

PERSIAN ECHOES IN THE ARCHIPELAGO: *Exploring Shi'a Aesthetics and Ritual Memory in Indonesian Islam*

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KEYWORD	ABSTRACT
Tabuik, Karbala, Ritual, Indonesian Islam,	<p>This article examines the presence of Persian Shi'a ritual aesthetics in Indonesian Islam through a case study of two Muharram commemorations: the Tabuik festival in Pariaman, West Sumatra, and the Tabok ritual in Palembang, South Sumatra. Though practiced within predominantly Sunni communities, these rituals retain symbolic, theatrical, and affective elements historically associated with Shi'a mourning traditions in the Persianate world. Drawing on theories of cultural memory (Assmann, Connerton), ritual aesthetics (Chelkowski, Aghaie, Hyder), and Persianate cosmopolitanism (Pollock, Green, Ahmed), the article argues that such practices are not aberrations but culturally adapted expressions of a broader Islamic memory. By tracing the localized afterlives of Karbala in Indonesia, this study reveals the plural genealogies of Islamic devotion in the archipelago. It contributes to a deeper understanding of Islam's transregional aesthetic and emotional vocabularies.</p>

INTRODUCTION

Throughout Southeast Asia, the historical formation of Islam has been shaped not only by Arab traders and Sufi mystics from India but also by less frequently acknowledged Persian influences (Malik, 2008). In Indonesia, the Persian strand of Islamic culture—particularly that of Shi'a origin—has left subtle yet profound imprints on local religious expressions and public rituals. At the same time, the dominant narrative of Indonesian Islam emphasizes Sunni orthodoxy, especially of the Shāfi'ī school, a layered cultural memory points toward Shi'ite symbolic practices and aesthetic forms, transmitted through centuries of transregional contact (Wormser, 2014).

Two notable examples of this phenomenon are the *Tabuik* festival in Pariaman, West Sumatra, and the *Tabok* ritual in Palembang, South Sumatra. Both are locally embedded commemorations of the martyrdom of Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī at Karbala—an event central to Shi'a piety—and are observed annually on the 10th of Muḥarram (*'Āshūrā'*). Despite being situated within communities that overwhelmingly identify as Sunni, these rituals bear unmistakable traces of Shi'a devotional memory and Persian ritual aesthetics, suggesting a historical layering of Islamic expressions shaped by transregional interactions across the Indian Ocean.

For instance, the *Tabuik* procession in Pariaman involves the construction of towering, elaborately decorated effigies—representing the *buraq* or symbolic coffin of Ḥusayn—which are paraded through the city before being ceremonially cast into the sea. This practice mirrors the *ta'ziya*

traditions of Iran and India, in which passion plays and funeral processions dramatize the Karbala tragedy and serve as vehicles of communal mourning and spiritual catharsis (Coleman et al., 1997; Pinault, 2016). In Palembang, the *Tabok* ritual similarly features processions, rhythmic lamentations, and ritual drumming (*dohol*), all echo the performative and sonic elements of Persianate Muharram rites (Cole, 2002).

While these rituals have undergone localization processes—often framed within local adat, Islamic piety, and community identity—they retain the core symbolic grammar of Shi'a commemorative practice. Elements such as public weeping, symbolic martyrdom, and processional drama constitute what Hobsbawm (1983) would term “invented traditions,” wherein older ritual forms are adapted to new contexts yet retain a sense of historical continuity and emotional resonance. Anthropologically, these practices can also be read as “ritual palimpsests,” in which traces of earlier religious meanings are inscribed beneath layers of contemporary local interpretation (Masquelier et al., 1997).

The survival and adaptation of these rituals point to a complex religio-cultural entanglement between Persian Shi'a Islam and localized expressions of devotion in the Indonesian archipelago. Far from being residual curiosities, *Tabuik* and *Tabok* represent enduring cultural scripts through which communities articulate collective memory, moral struggle, and spiritual solidarity with the martyrdom of Ḥusayn—albeit through lenses and idioms that resonate with their own social and theological sensibilities.

Moreover, the persistent enactment of these rituals challenges the often rigid Sunni-Shi'a binaries imposed by later orthodoxy. Their presence within nominally Sunni societies demonstrates the fluidity of sectarian boundaries in pre-modern Islam. It highlights how transregional religious flows—facilitated by traders, Sufi orders, and diasporic communities—have shaped the spiritual landscape of Southeast Asia in ways that resist easy categorization (Green, 2012b).

The study of Persian cultural influence on Indonesian Islam has historically remained on the margins of Southeast Asian Islamic historiography, often subsumed under broader metanarratives such as Arabisation, Indianisation, or the process of *pribumisasi Islam*—the indigenization of Islam in local cultural contexts (Al-Attas, 1968; Azra, 2022). These dominant paradigms have tended to foreground the role of Hadrami Arabs, Gujarati traders, or localized syncretic practices in shaping the contours of Islam in the archipelago, thereby relegating Persian contributions—particularly those mediated through Shi'a rituals, aesthetics, and cosmologies—to a footnote in the region's religious history.

This marginalization may be partly attributed to the ideological dominance of Sunni orthodoxy in Indonesia, which has historically viewed Shi'a Islam with suspicion, and to the scarcity of extant written records that explicitly identify Persian networks in early Indonesian Islam. Nevertheless, emerging scholarship in Islamic cultural studies and transregional history has begun challenging this lacuna by emphasizing the plurality of Islamic formations and the deep interconnectivity of the Indian Ocean littoral (Green, 2012a; Ho, 2002). These new approaches foreground what Nile Green (2012) terms “Islamic cosmopolitanisms”—plural, mobile, and mediated by commerce, migration, and mysticism, rather than by centralized religious authority or doctrinal homogeneity.

Within this theoretical framework, Persianate Islam is understood not simply as a sectarian or ethnic category, but as a cultural formation that spans languages (Persian, Urdu, Malay), artistic traditions (calligraphy, architecture, poetry), and ritual practices (mourning dramas, devotional music, saint veneration). In this sense, the Persian imprint on Southeast Asian Islam is best traced not through confessional affiliations alone, but through what Shahab Ahmed (2015) might call “the Sufi-Bureaucratic-Poetic” complex of pre-modern Islamic civilization.

This article thus seeks to reevaluate the legacies of Persian contact in the Indonesian

archipelago, particularly through the lens of Shi'a aesthetics and ritual memory. By examining performative commemorations such as *Tabuik* in Pariaman and *Tabok* in Palembang, we contend that Persian-derived symbolic forms—despite existing within Sunni-majority societies—have persisted as ritual palimpsests that mediate collective memory, emotional expression, and local Islamic identity. These commemorations reveal the resilience of Persian religious idioms and the permeability of sectarian boundaries in the region's Islamic past (Mason, 2016; Rahma et al., 2021).

This study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that calls for decentering Middle Eastern paradigms in Islamic studies and instead foregrounding the Indian Ocean as a space of fluid religious exchange, negotiated authority, and hybrid devotional practices (Godfray et al., 2010). It further suggests that Southeast Asia's Islamic heritage cannot be adequately understood without attending to the aesthetic, ritual, and emotional vocabularies transmitted through Persianate networks—networks that have long shaped the affective landscapes of Muslim societies across the archipelago (Ishii, 2018).

By focusing on the performative and symbolic dimensions of *Tabuik* and *Tabok*, the article aims to illuminate how historical narratives of Karbala have been vernacularized in the Indonesian archipelago. It also seeks to contribute to the broader field of Islamic studies by challenging the monolithic representations of Southeast Asian Islam and demonstrating the heterogeneity of devotional cultures shaped by transregional flows.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To uncover the deeper layers of meaning within *Tabuik* and *Tabok*, this study draws on three interrelated theoretical frameworks: (1) cultural memory and ritual performance, (2) Shi'a aesthetic theory, and (3) Persianate cosmopolitanism. These frameworks help illuminate how ritualized practices from the Persian Shi'a world have been transformed, localized, and sustained within predominantly Sunni Southeast Asian societies.

Ritual and Cultural Memory

The foundational theories of Jan Assmann (Assmann, 2011) and (Wacquant et al., 1991) on *cultural memory* offer crucial insight into how rituals such as *Tabuik* in Pariaman and *Tabok* in Palembang serve as more than mere commemorations—they are embodied, performative acts of *remembrance* that sustain and reconfigure collective identities. Assmann distinguishes between *communicative memory*, which is fluid and based on everyday interpersonal interactions, and *cultural memory*, which is stabilized through ritualized, symbolic forms preserved over generations. In this framework, rituals become vehicles of deep memory, enabling communities to preserve connections to historical events far removed from their immediate contexts.

Within this model, *Tabuik* and *Tabok* function as sites of *ritual mnemonics*, encoding the memory of Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī's martyrdom at Karbala into a performative grammar of drums, effigies, laments, and processions. These are not neutral gestures; they are cultural technologies of transmission. As Paul Connerton emphasizes, "*we remember in our bodies*" (Connerton, 2006), and the act of carrying the *tabuik*, the collective chanting, and the public mourning constitutes a kind of *corporeal archive*—a non-textual but deeply affective system of knowledge and memory. Even as doctrinal affiliation with Shi'ism may fade or be absent, the *form* and *feeling* of remembrance persist, shaping local Islamic subjectivities and their relation to historical pain and justice.

Moreover, these rituals also function as a form of *mnemohistory*, in Reinhart Koselleck's sense, whereby the past is not merely preserved but reinterpreted according to the needs and anxieties of the present (Carr et al., 1987). The memory of Karbala is thus not only about a 7th-century tragedy but also a symbolic template through which communities express collective grief, moral aspiration,

and even political resistance. In this sense, *Tabuik* and *Tabok* become more than commemorations—they are performative acts that re-inscribe ethical memory within localized Islamic cosmologies, reaffirming bonds of community while simultaneously invoking translocal Islamic imaginaries shaped by the Persianate world (Koselleck, 2002).

In this view, ritual is not a passive reproduction of the past, but an active site where memory is shaped, contested, and transmitted across generations. *Tabuik* and *Tabok* may thus be interpreted as *ritual mnemonics*, transmitting Shi'a cosmologies through aesthetic forms—drums, processions, laments, effigies—without necessitating doctrinal alignment with Shi'ism.

Shi'a Aesthetics and the Politics of Mourning

To analyze the *aesthetic grammar* of the *Tabuik* and *Tabok* rituals, this study draws upon critical insights from scholars such as Peter Chelkowski (2022), Kamran Scot Aghaie (Aghaie, 2004), and Hyder (2011), whose works interrogate the affective, symbolic, and political registers of *Shi'a ritual mourning* ('azā'). These scholars underscore that rituals commemorating the martyrdom of Ḥusayn are theological or devotional and *deeply aesthetic*, employing material forms, sonic landscapes, choreographed movements, and spatial configurations to invoke affect, cultivate memory, and shape subjectivity. As such, the rituals engage multiple sensory domains—sight, sound, touch, and even smell—to create immersive and emotionally charged experiences that reinforce communal identity and ethical commitments.

Peter Chelkowski's foundational work emphasizes the *theatricality* of Ta'ziyeh and other Shi'a mourning practices in Iran, showing how these performances dramatize the suffering of Karbala as a "sacred tragedy" that operates at the intersection of art, memory, and theology. This performative tradition, with its elaborate use of costumes, props, and processional rhythms, resonates strongly with the *symbolic dramatization* found in *Tabuik* and *Tabok*—particularly the construction of elaborate effigies (*tabuik/tabut*), public lamentations, and the ritual immersion of these structures into rivers or seas. These acts function as aestheticized re-enactments of martyrdom and redemption, giving form to grief while embedding ethical ideals such as justice, sacrifice, and resistance.

Kamran Scot Aghaie and Syed Akbar Hyder expand this aesthetic analysis by foregrounding the *political semiotics* of mourning. For them, Shi'a rituals operate as a moral language of dissent, where expressions of sorrow become encoded critiques of injustice, oppression, and historical trauma. In this light, rituals such as *Tabuik* and *Tabok* can be interpreted as localized commemorations and *aesthetic protests*—echoes of a Persianate cosmology in which martyrdom is valorized as an act of defiance against tyranny. While these Indonesian rituals are now embedded within predominantly Sunni contexts, the *aesthetic DNA* of Shi'a practice persists, revealing how memory, mourning, and resistance can be transmitted through form and feeling—even across doctrinal divides and geographical distances.

In this light, *Tabuik* and *Tabok* are *aesthetic translations* of Shi'a devotional forms. While they have been "Sunni-fied" or culturally neutralized in their local contexts, the underlying structure of grief, symbolic justice, and resistance remains. These rituals echo Aghaie's call "the Karbala paradigm"—a model in which martyrdom is sacralized and emulated across time and space.

The Persianate Cosmopolis

To frame the presence of Persian cultural forms in Indonesia, this article engages the conceptual apparatus of the *Persianate world* or *Persian cosmopolis*, as theorized by Sheldon Pollock (2006), Nile Green (2012b), and Shahab Ahmed (2015). This framework allows us to understand Persianate influence not simply in terms of ethnic or national dissemination, but as a *civilizational formation*—a transregional cultural field structured by shared aesthetic sensibilities, epistemologies, and religious imaginaries, with Persian as its lingua franca. The "Persian cosmopolis," in Pollock's articulation, refers to a vast zone of textual, artistic, and ethical exchange where Persianate norms

transcended linguistic and ethnic boundaries, becoming embedded in local idioms and institutions throughout the Muslim world.

In this context, *Persianate Islam* does not denote a homogenizing force but rather a plural and generative aesthetic-political horizon that traveled through circuits of Sufi tariqas, commercial routes, intellectual patronage, and migration. Nile Green (2012) highlights how Persian, as a language of power and piety, facilitated the movement of ideas and practices from Iran through India and Southeast Asia, especially in port cities and Islamic sultanates open to transregional currents. These processes produced a "maritime Persianate sphere," within which Indonesia—particularly Sumatra—was a vital node. The arrival of Persian-speaking scholars, traders, and Sufi saints not only introduced new religious idioms but also helped localize Karbala-centered memory through ritual and poetry, as seen in the affective and performative contours of the *Tabuik* and *Tabok* rituals.

Shahab Ahmed (2015) further broadens the lens by theorizing Islam as a *Balkans-to-Bengal complex*, in which Persianate ethics, aesthetics, and metaphysics shaped what he calls the *pre-modern Islamic ecumene*. In his view, Persianate Islam was not an "alternative" to Arab-Islamic orthodoxy but a dominant and deeply intellectual tradition that expressed itself through poetics, Sufism, philosophy, and ritual, particularly around themes of divine love, martyrdom, and justice. Within this configuration, mourning for Ḥusayn becomes not merely a doctrinal marker of Shi'ism but a *civilizational aesthetic* carried into diverse Sunni-majority contexts such as Indonesia. The ritual memory of Karbala—encoded through forms like *Tabuik* and *Tabok*—therefore indexes a layered genealogy of cultural transmission in which the Persianate continues reverberating across linguistic and sectarian lines.

Rather than viewing Persian influence solely through the lens of sectarianism (i.e., Shi'a-Sunni divisions), this study treats the Persianate as a cultural matrix—a repertoire of motifs, symbols, and styles—that was highly mobile and adaptable. In this way, rituals like *Tabuik* and *Tabok* can be read as Persianate inheritances mediated through Sufi networks and Indian Ocean diasporas, which were then reframed within local Islamic cosmologies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in the methodologies of cultural anthropology, religious studies, and performance theory (Anggito & Johan Setiawan, 2018; Arikunto, 2016). Given the focus on ritual practices and their embedded aesthetic, historical, and affective meanings, the research is anchored in textual analysis, comparative cultural hermeneutics, and historical contextualization. The central aim is not merely to describe the rituals of *Tabuik* in Pariaman and *Tabok* in Palembang, but to decode their symbolic architecture, trace their genealogies, and interpret their role in articulating communal memory and transregional Islamic identities.

Primary data were drawn from ethnographic reports and archival materials. They documented visual representations of the rituals, including photographs, video footage, and festival descriptions available through local cultural offices and digital repositories. This is complemented by a close reading of relevant secondary literature—particularly scholarly works on Persianate Islam, Shi'a mourning traditions, and Southeast Asian Islam. Through intertextual reading across different disciplines, the study seeks to position the Indonesian rituals within a broader Persianate performative continuum that spans Iran, India, and the maritime Muslim world.

The analysis is also informed by critical theory of cultural memory (Assmann, Connerton), ritual aesthetics (Chelkowski, Aghaie, Hyder), and transregional Islamic studies (Pollock, Green, Ahmed). These frameworks allow for a diachronic and synchronic interpretive methodology, attuned to historical transformations across centuries and the contemporaneous rearticulations of

meaning in local Sunni-majority contexts. Particular attention is given to the *embodied and affective dimensions* of the rituals—how the performance of grief, the crafting of effigies, and the staging of processions serve as sites of memory transmission and identity negotiation.

Given the lack of first-hand fieldwork, the study acknowledges its limitation in capturing the full phenomenological richness of the rituals as lived experiences. However, the approach remains critically grounded in thick description and context-sensitive analysis, drawing upon multi-layered sources to reconstruct the semiotics and sociopolitical implications of the rituals. This methodological design aims to offer a culturally nuanced and historically situated reading of the ways Persianate Islamic memory endures and transforms in the Indonesian archipelago (Wang, 2021).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Performing Karbala in the Malay World: *Tabuik* and *Tabok* as Ritual Memory

The annual commemorations of *Tabuik* in Pariaman and *Tabok* in Palembang represent two of the most enduring public rituals of ‘Āshūrā’ in the Indonesian archipelago. Though both practices have been historically performed by Sunni-majority communities, their symbolic architecture—effigies, processions, laments, and dramatic reenactments—evokes the memory politics of Shi’a Islam, particularly the martyrdom of Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī at Karbala in 680 CE. As such, these rituals function as complex sites of cultural memory, wherein local Muslim communities articulate collective grief, moral ideals, and historical identity through embodied performance (Haroon, 2021; Mottahedeh, 2005).

Drawing upon Jan Assmann's (2011) concept of *cultural memory* and Paul Connerton's (1989) idea of *habitual memory*, the ritualization of Karbala in these regions can be understood as a form of "reiterative performance"—acts that not only recall the past but re-inscribe its significance into communal consciousness. In both Pariaman and Palembang, the narratives of Karbala are not transmitted through formal theology or textual education, but through the affective immediacy of public spectacle: the raising of the *tabuik* or *tabok* effigy (symbolizing Ḥusayn's bier or the Buraq), the mournful chants and processions (*arak-arakan*), and the dramatic climax of sea or river disposal—actions that mark both a sacrificial offering and ritual closure (Rinaldo, 2021).

In Pariaman, the *Tabuik* festival—believed to have been introduced by Indian Shi’a sepoys from the British army in the early 19th century—has undergone a transformation from ritual mourning to a cultural spectacle, now supported by the local government as part of West Sumatra's tourism agenda (Feener & Sevea, 2009; Riddell, 2001). Despite its secularization, the festival retains structural and symbolic features that resonate with *ta’ziya* theater traditions of Iran and South Asia: a bifurcated procession (*Tabuik Pasa* and *Tabuik Subarang*), the use of narrative dramatization (*kisah Karbala*), and embodied grief. In this way, *Tabuik* preserves not just an image of Karbala, but a rhythm of mourning encoded in communal time (Mason, 2016).

Similarly, *Tabok* in Palembang, though less commercialized, continues to function as a spiritual commemoration. Performed by specific traditionalist Muslim communities in South Sumatra, the ritual includes the crafting of a coffin-like effigy, accompanied by *ratapan* (dirges), storytelling, and the burning or releasing of the effigy into the river. Oral histories collected by local researchers (Hasan, 2017) suggest that the practice once involved recitations of the *kisah Ḥusayn*, suggesting a past in which ritual storytelling played a catechetical role in transmitting the ethos of Karbala. Over time, theological Shi’ism may have receded, but the *emotive structure of mourning* remains.

What is striking in both cases is the "sectarian deactivation" of the rituals—i.e., the process by which a Shi’a-centered narrative is stripped of doctrinal markers while retaining its emotive and moral force (Greeley, 2022). Karbala becomes a universalized Muslim grief, not the monopoly of Shi’ism. In this sense,

Tabuik and *Tabok* exemplify what Kamran Aghaie (2004) calls the "malleability of Shi'a symbols" across Islamic cultures. The memory of Ḥusayn survives as a theological tenet and a moral paradigm—valorizing justice, sacrifice, and defiance against tyranny.

In sum, the *performative memory* embedded in *Tabuik* and *Tabok* speaks to a larger pattern of how Karbala has been localized and ritualized beyond its doctrinal origins. These rituals are not "deviations" or mere folklore, but living vessels of Islamic historical imagination—articulated in the aesthetic and emotional vocabulary of the Malay world.

Aesthetics of Mourning: Traces of Persianate Shi'a Expression

The visual and performative grammar of *Tabuik* and *Tabok* rituals reveals unmistakable resonances with the Persianate aesthetic of 'azā', or ritual mourning, rooted in Shi'a devotional culture. As Peter Chelkowski (Chelkowski, 2022) notes in his landmark work *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, Shi'a mourning is not merely a doctrinal expression, but an embodied, multi-sensory language, where sound, space, objects, and movement converge to produce a powerful affective and communal experience. These same modalities are visible in Indonesian commemorations of Karbala, albeit in locally adapted forms.

The *tabuik/tabok* effigy—a towering, ornately decorated structure believed to symbolize either the coffin of Ḥusayn or the Buraq that carried his soul to heaven—functions as both icon and carrier of meaning. In the context of Persian Shi'ism, this corresponds to the practice of *nakhl gardānī* in Iran or *ta'ziya* stage props in South Asia, which serve as ritualized objects of mourning and focal points for collective grief (Aghaie, 2005; Hyder, 2006). The aesthetic form of these effigies—elaborate wings, equine imagery, and canopy structures—suggests both celestial ascent and martyrial dignity, reflecting the Shi'a visual code of sanctified suffering.

In performance, these rituals mobilize what Syed Akbar Hyder (2006) calls a "poetics of lament"—a repertoire of oral chants, dirges (*ratapan*), and rhythmic recitations that evoke sorrow, resistance, and piety. Although Indonesian versions may not contain the classical *marsiya* poetry of Urdu or the formalized *nawha* chants of Iran, the emotional cadence and communal weeping (*tangisan massal*) during the ceremonies reflect an analogous "theater of affect"—one that binds bodies, space, and memory through shared grief. In *Tabuik* and *Tabok*, women often take an active role in mourning, much like in Iranian *rowzeh-khāni* gatherings, reinforcing the gendered dimensions of Shi'a ritual mourning (Deeb, 2006).

Crucially, these rituals also operate as a spatial aesthetics, transforming streets, riversides, or village squares into liminal zones where the sacred past is momentarily made present. The processions (*arak-arakan*) mirror the *taziya* parades of Lucknow or Isfahan, in which public space becomes the stage for moral dramatization. Lowering the effigy into the sea or river may mark an ending. However, symbolically, it enacts the cyclic nature of memory—a ritual cleansing and recommitment to the values embodied by Ḥusayn.

Furthermore, this aesthetic is not politically neutral. Following Aghaie (2005) and Chelkowski (1979), we understand that Shi'a mourning has historically served as a language of dissent, expressing protest against injustice, tyranny, or neglect. While such overt political meanings may have been muted or recontextualized in the Indonesian context, the symbolic substructure remains. The narrative of Karbala—an unjust ruler silencing a moral voice—still resonates in societies marked by power imbalances, historical wounds, or spiritual longing.

Thus, the aesthetic features of *Tabuik* and *Tabok*—their material culture, sonic landscape, and performative spatiality—are not mere decorations or cultural vestiges. They represent a localized syntax of the Persianate Shi'a imaginary, recoded within the lexicon of Malay Islam. In their continued performance, we glimpse a layered aesthetic that binds Indonesia to the larger Islamic ecumene, not only through creed, but through shared structures of feeling and remembrance.

The Persian Cosmopolis and the Localization of Shi'a Memory in Indonesia

Understanding the presence of Persian Shi'a ritual elements in Indonesia requires engagement with the broader framework of the *Persianate cosmopolis*, a concept articulated by Sheldon Pollock (2006), expanded upon by Nile Green (2012), and reimagined by Shahab Ahmed (2016). Far from being geographically bounded, the Persianate world refers to an expansive civilizational sphere in which Persian language, aesthetics, ethics, and epistemologies were not only influential but also actively rearticulated across diverse Muslim societies—from Anatolia to Bengal, from the Iranian plateau to the Malay world.

This diffusion was never a matter of one-way transmission. Instead, as Green (2012) emphasizes, it involved a polycentric circulation of ideas, texts, practices, and people, mediated by Sufi orders, merchant networks, scholars, poets, and artisans. In the Indonesian archipelago, Persian cultural forms entered not solely through direct Iranian contact, but via South Asian intermediaries, mainly from Gujarat and Coromandel, where Shi'a presence and Persianate culture had long flourished. The widespread adoption of *taṣawwuf* (Sufism), Persian literary forms (e.g., *ghazal*, *mathnawī*), and ritual vocabulary across the archipelago is a testimony to this cosmopolitan intimacy (Smith, 2014).

For instance, the *Tabuik* festival in Pariaman is widely believed to have been introduced by Indian Muslim soldiers and laborers (often of Shi'a background) who were brought to the region by the Dutch colonial military in the 19th century. However, the *ritual's symbolic grammar* and performative resonance suggest a much older and more diffuse cultural memory—one not reducible to colonial migrations. The swift integration of *Tabuik* into the religious life of the Minangkabau, a staunchly Sunni community, indicates the pliability of local Islam and its capacity to accommodate and transform transregional symbols into culturally meaningful forms.

Similarly, the *Tabok* ritual in Palembang—though smaller in scale and less widely publicized—demonstrates the persistence of Shi'a-inflected ritual vocabulary in urban centers historically shaped by global trade, Sufi learning, and complex sectarian dynamics. Palembang's role as a regional Islamic hub in the 17th–19th centuries brought it into contact with Yemeni, Indian, and Persian networks. The existence of tombs, manuscripts, and oral traditions in the region that retain Persianate markers reinforces the argument that such rituals are not marginal curiosities but residues of a larger historical formation.

However, this process is also one of creative localization. The Karbala narrative in Indonesia is not always framed within explicitly Shi'a theological discourse. Instead, it is metabolized through the ethical grammar of Sunni Sufism, focusing on values such as *sabar* (patience), *ikhlas* (sincerity), and *perjuangan melawan kezaliman* (struggle against injustice). In many cases, Ḥusayn is revered not as an Imām in the Shi'a sense, but as an *awliya* ' or spiritual exemplar—consistent with the way saints and martyrs are remembered in the Malay Islamic cosmology (Feener, 2019).

This hybridization reflects what Shahab Ahmed (2016) terms the "Balkh-to-Banda Sea" continuum, wherein Islamic expressions are plural, paradoxical, and richly layered. The Indonesian adaptation of Persianate rituals thus exemplifies Islam's capacity for semantic elasticity, where ritual, memory, and aesthetics move beyond sectarian categories. Far from being relics of an alien theology, these rituals are living archives of the region's historical intimacy with the Persianate ecumene.

In this context, *Tabuik* and *Tabok* do not simply commemorate a distant event; they recite a past that still breathes—a past inscribed in bodies, streets, tears, and seas. They remind us that Indonesia's Islamic identity, often cast in narrow Sunni frameworks, is woven from plural genealogies, where echoes of Karbala still resound—subtly, beautifully, persistently.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated that rituals such as *Tabuik* in Pariaman and *Tabok* in Palembang are not merely local commemorations, but deeply embedded performative acts of cultural memory that link Indonesian Islam to the wider Persianate cosmopolis. Despite occurring within predominantly Sunni contexts, these rituals retain affective and aesthetic traces of Shi'a devotional practices, particularly those associated with mourning Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī at Karbala.

This study has shown that these commemorations function as sites where history, emotion, and identity converge by employing theoretical frameworks on cultural memory, Shi'a ritual aesthetics, and the Persianate world. They preserve Karbala's moral and political ethos while creatively adapting it to local Islamic cosmologies, especially those shaped by Sufism and vernacular ethics. Far from being historical anomalies or remnants of marginal sects, these rituals reflect the capacity of Islam in Southeast Asia to absorb, localize, and rearticulate transregional traditions.

Ultimately, this analysis challenges rigid sectarian framings of Islamic history in Indonesia. It urges a rethinking of religious identity not as fixed doctrinal boundaries, but as fluid cultural formations shaped by centuries of mobility, translation, and shared memory. The echoes of Persia in the Indonesian archipelago remind us that Islamic piety in Southeast Asia has always been global, layered, and generative.

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