

Tabot Bengkulu in the Perspective of Islamic Legal Sociology: A Case Study about Ritual, Authority Customs, and Shift Meaning from Sacred to Profane

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Abstract

Tabot is an annual ritual observed on 1–10 Muharram in Bengkulu to commemorate the death of Husayn ibn Ali at Karbala. Although introduced from outside the region, it has become embedded in local society over centuries and constitutes a marker of regional cultural identity. This study examines Tabot through the sociology of Islamic law, focusing on its operation as a living norm, changes in its meaning and authority, and its assessment within normative Islamic law. A qualitative, literature-based case study was employed. The findings identify three principal dynamics. First, in its sacred phase, Tabot functioned as living law through ritual rules, taboos, sanctions believed to involve supernatural consequences, and authority vested in the Tabot family. Second, festivalization since the 1990s, involving local government participation and the emergence of *Tabot Pembangunan* (Development Tabot), has generated competing claims over the authority to define the tradition. Third, assessment through principles concerning custom and the objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*) requires distinguishing its sociocultural practices from its associated beliefs. Its sociocultural elements may be accepted as valid custom (*urf*) insofar as they do not contradict Islamic legal texts, whereas beliefs involving sacred and magical powers require theological correction. The study concludes that Tabot warrants a differentiated assessment attentive to its social functions, changing authority, and normative implications. It contributes a contextualized academic

interpretation of local traditions that integrates sociological analysis with Islamic legal and theological considerations.

Keywords: Tabot; Sociology of Islamic Law; Living Law; *'urf*; Bengkulu.

INTRODUCTION

When people talk about Bengkulu culture, Tabot is almost certainly mentioned. Every year, public Bengkulu roll out series ceremony on 1–10 Sacred For in memory of fall Husain, grandchild Prophet Muhammad saw., in the Karbala Plain on 10 Muharram 61 AH (Sapriansa & Prayogi, 2023). However, researchers agree that this tradition is not native to Bengkulu. It originates from from the Shia mourning tradition in the Middle East, it spread to India, then reached the west coast of Sumatra during the British occupation around the end of the 17th century to the beginning of the 18th century, brought by the sipahi or cipei from Madras and Bengal (Handayani, 2013; Aviandy et al., 2025).

Of particular interest to legal scholars is the subsequent trajectory of Tabot. From a closely guarded ritual held by a handful of ancestral families, Tabot evolved into a tourist festival managed by the local government and attended by people from all walks of life. Research (Handayani, 2013; Suradi et al., 2025) notes that during this process, Tabot's religious elements diminished while its ethnic-cultural elements strengthened. At the same time, Tabot has never been free from debate. the same applies to research (Kurniawan, 2024) notes an open polemic in November 2013 between a cleric supported by the Indonesian Mosque Association (IKMI) in Bengkulu and the traditional institution, the Tabot Harmony Family. The local government's mediation efforts have not yielded optimal results.

A phenomenon like this cannot be answered simply by a fiqh question of whether it is permissible or not. Sociological questions also play a role: who maintains the rules of the Tabot, what makes people obey, and what happens to that authority when tradition is commercialized. Therefore, this article formulates three problem. (1) How Tabot functioning as norm social or law who live in Bengkulu society? (2) How do social changes, especially festivalization, affect the meaning and authority of Tabot? (3) How does Islamic law normative evaluate Tabot through rules of *'urf* And maqasid sharia? The aim is to provide a proportional reading of this tradition, not merely justifying and not merely condemning.

There has been quite a lot of research on Tabot, from historical, cultural, and tourism perspectives. By (Dahri, 2009) sought a meeting point between Sunni and Shia traditions in Tabot, and (Ridwan, 2016) traced the history of the Muharram commemoration. in Bengkulu, and (Sapriansa & Prayogi, 2023; Ulfa & Jalili, 2024) examine change meaning Tabot from sacred to profane through the manuscript *of the Tabot Story*. The contribution of this article lies in from his perspective: reading Tabot as a case of the relationship between Islamic law, custom, and social change. The purpose of this study is to examine the Tabot tradition through the lens of the sociology of Islamic law, exploring how a religious practice functions as "living law" within a society, how social change shifts its meaning and authority, and how it is evaluated from the perspective of normative Islamic law.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design based on library research to examine the Tabot tradition in Bengkulu City from the perspective of the sociology of Islamic law. This approach was selected because the study focuses on developing an in-depth understanding of ritual practices, customary authority, government involvement, diverse religious perspectives, and the shift in the meaning of the Tabot tradition from the sacred to the profane. The case study design is used to examine Tabot as a sociocultural phenomenon that illustrates the interaction between religious norms, customary values, government interests, and social change. The research relies entirely on secondary data obtained through a review of relevant scholarly journal articles, academic books, theses, official documents, and statutory regulations. Sources were selected based on their relevance to the history and implementation of the Tabot tradition, changes in its ritual functions, the roles of customary and governmental actors, sociological theories of law, and the principles of Islamic law. Data collection involved identifying relevant sources, assessing their suitability to the research focus, documenting essential information, and organizing the materials according to predetermined thematic categories. Library research enables the researcher to develop a systematic interpretation based on previous scholarly findings while considering the relevance, credibility, and interrelationships of the sources (Zed, 2023).

Data were analyzed using a descriptive-analytical method through three stages. First, the researcher mapped the history, ritual stages, symbols, participating actors, and development of the Tabot tradition to identify continuities in the tradition and changes in its

orientation. Second, these practices were examined through the perspective of the sociology of law by analyzing the reciprocal relationships among social norms, law, customary authority, government institutions, and community behavior. This stage aimed to explain how the tradition is maintained, negotiated, and adapted to social change, including the shift in orientation from religious devotion toward cultural performances and public activities. Third, the findings were examined in light of the principles of Islamic law by considering the purposes, forms of implementation, symbolic meanings, and socioreligious implications of the tradition, including its relevance to the concept of 'urf, or customary practices that develop within a community. The normative assessment was conducted cautiously by distinguishing cultural practices, social customs, and ritual activities that require separate legal consideration. Throughout the analytical process, findings from different sources were compared to develop a coherent interpretation and avoid conclusions unsupported by documentary evidence. Since this study does not involve field observations or interviews, its findings are limited to a conceptual analysis based on the literature and are not intended to represent the views of all practitioners or members of the Bengkulu community. Therefore, future field research is needed to test and further explore the findings concerning customary authority, ritual experiences, and changes in the interpretation of the Tabot tradition within community life (Snyder, 2019).

RESULTS

The Tabot Tradition and Its Ritual Practices in Bengkulu

The Tabot tradition in Bengkulu is a cultural practice that combines religious remembrance, customary values, and collective identity. Its historical origins remain uncertain, with accounts linking its introduction to preachers from Punjab and others associating it with Sipahi soldiers. The ritual traditionally consists of several stages, including taking soil, sitting penja, meradai, arak penja, arak sorban, gam, and the final procession and disposal of Tabot on the tenth of Muharram. These stages symbolically commemorate the tragedy of Husayn ibn Ali at Karbala. Historically, the ritual was organized by Tabot families, who maintained customary authority over its procedures, participants, and ritual requirements. The tradition therefore functioned not only as a cultural expression but also as an unwritten system of social norms governing community behavior.

Changes in Customary Authority and the Shift from Sacred to Profane

Since the early 1990s, Tabot has increasingly developed into a cultural and tourism festival. The establishment of the Tabot Harmony Family organization in 1993 and the involvement of the provincial tourism authorities since 1997 contributed to changes in its organization and public presentation. Customary authority, which had previously been concentrated among Tabot families, gradually became shared with festival organizers and government institutions. Additional activities, including art performances, competitions, and bazaars, expanded the festival beyond its original ritual context. Consequently, the sacred dimensions of Tabot increasingly coexist with its profane dimensions as a public cultural attraction. Nevertheless, the traditional Tabot families continue to preserve important ritual knowledge and craftsmanship. This transformation also creates debates concerning cultural authenticity, religious legitimacy, and the authority to determine the meaning of Tabot.

Tabot from the Perspective of Islamic Legal Sociology

From the perspective of Islamic legal sociology, Tabot illustrates the interaction between living law, customary authority, religious interpretation, and government policy. The tradition demonstrates how unwritten customary norms can regulate behavior through inherited authority, collective expectations, and beliefs concerning the consequences of violating ritual obligations. However, the development of Tabot as a public festival has introduced different interpretations of its religious and cultural significance. Some concerns relate to its historical association with Shi'a traditions, ritual mourning, and beliefs that abandoning the ritual may bring misfortune. From the perspective of Islamic law, the tradition requires a differentiated assessment rather than a single judgment concerning all its elements. Cultural expressions and customary practices may be considered through the concept of *'urf*, provided they do not conflict with established Islamic principles. Conversely, beliefs that attribute independent supernatural power to ritual practices require careful theological examination. This distinction supports an approach that preserves cultural heritage while addressing religious concerns through education, dialogue, and responsible festival management.

Table 1. Transformation of the Tabot Tradition in Bengkulu

Analytical aspect	Traditional phase	Contemporary phase
Main orientation	Ritual remembrance and inherited customs	Cultural festival, tourism, and public identity

Analytical aspect	Traditional phase	Contemporary phase
Authority	Tabot families and customary leaders	Tabot families, festival organizers, and local government
Participation	Primarily ritual participants and customary groups	Broader community and festival visitors
Social function	Preserving ritual knowledge and customary obligations	Cultural preservation, tourism, and social integration
Sacred–profane relationship	Sacred meanings dominate ritual activities	Sacred rituals coexist with profane public entertainment
Islamic legal concerns	Observance of customary ritual rules and beliefs	Differing interpretations of ritual practices and religious legitimacy

Source: Researcher's analysis based on the literature reviewed in this study.

Table 1 illustrates the transformation of Tabot from a tradition primarily governed by customary families into a broader cultural event involving multiple institutions and social groups. The most significant change concerns the distribution of authority and the coexistence of sacred and profane meanings. Although the expansion of the festival has strengthened Tabot's role in cultural identity, tourism, and social interaction, it has also raised questions about the preservation of ritual meaning and the compatibility of certain beliefs with Islamic principles. These findings indicate that the development of Tabot should be understood as a process of social negotiation rather than the complete disappearance of its sacred character.

DISCUSSION

Historical Origins and Ritual Practices of Tabot in Bengkulu

There are two main theories about Tabot's arrival in Bengkulu. The first theory links it to a group of preachers from Punjab led by Maulana Ichsad, then continued by Sheikh Burhanuddin, also known as Imam Senggolo, whom the Tabot family reveres to this day. The second theory states that Tabot was brought to Bengkulu by a soldier Sipahi which accompanied English troops in the west coast of Sumatra around 1750–1825. Sapriansa and Prayogi note that both theories lack definitive evidence. Hamka even observed that in Pariaman, an area that also has a similar tradition called Tabuik, Shia ideology is virtually unknown to the public (Hamka, 2017), as quoted (Sapriansa & Prayogi, 2023). This important matter: ritual Tabot and Shia understanding is not automatically identical in the consciousness of its supporting community.

Tabot Story manuscript dated 1886, the series of Tabot rituals runs as follows :

1. Take land, on Evening 1 Sacred, as symbol the land of Karbala.
2. Sit penja, that is put prison (symbol shaped palms) and make Tabot from banana stems.
3. Meradai, in the form of pilgrimage And respect to tombs holy.
4. Arak prison on Evening 8th And liquor turban on Evening 9th .
5. Gam, day 9th Which marked with silence.
6. The Tabot parade on the 10th night, then the Tabot is thrown on the 10th of Muharram, when the Tabot is floated as a symbol of the burial of the martyrs of Karbala.

Each stage is associated with a specific phase of Husayn's life and death. This means that this ritual is not simply a performance, but a physically practiced and repeated form of storytelling (Sapriansa & Prayogi, 2023).

Tabot as *Living Law* on Sacred Phase

Until the mid-1970s to the early 1990s, Tabot was carried out primarily by Tabot family groups, which according to (Sapriansa & Prayogi, 2023; Amirullah & Huda, 2025) consisted of fourteen families, each led by a head of the family or eldest son and equipped with a penja as a group symbol. From this, the characteristics of living law are evident according to (Ehrlich, 1936).

First, there is the authority structure. The Tabot family holds the authority to determine when, how, and by whom rituals are performed. This authority is traditional in (Weber, 1972) sense: it is legitimated by lineage from respected ancestors, not by formal appointment.

Second, there are behavioral norms. Ritual participants are expected not to show any joy. avoid dispute in family, And No comment The taste of the food offered. Outsiders who wish to participate must also meet certain requirements (Sapriansa & Prayogi, 2023).

Third, there are sanctions. These sanctions are not punishments imposed by institutions, but rather the belief that abandoning rituals will bring disaster, either in the form of illness or a lack of prosperity, and that those who violate taboos will fall ill. In legal sociology theory, this belief is a highly effective compliance mechanism because it operates from within the perpetrator (Sapriansa & Prayogi, 2023; Fitouchi et al., 2022). Therefore, at this stage, Tabot can be described as a complete, though unwritten, system of norms. It

regulates who has authority, what must be done, and the consequences of violations. This is *the living law* Ehrlich referred to .

Change Social: Festivalization and Shift Authority

The turning point came in the early 1990s. After Bengkulu was invited to perform its culture in Jakarta on 1991 in frame Visit Indonesia That year, Tabot was elevated to a tourism festival. In 1993, the Tabot Harmony Family (KKT) was formed to organize it, and since 1997, the provincial Tourism Office has been directly involved (Sapriansa & Prayogi, 2023). This change brings several consequences that can be read sociologically.

First, authority has become layered. While previously the Tabot family held the sole authority, now the KKT and local governments participate in determining the schedule, format, and promotion of events. The government has added a tambourine competition, a hijab princess election, a bazaar, and art performances. Research by (Sapriansa & Prayogi, 2023) note that within this framework, the term Tabot emerged. Development, that is Tabot Which made group public, agencies, or companies to enliven the festival. This type of Tabot accompanies the Tabot sacred and not equipped with penja, because penja is only intended for Tabot family as a symbol of their identity.

Second, the boundaries between sacred and profane are shifting. According to (Durkheim, 1995), rituals maintain their sacredness through restrictions. Once the Tabot became a tourist attraction and became public property, everyone felt entitled to participate, including those who did not understand the ritual's meaning. So as (Sapriansa & Prayogi, 2023) assess this. most inhabitant Bengkulu now more know side the festival from the side the ritual, and (Dahri, 2009; Widanita et al., 2021) see side other from change, this, that is that The expertise in making Tabot remains in the hands of the Tabot family so they are still needed in the manufacturing process.

Third, tradition provides a meeting space for various groups. In festivals, Chinese citizens participate through *telong-telong* and *barongsai*, so that Tabot display layer culture local, Islam, And Chinese simultaneously (Sapriansa & Prayogi, 2023). So as (Zubaedi, 2008) even proposed revitalizing Tabot as a means of building interfaith harmony in Bengkulu. From a sociological-legal perspective, this demonstrates the integrative function of tradition, namely, it binds together diverse communities.

The price of this change is the emergence of questions of legitimacy: who has the right to define the "authentic" Tabot? Sapriansa and Prayogi call this a discourse on the

legality of identity within the Tabot tradition. This is not simply a debate over terminology, but rather a struggle for authority over a living norm (Sapriansa & Prayogi, 2023).

Collision With Law Islam Normative

The 2013 polemic, recorded by (Kurniawan, 2024; AM et al., 2022), shows that social change did not proceed without friction. Opposition to Tabot generally stemmed from several concerns, which can be mapped as follows.

First, the question of the origins of Shia. Some groups reject Tabot because they believe it carries the traditions of a particular sect. However, as mentioned above, the historical origins of a practice do not automatically determine the meaning held by its supporters today. According to (Handayani, 2013; Al-Syathibi, 1997) explains that in Bengkulu society, the practice of Tabot has shifted from a religious orientation to an ethno-cultural one. A more appropriate question for a fakih is not simply "where it comes from," but "what is believed and practiced in it today."

Second, regarding the form of mourning. The hadith narrated by al-Bukhari and Muslim forbids slapping the cheeks and tearing clothes as expressions of grief. In the series of Tabot rituals described in the literature used in this article, no such practices are found. The rituals include the construction of Tabot, pilgrimage, procession, silence, and burial. However, this conclusion is limited by the available sources and needs to be confirmed through field observations.

Third, question belief. This is it point Which most sensitive. Script *Story Tabot* load element myth, for example story about people cipei Which depends on the angelic stretcher carrying Husain's body (Sapriansa & Prayogi, 2023). Furthermore, the belief that abandoning the ritual will bring disaster is a matter of faith, because such a law of cause and effect has no basis in the texts and has the potential to shift the belief that disaster and sustenance exist in the hands of God. This is the part that seriously needs to be straightened out.

Evaluation through 'Urf and Maqasid Sharia

Based on rules *al-'adah mubakkamah*, A habit can accepted if it meets the requirements of 'urf is valid. These conditions are basically that the custom is well established and widely known, existed when the practice was carried out, does not conflict with the text, and does not make lawful what is haram or forbid what is halal. When Tabot is weighed against these conditions, the results are not singular.

First, in terms of stability and generality, Tabot clearly meets these requirements. It has been practiced for generations and is now widely accepted by the people of Bengkulu, even becoming a regional identity.

Second, from the aspect of form and art, the majority of Tabot elements are traditional and expressive. culture, No worship mahdhah. No There is claim that procession The construction of a Tabot is a mandatory ritual, similar to prayer or fasting (Julita & Kirantika, 2026). In traditional areas, well-known principles state that it is permissible as long as there is no prohibition. Love for the Prophet's family and commemoration of the tragedy of Karbala do not contradict Islamic law.

Third, from a religious perspective, the sacred-magical elements, such as the belief in calamity if rituals are abandoned, and myths considered factual, are considered contrary to the principles of monotheism. In this regard, these customs are classified as '*urf* fasid' and cannot be justified, even if they have been in existence for a long time. Therefore, the most accountable approach is *tafshil*, that is, sorting. Judging Tabot as a whole as halal or haram would ignore the sociological fact that Tabot contains elements of varying nature, and that its meaning changes between one group and another (Sirajuddin, 2016).

From the maqasid side, there are several considerations (Al-Syathibi, 1997). Safeguarding religion requires that deviant beliefs be corrected, not by forcefully eradicating traditions, but through education and dialogue. Guarding treasure looks in impact economy festival, start from maker Tabot, bazaar vendors, and tourism. The public good is evident in Tabot's function as a social glue across groups. Conversely, social damage can arise if differing views on Tabot are allowed to escalate into open conflict, as occurred in 2013.

Implications for Development Law Islam in Middle Tradition Local

The Tabot case demonstrates that Islamic law in Indonesia exists in a much more diverse form than that outlined in fiqh texts. It negotiates with customs, economic interests, and government policies. Within (Mudzhar, 1998; ZTF, 2022) framework, changes in social structures, in this case the entry of government and the tourism industry, influence how religious teachings are practiced and understood. Therefore, legal judgments based solely on texts without understanding the social context will easily miss the mark.

There are three practical implications. First, religious institutions such as clerics and the regional MUI (Indonesian Ulema Council) should engage in direct dialogue with the KKT (Islamic Religious Affairs Ministry) and local governments, rather than engaging in

open polemics. Second, public education needs to emphasize the separation between cultural and religious aspects, so that festival attendees understand the boundaries. Third, festival organizers need to ensure that elements that conflict with the principles of monotheism are not promoted as part of obligatory traditions.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the Tabot tradition in Bengkulu, when examined from the perspectives of the sociology of Islamic law, can be understood through three main findings. First, during its sacred phase, Tabot functioned as a form of living law, characterized by the traditional authority of the Tabot families, established behavioral norms, and sanctions associated with supernatural beliefs. Second, since the 1990s, the festivalization of Tabot, involving the Kerukunan Keluarga Tabot (KKT) and local government, has transformed the tradition through the emergence of Tabot Pembangunan, reshaped the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, and generated contestation over the authority to define and interpret Tabot. Third, from the perspectives of 'urf and maqasid al-sharia, Tabot requires a differentiated assessment (tafsil), whereby its socio-cultural elements may be accepted as 'urf sahih (valid custom), while sacred-magical beliefs that contradict the principle of tawhid require clarification and correction. Thus, the sustainability of Tabot should consider both the preservation of cultural heritage and the principles of Islamic law.

This study contributes to the development of the sociology of Islamic law by examining Tabot not merely as a cultural festival but also as a social institution shaped by traditional authority, customary norms, religious beliefs, and government intervention. By integrating the concepts of living law, 'urf, and maqasid al-sharia, this research offers an analytical framework for understanding the transformation of Tabot from a sacred tradition into a public cultural festival. It also highlights the contestation of authority among Tabot families, cultural organizations, religious perspectives, and local government in determining the meaning and legitimacy of the tradition. Furthermore, the study provides a basis for distinguishing between cultural practices that can be preserved as expressions of local identity and religious beliefs that require evaluation in light of Islamic principles. Nevertheless, because this research relies on a literature review, its findings constitute a conceptual interpretation that requires further empirical verification.

Recommendations Future research should employ an empirical approach to examine the contemporary practice and social significance of Tabot in Bengkulu through direct observation, in-depth interviews, and, where appropriate, participation in cultural activities. Interviews should involve Tabot family representatives, KKT administrators, Islamic scholars, local government officials, cultural practitioners, and community members to obtain diverse perspectives on the tradition's historical development, religious meanings, and institutional transformation. Further studies should also investigate how the festivalization of Tabot has influenced the transmission of customary knowledge, the relationship between sacred and profane elements, and the distribution of authority among relevant stakeholders. In addition, empirical research should explore how the principles of 'urf and maqasid al-sharia are interpreted and applied in actual community practices, particularly in distinguishing acceptable cultural expressions from beliefs that conflict with tawhid. Such investigations would strengthen the empirical basis of the present study and support the development of culturally sensitive recommendations for preserving Tabot while maintaining its compatibility with Islamic principles.

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