battle between good and evil. It remains an important cohesive celebration for the community, but its political and historical implications have been deliberately diluted.

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