

THE POLITICO-CULTURAL DIMENSION OF TABUIK PIAMAN PERFORMANCE IN WEST SUMATRA

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Abstract

This article aims to discuss about performance of *Tabuik Piaman* from the perspective of cultural policy of the West Sumatra Province and Pariaman District. *Tabuik Piaman* as a ritual tradition of Muslims Syi'ah has long been a cultural heritage and colossal ritual by Muslims Sunni community in Pariaman district. For the Pariaman people, *Tabuik Piaman* ceremony has become a space expression of social and cultural community. Each execution of the ceremony is their responsibility.

However, the potential and strength of this ceremony was not much gotten serious attention by the government, especially before the early 1980s. In the period of the mid-1960s to late 1980s, *Tabuik Piaman* just become an arena of influence scrambling by political parties to attract their supporters, then *Tabuik Piaman* encountered the period of tragic - labeled as "black sheep" riots trigger. Consequently, execution of the ceremony is often discontinued. Although in the mid-1960s the West Sumatra provincial government issued policy concept about "self-esteem restoration", in order to rebuilding cultural identity especially Minangkabau, and local traditions in each region.

In the early 1980s, the government of Pariaman viewed *Tabuik Piaman* performances as a very positive opportunity to be revived. Government tried to make a policy to create *Tabuik Piaman* as media publications, promotion, and agent of "identity" as well as a carrier of economic and tourism sectors. Then, the *Tabuik Piaman* ceremony was changed to *tabuik* tourism. This policy has impact to the cultural expression of the people who positioned *Tabuik Piaman* as a traditional ritual to performance that is more prioritize aspect of spectacle. Performance and artifacts of *tabuik* become the space of artistic expression.

Key words

Tabuik Piaman, politic of culture, self-esteem restoration, *tabuik* tourism.

Introduction

"He tried so hard to banish the humiliation endured by the West Sumatrans for many years and began to build pridefulness towards the Minangkabau heritage and identity. He tried to instill a sense of respect to the local history and culture, emphasizing aspects of Minangese tradition which don't pose a threat to the political center and military control of West Sumatra" (Kahin, 2008).

The aforementioned excerpt is acknowledged as the "self-esteem restoration" concept. A year following the G30S/PKI as well as the dawn of the New Order, another political incident also occurred in West Sumatra. In 1966, Harun Zain, then the rector of University of Andalas Padang, was elected the governor of West Sumatra Province. The new governor was a Minangkabau youth from Pariaman city born and raised in *rantau/overseas* (Jakarta). At the beginning of his service, he introduced the notion of "self-esteem restoration". He aspired to regain the thing that he sensed had lost in the society (Abdullah, 2008). According to Zain, in the period prior to and during the early Indonesian independence, numerous leaders and fighters from Minangkabau seemed to disappear within only two decades.

The notion of "self-esteem restoration" was a "cultural" statement for a (Minangkabau) identity because the West Sumatrans had to endure an identity and confidence crisis after losing the revolt war between the Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia (Pemerintah Revolusioner Republik Indonesia or PRRI) and the government of the Republic of Indonesia in 1961. The

"self-esteem restoration" notion was regarded as the cultural politics of the government and became the foundation to rebuild the Minangkabau identity. Numerous institutions, organizations, artists, and culture figures were interpreting and attempting to manifest the concept. So were the Pariaman society, the community and authority of which were attempting to rediscover rituals and traditions appropriate to be a part of the Pariaman identity. So how did the Pariaman local authority attempt to interpret the self-esteem restoration concept as a cultural politic attitude in *Tabuik Piaman*¹?

Tabuik Piaman

The people of West Sumatran city of Pariaman have one ritual tradition, namely the *Tabuik* performance. The ceremony is carried out to remember the death of Husain ibn Ali, the grandson of The Prophet Muhammad, who died in the Battle of Karbala in Iraq on 10 Muharram 61

¹ Designation of the ceremony that employs *tabuik* artifacts as its main property has several versions, namely: *batabuik* (activities related to *tabuik* ceremony); *hoyak tabuik* (this word is taken from the culmination part of the ceremony; it also means activities related to *Tabuik* ceremony); *tabuik* cultural celebration; and *tabuik piaman*. This designation change occurs due to the everchanging sense of meaning of the word *tabuik* overtime. In this paper, the author is using the word *tabuik piaman*, because this is the latest term to be instituted by the Pariaman government and society to discuss aspects related to *tabuik* ceremonies or performances.

AH (680 AD) (Brockelmann, 1956; Amin, 2010; Ansary, 2012). Originally the ceremony is a major religious ritual and has a theological dimension for the Shi'ite Muslim. However, in later development, the form and interpretation of the ceremony differ among countries and regions due to the assimilation and 'dialog' with local cultures resulting in the ritual being held some in grief, while the others in joy. The Tabuik ceremony belongs to the joyous celebration.

The performance of *Tabuik Piaman* carried out by the Pariaman public is outstanding and colossal; the people carrying two tabuiks (artifacts), i.e. *tabuik pasa* and *tabuik subarang*. The tabuik artifact is around 10-12 meters tall. Each *tabuik pasa* and *tabuik subarang* has its own community as the supporters. The Tabuik performance presents symbolically snippets of events endured by Husain. The battle 'scene' between *tabuik pasa* and *tabuik subarang* supporters, for example, illustrates the battle in Karbala even though the supporters of both tabuiks never claim the other as Husain's enemy. However, the fight is what brings the liveliness of every Tabuik performance; it can even be considered the "spirit" of the performance. When the performance peaks, both tabuiks are attractively displayed in public around Pariaman Market. When it ends, the tabuiks are thrown into the sea to symbolize Husain's funeral. The ritual is believed to have started since the beginning of the 19th century and is still held to this day in Pariaman. Azyumardi Azra (2000) notes that the tradition of shouldering *tabut* (*tabuik*) was influenced by the Shi'ite Sepoy that came along with the British army between 1750 and 1825 when the British attempted to occupy the western coast of Sumatra.



Figure 1

In the late afternoon before sunset on the final day of Tabuik performance, the ritual of *membuang tabuik ke laut* or throwing the tabuik into the sea is done to illustrate the funeral of Husain's body. Thousands of visitors watching the ceremony become a part of the ceremony as the "mourners" to escort the dead body to the funeral. Visitors who want to see it from the sea can rent local fishing boat and those who want to grab tabuik fragments can also wait on the sea, swimming until tabuik is laid down. The picture above shows the moment the tabuik is about to be laid down on the sea. (Photograph: Alamsyah Studio, 2010)

Political Situation and (Cultural) Political Interests

Along the way, *Tabuik Piaman* has gone through highs and lows in different contexts over time. In one side, *Tabuik Piaman* serves as the socio-cultural space for the Pariaman community, highly expected to represent their cultural heritage. It even serves as a highly influential publicity space for political parties and authorities. According to Kartomi (1986), the Tabuik ritual likely attract large crowds and therefore is exploited as a means of political propaganda, as done by PNI and PKI political parties. During both New Order and Reform eras, Tabuik has also been used as a means to publicize governmental programs and slogans, such as "Tabuik of The Development", "Tabuik of Tourism", "Along With Hoyak Tabuik, Let's Develop Piaman (Pariaman)", and so forth.



Figure 2

The developmental message written under the *buraq* (flying horse model)'s wing on tabuik: "Along With Hoyak Tabuik, Let's Develop Piaman." The picture was taken in 2010 during Tabuik Piaman in Pariaman. (Photograph: Asril Muchtar, 19 December 2010)

On the other hand, *Tabuik Piaman* was blamed for riots and conflicts among several communities and groups. For example, in 1965, Tabuik was considered to be the medium of tension among communities, particularly political parties. From a Tempo article dated March 25, 1972: "In 1967, Pariaman community performed Tabuik ritual again but due to the nearness with the 1965 mass massacre and the mass riots during fight 'scene', the ritual was interrupted" (Andoni, 2010). Later on, between 1969 and 1972, Tabuik was held again but between 1973 and 1980 it had to be discontinued due to the disagreement among authority, community figures, and tradition figures on Tabuik ritual. In fact, some argue that Tabuik ritual was intentionally interrupted by the government. Besides, Muhammadiyah scholars in Pariaman regarded Tabuik ritual as heretical activities so they deemed it

inappropriate to carry out. The tension between the community and the government on Tabuik raises questions: who is having an agenda in Tabuik?

The political situation in West Sumatra and Pariaman in particular during the mid 1960s and the years that followed was very influential on the survival of Tabuik ceremony. The situation had also become an obstacle for the Pariaman authority in translating self-esteem restoration concept and building the Pariaman cultural entity in particular. West Sumatra local authority had only interpreted the concept in aspects that characterized Minangkabau in general, for example the use of *gonjong* roof design (upswept building roof similar to buffalo horns) in governmental offices throughout West Sumatra.

Exercising The Concept of Self-Esteem Restoration

The notion of self-esteem restoration is not stated explicitly as a cultural politics by the West Sumatra local government. However, contents of its instruction are very clear. The notion has an instructional relation, inspiration, and a strong foundation for Pariaman local government to revive Tabuik performance and develop Minangkabauan sense of identity.

Embracing a certain cultural identity in Minangkabau context requires mindfulness in sorting out among similarities and differences. If it's inclined to similarities, the specific identity is difficult to grasp. And it's very likely because Minangkabau ethnic inhabits the entire West Sumatra province and therefore pursuing entity distinction significant to emphasize as a cultural identity becomes imperative. Pariaman local government is aware that one of the cultural traditions that has long survived in Pariaman community and is not shared with other communities in Minangkabau cultural region is the Tabuik rite.

The Tabuik ritual as a cultural performance of Shi'ite heritage is very interesting in terms of performance, artifacts and other performance elements, as well as in chronology aspects, performance dramatic elements (conflict performing, in particular), and mass mobilization in every performance. Tabuik performance is potentially a public space to express aspiration and mission. Therefore, individuals, mass organizations, and government authorities are interested in playing a role in the rite.

In a Tempo article dated September 19, 1987, due to the enormous potential instability in Pariaman when Tabuik performance was held, the New Order government decided to interfere it. The New Order was not comfortable with instability in the community: however narrow the scope, the periodically-held Tabuik rite enabled the turmoil to live on. A community or group resistance towards governmental programs was possible to happen. The experience from the previous two decades could happen again. Groups and organizations oppressed in political situation and policy of the new Order would find loopholes to exploit Tabuik festival as a means to convey their protest and propaganda.

In 1980, Anas Malik, the then regent of Padang Pariaman regency², organized the Tabuik performance, reducing

and eliminating fights among Tabuik supporters inclined to riot (Andoni, 2010). What the regent attempted to do was considered to be a beginning to revive Tabuik festival. Anas Malik as a Pariaman leader in New Order era brought important missions: reviving a ritual tradition of the community and maintaining stable security in Pariaman society. Both missions were integrated in one package: tradition ritual such as Tabuik ritual was to be reduced, leaving parts deemed crucial, and was furthermore changed into a more friendly and sympathetic performance, casting image that Tabuik was fully supported by the government. Anas Malik had been engaged in dialogs with different society elements and organizations related to the Tabuik ritual. The ceremony was subsequently dubbed with such titles as *Tabuik Pariwisata* (Tourism Tabuik) and *Tabuik Pembangunan* (Development Tabuik). With such missions and institutional approaches, the government could also offer to serve as a new "patron" for the *Tabuik Piaman* performance.

The name alteration from Tabuik ceremony into Tourism Tabuik had apparently received positive response from the government tourism authority at that time so that in the national scope the organization of tabuik performance became the national tourism agenda and was promoted in a wider scale. *Tabuik Piaman* was included in one of Indonesian cultural tourism destinations to visit.

The policy was also associated with an effort to boost the economy during the celebration, assuming the number of visitors and spectators, particularly on ceremonial peak, would reach over hundreds of thousands. Billions of rupiahs were expected to circulate in Pariaman as a result of transaction in services, as well as food and beverage and merchandising businesses. The government even assumed that the tourism tabuik would be attended by foreign tourists.

As a matter of fact, economic activities particularly in services had indeed benefited owners and managers of lodging, transportation, and entertainment services; and even parking space organizers. Culinary and accessories businesses had benefited as well. However, it seemed that the economic activities occurred more between local people and domestic visitors. The government assumption that tourism tabuik would attract more foreign visitors to come to Pariaman was yet to be significantly confirmed. According to Simatupang, such a sense of reasoning is not always true. He observed that in every art and culture happening, even though not intended to attract tourists, economic activities would still occur. When it happens, therefore, the production and consumption processes of services and art-and-culture objects take place and are organized by local people – from the people to the people (Simatupang, 2013: 279-280).

Did Anas Malik decide to revive Tabuik stemming from the concept of self-esteem restoration or simply being motivated by his desire to explore the potential culture and tradition of Pariaman? Such questions should be necessarily raised. And when the tabuik performance was held again, why did Anas Malik entitle tabuik ceremony with Tourism Tabuik and Development Tabuik, instead of highlighting Pariaman cultural identity? As far as I have observed in Pariaman region and people, there never seems to exist the statement that Tabuik is the Pariaman cultural identity, stemming from the self-esteem

² In 1980, Pariaman city wasn't an autonomous municipality and was still a district capital of Padang Pariaman regency. Pariaman was administratively autonomous in 2002.

restoration idea. The idea of restoring self-esteem seems to be disengaged, spiritless, and instructional to revive Tabuik Piaman. It could be that Piaman local government and community don't necessarily have to express Tabuik as their cultural identity literally; organizing Tabuik as an act is probably sufficient.

As if the Tourism Tabuik policy is not enough, in 2006 Piaman municipality executed the idea to perform Tabuik twice a year. The authority considered that the Tabuik performance held every Muharram month was the ceremony to commemorate the death of Husain and to welcome the Islamic New Year and had become tourism agenda in Piaman and West Sumatra. They wanted to perform Tabuik carried out specifically out of the routine Muharram event and had the performance reduced, for example only the ceremonial peak would be performed. The authority seemed to take advantage of the vacant "public time" i.e. the midyear holiday. However, the program failed to be executed.

From the perspective of art studies, Julianti Parani (2010) asserts that when economy is almost solely intended to improve industrialization, in terms of art work and services, the culture "welfare" becomes prominent. Individual and communal arts are confined within the context of cultural commodity. As a product of culture, it's impossible that arts are confined within the interest of maintaining the legacy of the past as they also enter various aspects of modern life with many interests. Arts can be a powerful tourist attraction and become a favourite commodity in modern economy that can contribute to the country's revenue, in addition to trade and industry.

From Parani's perspective, the current *Tabuik Piaman* has become a cultural commodity. As an annually scheduled program, *Tabuik Piaman* is intended to serve the interest of tourism in Piaman city. *Tabuik Piaman* performance as a social space is lowered in priority. Despite the fact that the performance still gathers different individuals, it takes place in a different space and state of mind. The gathering no longer becomes a cultural space of communal yearning as a ritual expected to reflect in the individual spirit and enthusiasm of Piaman people.

As a Piaman cultural identity, the performance event of *Tabuik Piaman* is not only organized in Piaman city. Piaman people dispersing across different cities in and out of West Sumatra carry out Tabuik performance in different times and contexts. How do Piaman people perform Tabuik outside their habitat?

Piaman people introduce Tabuik to their overseas environment through cultural reproduction mechanism. According to Abdullah (2006: 41-42), cultural reproduction process is an active process that confirms the existence of certain groups and ethnicities in social life so that it requires them to adapt to other groups from different cultures. The socio-cultural process is very important since it involves two different aspects: at the social level, dominance and subordination go on dynamically, while at individual level, resistance occurs in reproducing a cultural identity of a certain group within a certain socio-cultural context.

Piaman people in overseas environment adapt to the new environment and culture. Subsequently, together they reproduce a cultural identity originating from their own culture. Furthermore, Abdullah (2006) stated that in

the process of identity formation, migrant groups in several environments tend to be confined in the longing for the past. Despite the different expressions, the foundation of cultural reproduction is laid more upon the effort to bring the past into the present life. It's related to the historical burden borne by groups that leave their cultural habitat: burden to manifest their aspiration and affirm identity.

What they experience in Tabuik ceremony is an inerasable memory in the minds of Piaman people. Tabuik performance serves not only as an event to commemorate the death of Husain, but also a means to socialize in joyfulness that is difficult to find in foreign land. Piaman people in foreign environment gathering in Family Union of Piaman Region (Persatuan Keluarga Daerah Piaman or PKDP) eventually choose Tabuik as their own original culture to reproduce. They make adjustments by reducing the original ceremony and then give it a new name: Hoyak Tabuik. They reduce the ceremony by performing only the Hoyak Tabuik ritual. They considered Hoyak Tabuik to be a part of the entire Tabuik ceremony that enables them to mobilize many people. This preference seems to be a mutual agreement because in cities carrying out Tabuik, only Hoyak Tabuik is performed. They demonstrate Hoyak Tabuik as a form of cultural actualization and a joyful longing for the celebration of Tabuik.

The efforts done by the Piaman authority, either as an administrative region of Padang Piaman regency or now as an autonomous municipality, in one side they seem to be capable of reviving the Tabuik performance, but in another side, programs and planning are not conducted properly. The fact is that even without governmental intervention to revive and discontinue Tabuik, it can still be performed by the society supporting Tabuik. For years, Piaman people organize Tabuik performance with their own effort and financial support from Piaman people who migrate to other region. As asserted by Simatupang (2013: 275), even without the role of government, art happenings (including Tabuik performance) can still be held by stakeholders who live and work in the community with their own agenda, ways, and intentions.

Long before the independence era, Tabuik ritual has been held by the public of Piaman despite the obstacles and adjustment to the everchanging political situation. In early twentieth century for example, the Dutch government could have stopped the Tabuik ritual because it was considered as a space for protest against colonial rule. On the contrary, it could have also been supported by the Dutch because it could be taken advantage of to politically divide the people. However, the Dutch attitude can be considered a positive value for letting the ceremony be performed by the Piaman people so that in turn it would become the Piaman cultural identity.

Referring to Simatupang's ideas (2013: 275-277), there are three strategic roles that Piaman local government can serve to maintain and develop *Tabuik Piaman*, namely to facilitate, motivate, and preserve it. As a facilitator, the government is expected to create a supportive environment by providing facilities and infrastructures that enable the sustainability of the performance. This role covers the overall process of Tabuik cultural performance, starting from the preparation of cultural resources, creative production, to the marketing and consumption of the culture (Tabuik should be publicized to different audiences). As a motivator, the

government is supposed to be involved directly in the creative process of culture (the execution of rites and the making of the tabuik artifacts) and should endorse cultural acts in order to increase its dynamics and development. As a preserver, the government is expected to maintain historical records, to raise the people's historical awareness on Tabuik ritual, and to provide literature references related to Tabuik.

Of all the aforementioned three strategic roles, several aspects have been successfully organized by Pariaman authority but other aspects are more likely to be treated merely as routine programs or projects. Policies are not based on a deeper analysis and tend to address issues on the surface. It's important therefore to build mutual perspective with the society as the owner of the culture. In the construction of *rumah tabuik* (tabuik house) aimed to keep objects and records on activities and events related to Tabuik, serving as a kind of museum, or example; location and reference to the ceremony seem to be disconnected. The tabuik house is the original house of the owner or family of tabuik to serve as a place to organize the Tabuik rites. The location has been determined by public convention.

When Tabuik is shifted into tourism tabuik, internal clash occurs among Tabuik owners. The shifted schedule of ceremonial peak which is past 10 Muharram has eliminated the supposedly sacred time. Tenth of Muharram is no longer regarded a sacred day of Ashura as the referred day to celebrate the heroic death of Husain. The tourism tabuik program chooses its own schedule as the ceremonial peak of tabuik, which is in Sunday and occurs more frequently in 11, 12, 13, even 14 Muharam instead of in the 10th of Muharam. In fact, during the Tabuik performance in November 2012 several observers and tabuik family (who own tabuik according to tradition/custom) protested against the current ways of making tabuik and exercising the rituals. They wished that Tabuik ritual procession be performed as the originally sacred ceremony. Tabuik cannot be made by common ordinary folks because every part of it contains certain meaning and philosophy (Haluan.com).

Compared with other ceremony and performance of a similar foundation, namely Tabot Bengkulu; in Bengkulu the ceremonial peak is still executed on the 10th of Muharram. The Tabot culture has also endured significant changes; in fact it's also dubbed Tourism Tabot and Tabot Festival. However, the important and essential values of the ritual are still maintained. Tabot owners and Bengkulu local government carry out the changes wisely, raising local wisdom issues (Zubaedi, 2008).

We are certainly aware that Tabuik performance should not be confined merely as a means to maintain the legacy of the past. Alteration and modification are needed to boost its attractiveness. Several things have been done: tabuik artifacts are employed as a means for tabuik-making artists to express their creativity; while several parts of the rite have been rearranged to highlight sacredness. However, parts of the rites potentially creating a dramatic performance to stun the audience are not sufficiently organized as an interesting performance. The Hoyak Tabuik attraction should be restored in the ceremonial peak in order to present movements of *hoyak* (shaking), spinning, laying, stomping, running while shouldering tabuik, and pushing between both supporters of tabuik; all developed along the spirit of *gandang tasa* percussion.

Conclusion

Piaman Tabuik performance has as a matter of fact become the identity of the people and city of Pariaman. To this day not a single region in West Sumatra claims *Tabuik Piaman* as belonging to them. However, a slightly ironic perspective is presented here that the reinforcement of *Tabuik Piaman* as Pariaman cultural identity seemed baseless and unrelated to the concept of self-esteem restoration. *Tabuik Piaman* is embraced as the identity of Pariaman city and society in general as if it happens merely because of its historical existence that traces a long way back before the self-esteem restoration concept. In my opinion, the notion of self-esteem restoration is an important politico-cultural momentum in West Sumatra and Pariaman because the state of mind of West Sumatrans at that time was so vulnerable. *Tabuik Piaman* is one of happenings that benefit from the concept of self-esteem restoration.

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