

The Tabot Tradition: Exploring the Spread of Islam and Cultural Interaction in Bengkulu

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Abstract

The Tabot tradition is an important part of the Bengkulu cultural and religious heritage, which shows a close interaction between traditional customs and Islamic beliefs. The study aims to describe the Tabot tradition in Bengkulu and its relationship with the process of Islam's entry into the country using a literature study approach. This study showed The process of Islamization in Bengkulu involved the economic activities of Muslim traders, intermarriage, Sufi teachings, and the development of the arts. Islam reached Bengkulu in the 15th or 16th century, primarily through contacts with Minangkabau and Palembang. The introduction of Islam to Bengkulu resulted in the formation of small kingdoms and the establishment of Islamic burial sites and manuscripts. The Tabot tradition, an annual ceremony commemorating the death of Imam Husayn, was brought to Bengkulu by Indian Bengalis and later blended with local traditions. This tradition demonstrates the close interaction between traditional customs and the Islamic faith in Bengkulu.

Keywords: *Tabot tradition, Islam, Bengkulu*

A. Introduction

In the 7th century AD, Islam entered the Nusantara region through traders from Gujarat who conducted trade along the coastal areas. T. W. Arnold in "The Preaching of Islam" confirms that Islam entered in the early 7th century AD from the Arabian Peninsula. The exchange and interaction between Muslim traders and the local population in the form of trade were well-received by the local society. Puspongoro and Nugroho (2008) explain that in the early stage, the process of Islamization in the Nusantara region was carried out through the economic activities of Muslim traders, including traders from Arabia, Persia, and India during the 7th century. Furthermore, the Islamization process involved intermarriage between Muslim traders and local women. Additionally, Islamization also occurred through the dissemination of Sufi teachings through education and the establishment of Islamic boarding schools. Moreover, Islamization involved the development of arts such as architecture, carving, sculpture, music, dance, and literature (Sirajuddin 2016).

Based on historical research, Islam reached Bengkulu through an Acehese scholar named Tengku Malim Muhidin in 1417 AD. Tengku Malim arrived in Bengkulu through the Kingdom of Sungai Serut, where Aceh had dominance in the spice trade during the 17th century. Furthermore, there is a gravesite called Gresik Dusun Kaum

Gresik in Pauh Terenjam Village, Mukomuko Subdistrict, which has nine graves, two of which use the Acehnese-style tombstones (Musofa 2016).

The spread of Islam in Bengkulu is similar to the Java region. Just as the wali songo (nine Islamic saints) did in Java, Islamic propagation in Bengkulu also employed various forms of art and culture, including the use of wayang (traditional puppet theater). In Bengkulu, there is a tradition called tabot, an annual ceremony conducted by Shia Muslims to commemorate the death of Imam Husayn ibn Ali ibn Abi Talib. There is no valid data regarding the origin and implementation of the tabot tradition in Bengkulu, but it is believed to have originated from the Shia tradition of commemorating death, which was brought by the British government from Madras and Bengal in the southern region of India during the construction of Fort Marlborough (1718-1719) (Musofa 2016). Under the leadership of Imam Senggolo or Syekh Burhanuddin, the laborers who felt comfortable and adapted to life in Bengkulu decided to settle and establish a new settlement called Desa Tengah Padang, which later developed into Sipai. This custom, originating from Madras and Bengal, later blended with local traditions and became institutionalized, known as the Tabot tradition that spread from Bengkulu to Painan, Padang, Pariaman, Maninjau, Pidie, Meulaboh, and Singkil. The Tabot tradition is considered a mandatory practice by some communities in Bengkulu.

Based on the description, this study aims to describe the Tabot tradition in the Bengkulu community and its relationship with the process of Islam entering Bengkulu. The Tabot tradition is an important part of Bengkulu's cultural and religious heritage, demonstrating a close interaction between traditional customs and the Islamic faith. Through a deeper understanding of this tradition, we can enrich our knowledge of the history and development of Islam in this region, as well as appreciate the existing cultural diversity.

B. Method

This study aims to describe the Tabot tradition in the Bengkulu community and its relationship with the process of Islam entering Bengkulu. The researchers gathered information from various written sources, such as books, articles, and scholarly works, to understand the historical context and significance of the Tabot tradition in Bengkulu. The collected data were then analyzed and interpreted to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Tabot tradition and its relationship with the introduction of Islam in Bengkulu. The researchers compared the findings with existing literature and historical records to validate the information and draw accurate conclusions. The research findings were presented in a descriptive manner, highlighting the historical background of Islam entering Bengkulu, the cultural significance of the Tabot tradition, and its connection to the spread of Islam in the region.

C. Result & Discussion

1. Brief History of the Introduction of Islam to Bengkulu

Bengkulu is a province in the island of Sumatra that was once colonized by the British and the Dutch. During the British colonial period, Governor General Sir Thomas

Stamford Loveless discovered a giant flower named *Rafflesia*, which led to the province being known as the Land of *Rafflesia* (Sucahyo 2018). The name Bengkulu is derived from the Bangkahulu River, which means "areca nut carried by the current from upstream or the bow." Bengkulu is located in the western part of South Sumatra and it is bordered by Lampung, Jambi, West Sumatra, South Sumatra, and the Indian Ocean. The Bengkulu region is divided into several areas, including coastal areas, slope areas, and mountainous areas. The mountainous areas are covered with dense tropical forests and are home to high peaks such as Mount Dempo and Mount Seblat. The Musi River, as a major river, flows to the northern coast of Sumatra, while the Ketahun River flows to the southern coast. The region benefits from a good amount of rainfall, making it fertile and renowned for producing pepper, various crops, vegetables, and fruits. Gold and silver are also mined in the Rejang Lebong and Musi Hulu areas (Muljana 2013).

According to another account, the name Bengkulu originated from a historical event where an Acehnese suitor named Soak Ratu Agung Raja Sungai Serut proposed to Princess Gading Cempaka but was rejected, leading to a war. During the battle, Princess Gading's sibling shouted, "Empang ka Hulu-Empang ka hulu," which means "Don't let them (the Acehnese) set foot in our land." From there, the term Bangkahulu or Bengkulu emerged, known to the English as Bengkulu Bencoolen (Daniswari 2022).

Islam entered Indonesia primarily through the island of Sumatra, via the Malacca route to Aceh and Palembang, as well as from Aceh to Minangkabau. It is estimated that Islam reached Bengkulu through Minangkabau or Palembang, resulting in a slower development of Islam compared to other regions in the Nusantara archipelago. This was due to Bengkulu's geographical location on the edge of the Indian Ocean, not situated between straits and islands, making it difficult for ships to sail to Bengkulu. Bengkulu's contact with Islam also led to the formation of small kingdoms in the highlands or coastal areas of the Bengkulu Province (Yulianti 2016). According to other sources, Islam spread to Bengkulu in the 16th century as evidenced by the cooperation between the Sungai Lemau Kingdom and Singalam or Suanda from Palembang, such as the efforts to seek political asylum from Lembak Beliti in the Taba Pingin Pucuk Palembang area, Suanda village, to Baginda Raja Sebayam, Sungai Lemau. Baginda Sana was the eldest son of Raja Sebayam, bestowed with the title Paduka Baginda Muda (Setiyanto 2001).

During the reign of Paduka Baginda Muda, a young man from Taba Pingin Pucuk village, Abdul Syukur, was the first person to spread Islam in the Lembak VIII and Sungai Itam regions. Suanda, also known as Aswanda, originated from Lembak Beliti village, Tambak Pingin Pucuk, Palembang, and belonged to a noble and well-mannered lineage (Setiyanto 2001). In 1650, Sebayam was accepted as a son-in-law and given a part of the kingdom's territory, specifically the coastal areas of Sungai Itam and Bengkulu, the upper reaches of Sungai Renaji Baxiang down to the coastline. In 1650, the arrival of Abdul Syukur, a relative of Aswanda, indicated an existing mutual relationship between Islam and the Sungai Lemau community, especially in the Sungai Itam to Lembak VIII areas (Hamidy 2014).

The Sungai Lemau and Sillembar kingdoms attempted to establish contact and cooperation with Sultan Ageng Titayasa or Sultan Banten in 1668 A.D. (Abdullah Siddik

1996). Depati Bangsa Raja and Depati Bangso Radin were the two envoys from the two kingdoms to declare their subordination to the Sultanate of Banten. Additionally, Sultan Ageng and the English agreed to confer the title of Pangeran Raja Muda to both envoys. At that time, Sultan Ageng awarded the title of Pangeran Nata Diraja to Depati Bangso Radin and married him to his daughter. The couple then returned to the Silebar Bengkulu kingdom accompanied by 12 soldiers from the Sultanate of Banten (Gadjahnata 1986).

Historical relics regarding the relationship between Islam and the Bengkulu community can still be seen today, including the Tabot ceremony. This tradition was initially brought to Bengkulu in 1714 by Indian Bengalis under the leadership of Sheikh Burhanuddin, who was given the title Imam Senggolo. Belian then married a girl from Cinggri village and Sungai Lemau, now known as Pondok Kelapa. He lived on the coast of Berkas village with his descendants. The Tabot tradition was introduced in the 18th century by Indians from the West Pai and Bengal tribes. During the British colonial period in Bengkulu, Bengalis were included in the fifth social stratification group. The number of Bengalis was smaller than that of the Chinese. Bengalis were seen as suspicious, aggressive, and slower compared to the Malay ethnicity. Additionally, the Bengalis, known as Sipaijer or Sipai, revived the cultural celebration known as the Bahtera Festival (Setiyanto 2001).

An Islamic burial site with motifs was discovered at the tomb of Sentot Ali Basya, who was buried on April 17, 1885. According to local residents' stories, the dome structure found at his tomb is a recent construction. It can be seen that the original mausoleum construction was simple, with no new constructions built. Furthermore, unlike most tombs in the archipelago, there are no tombstones at the site (Japarudin 2016). The author has not found any research results regarding the historical evidence of Islam entering Bengkulu due to its limited archaeological sites. However, based on the historical sequence of Islamic propagation in the region, there are Islamic-themed manuscripts, such as writings on bamboo stems (Gelumpai), popularly known as Rencong Ka-Ga-Nga script or Ug Lu script. The Padang Guci community, who are descendants of the Pasemah people, refer to the Ka-Ga-Nga script as Ke-Ge-Nge script. There is no difference between the Ka-Ga-Nga script and the Rejang community script or the Ke-GeNge text from Padang Guci that emerged. The Rencong Ka-Ga-Nga text is an original text from the Rejang community in Bengkulu in the mid-15th century, later referred to as the Rencong text. The writing is done from left to right, horizontally (Gadjahnata 1986). The Rencong script is also known as Ka-Ga-Nga script or Ulu (Ulu letters) but Dutch scholars commonly use the term Rencong. Information compiled from the bamboo joints (Gelumpai) indicates that in 1417 A.D., Malim Mukidim, a da'i from Aceh, arrived in Gunung Bungbuk, Sungai Serut Awi, which was still located in the Lematang Ulu region, and successfully converted the ruler, Raja Ratu Agung, to Islam. With these writings, we can have a clearer understanding of the development of Islam in the province. Furthermore, written relics, burials, and artifacts in mosques serve as witnesses to past events.

Therefore, when studying these past events, mosques are often used as markers of the spread of Islam in those areas. As centers of worship and propagation, mosques can

be considered as evidence of the spread of Islam to Bengkulu. However, there are unfortunately not many remaining ancient mosques that indicate the actual start of the construction of Islamic places of worship in the province. After the 19th century, Islamic houses of worship were built in Bengkulu, marking the spread of Islam, so it is not surprising that we can trace the history through the old houses of worship there. Abdul Baqir Zein (1999), in his book about Historical Mosques in Indonesia, mentioned that in the city of Bengkulu, there are several old and historical mosques. Among them, in 1910, there was the Baiturrahim Mosque in the Simpang Lima area. Then, there is the Al-Taqwa Mosque located on Jl Sutoyo RT 4. In 1912, the Al-Muhtadin Mosque was established on Jl S. Parman RT 10, and in 1915, the Lembaga Pemasyarakatan Mosque was also built. In 1920, the Al-Muhtadin Mosque was established again, and in 1921, the Al-Iman Mosque was built on Jl. Sutoyo RT 5. These are the Islamic places of worship registered in the records of the Regional Office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Bengkulu. Different opinions suggest that other remnants of Islamic houses of worship in Bengkulu include the Jamik Mosque, Al-Mujahidin Mosque, and Baitul Hamdi in Pasar Baru village, and the Syuhada Mosque in Dusun Besar. In the 19th century, Islamic houses of worship in the province played a significant role in the spread of Islam as places for acquiring religious knowledge, and the local residents contributed by helping to manage the places of worship together. Sunni Islam of the Shafi'i school has spread in the Malabro area of Bengkulu.

2. The Tabot tradition and its relationship with the introduction of Islam to Bengkulu.

Sumatra Island, which is the largest island in Indonesia, holds various natural resources and tourist destinations. Its excellence is not only in the field of tourism but also in the preservation of ancestral culture, which is still maintained to this day. When visiting Bengkulu and West Sumatra, it feels incomplete without witnessing the Tabot festival. This festival, which has become an annual agenda in the celebration of the Islamic New Year, is held every month of Muharram and has even become the closing event of the year.

Some sources mention that the Tabot ceremony, which is a ritual commemorating the death of Imam Husain ibn Ali Abi Thalib, took place in Karbala when he was captured by the troops of Yazid ibn Muawiyah. According to its history, this ritual is closely related to the emergence and development of Islam, especially Shia Islam in the region. The Tabot tradition is a cultural tradition of Bengkulu that is dedicated to commemorating the heroic deeds of Husain ibn Ali ibn Abi Thalib, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who fell in the desert of Karbala, Iraq, during battle. In the years 1713-1719, the Tabot ceremony was introduced by Shia Muslim workers from Madras and Bengal in southern India who were building Fort Marlborough. These workers married local residents and passed on this culture to their descendants.

The term "Tabot" originates from the Arabic word "Tabut," which literally means a wooden box or chest. Tabot is known as a bundle containing the laws of the Children of Israel and is believed to bring good fortune if present but disaster if lost. Nowadays, Tabot is used for ceremonies in the form of a multi-tiered tower resembling a mosque,

with varying heights and adorned with colorful sheets. Tabot must be made to meet the requirements set by its pioneers, namely Sheikh Burhanuddin, also known as Imam Senggolo, and continued by his family in introducing Tabot to the region. The Tabot-owning families consist of two main groups, namely the Tabot Bangsal Group and the Tabot Barkas Group. Initially, it was a Shia ritual to commemorate the death of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, but it has now become a pure family obligation to fulfill the last wishes of the ancestors (Mutjaba 2008). This happened after the indigenous people of Bengkulu were able to free themselves from the influence of Shia teachings, and gradually this tradition was preserved by the Sipai people with the staging of the Tabot festival, which has been an annual tourist agenda since 1990 (Dahri 2009).

The Tabot ceremony tradition is carried out with different mechanisms due to the social conditions of the community. For example, in Bengkulu, as a sign, the first family to perform it is called Tabot 17, whereas in Pariaman, Tabot (Tabuik) consists of only two types, namely Tabuik Pasa and Tabuik Subarang. They also have different Tabot disposal sites. In Bengkulu, just like in Pariaman, West Sumatra, the Tabot is thrown into the sea. However, as time goes by, the Tabot is later disposed of in low-lying waterlogged areas or marshes near public cemeteries, popularly known as Karbela tombs, where it is believed by the community to be the tomb of Sheikh Burhanuddin or Imam Senggolo. (Syiafril Sy 2012).

The implementation of the Tabot ceremony tradition, which is carried out with great sanctity and is synonymous with religious significance, has gradually changed into a mere cultural festival. This is due to the fact that the Tabot ritual participants are no longer from the Shia community. Many criticisms arise among the people who believe that the sacred values of the Tabot ceremony have been lost, exacerbated by the emergence of modernized Tabot construction or Tabot ceremonies. Until now, there is no evidence of the origins of the popular Tabot tradition in Bengkulu. However, many believe that the workers of the Marlborough Fort brought the custom, which originally commemorated followers of the Shia ideology, to Bengkulu. The British brought construction workers for the fort, who were from the southern regions of India, specifically Madras and Bengal, where Shia Muslims also resided. They were considered compatible with the local society, and under the leadership of Sheikh Burhanuddin, also known as Imam Senggolo, they decided to settle and inhabit a modern village called Berkas, now known as Kelurahan Tengah Padang. The ceremony, originating from Bengal and Madras, was passed down through generations and blended with the native population of Bengkulu. The descendants of these workers became known as Sipai or the Tabot community (Siagian and Kusumawardhana 2019).

As the Sipai population grew, the Tabot tradition also spread to Banda Aceh, Meulaboh, Pidie, Singkil, Padang, Parimana, Painan, and Maninjau (Astuti 2016). However, over time, this tradition gradually disappeared in various places. Eventually, the Tabot ceremony was only held in two locations: Bengkulu, referred to as Tabot, and Pariaman in West Sumatra, where it was known as Tabuik (since 1831). Although they share similarities, the implementation of the ceremonies differs (Gumay, Muria, and Yunilisiah 2011). According to historical records, a group of Arabs settled in Sumatra in

674 AD, followed by Arabs from Punjab, who continuously arrived until the 15th century. This facilitated the spread of Islam without obstacles, especially since the Islam they brought was known for its dynamic, accommodative nature, and tendency to blend with pre-Islamic Indonesian customs. The inclusive and accommodative nature of Islam is evident in the Tabot commemoration.

The spread of Islamic teachings was conducted through various means, including cultural approaches. The Tabot tradition aligned with the concept of Islamic outreach as a means of dissemination and attraction, making it easier to convey and gather faith among the visited communities. The development of Islamic teachings depended on the efforts of individuals who realized that the truth of their religion was a divine blessing and were delighted to share this blessing with others. Hence, it is clear that the spread of Islam did not occur through kings or kingdoms. Men spread Islam to coastal regions, including the city of Bengkulu on the western coast of Sumatra, where they married local women (Arnold 1985).

A Dutch scholar named Pijnappel was the first to propose the theory that Islam in Indonesia originated from people from Malabar and Gujarat, and it was the Arab people who followed the Shafi'i school of thought residing in India who later brought Islam to Indonesia (Drewes 1968). Not all experts fully accept that the spread of Islam occurred peacefully. Ricklefs (1992), for example, argues that there is no evidence to suggest that the process of Islamization in Indonesia was achieved through military expeditions that imposed Islam on the local population, as commonly referred to as conquest. However, when wars did occur, an Islamic kingdom emerged and spread Islam to other regions. According to Ricklefs, this indicates that Islamization did not occur entirely peacefully.

The adoption of the Tabot ritual by Islam is a fusion of local culture and Islam since its introduction to Indonesia. Overall, numerous cultural assimilations strongly relate to the development of Islamic teachings in Indonesia. Among the many assimilations, the traditional Tabot ritual is one of them. Islam required wisdom when encountering well-established customs. Islam can demonstrate its peaceful and progressive nature, marked by didactic methods, rather than resorting to violence and aggression. In essence, Islam can use dialectics to harmonize with various customs and provide reasonable interpretations of traditional elements with positive values. Therefore, Islam is not present to eradicate local culture and customs but to improve and make them more humane (Zubaedi 2008).

The Tabot Festival ceremony arrived and was accepted in the city of Bengkulu through the dissemination of Islam, serving as an appealing medium for spreading Islam. Prior to the emergence of Tabot Karbala, based on historical accounts, the spread of Islam to Sumatra began around 48 Hijriyah and was gradually brought by Arabs who usually settled in Persia (Iran), with India being the most important place for Arab immigration (Sari 2019). Simultaneously, when Arabs entered India, Bangladesh, Iran, and Pakistan, it started around the 25th year of the Islamic calendar. This was due to the similarities between various sects in Iran at that time and the marriage between Al-Hussein and Shahbanu, the daughter of the last Sasanian king, Yazdagrid. The arrival of Arab descendants in the Nusantara region from Punjab continued thereafter (Ricklefs 1992).

D. Conclusion

The relationship between the Tabot tradition and Islam can be considered mutually complementary and seen as a true application of the "local Islamic tradition and local Islam" impulse. Tradition is a continuous habit that is implemented through various attributes and rules applicable in society. Traditions begin as individual routines agreed upon by several groups and eventually implemented collectively. Often, these traditions become dogmas that carry risks if abandoned. In Bengkulu society, various traditions are practiced, one of which is the Tabot ceremony. Tradition cannot be understood solely as customary law. The diversity of values, meanings, and purposes contained within traditions includes food preferences, designs, architecture, clothing styles, specific dialects, and ceremonial ornaments. Ultimately, all aspects of community life become limited due to the existence and development of customs.

On the other hand, religious life is not aligned with the inherited traditions in society. Even from an Islamic perspective, some of these traditional values, cultures, and customs are found to be incompatible with the principles of truth. However, Islamic law does not prohibit actions considered social practices or ritual worship justified by Islamic law. Therefore, the connection between the Tabot Ceremony in Bengkulu and Islam is inseparable. The Tabot ceremony in Bengkulu not only serves as a means of proselytizing but also assists in the facilitation of the spread of Islam in the province.

In conclusion, based on the historical research presented, it can be inferred that Islam entered the Nusantara region, including Bengkulu, in the 7th century AD through trade routes and interactions between Muslim traders and the local population. The process of Islamization in Bengkulu involved the economic activities of Muslim traders, intermarriage, Sufi teachings, and the development of arts. Islam reached Bengkulu in the 15th or 16th century, primarily through contacts with Minangkabau and Palembang. The introduction of Islam to Bengkulu resulted in the formation of small kingdoms and the establishment of Islamic burial sites and manuscripts. The Tabot tradition, an annual ceremony commemorating the death of Imam Husayn, was brought to Bengkulu by Indian Bengalis and later blended with local traditions. This tradition demonstrates the close interaction between traditional customs and the Islamic faith in Bengkulu. The Tabot tradition and its practice in Bengkulu are important aspects of the region's cultural and religious heritage, highlighting the history and development of Islam in the area.

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