

Tulak Bala as an Outbreak Prevention Within Sharia-based Community

(The Practice and Views)

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Abstract—The ritual of *Tulak Bala* (warding off calamities) has been carried out by Acehnese people from generation to generation to prevent bad lucks or disasters upon their life. The objective of this qualitative study is to discover the practice as the existence of COVID-19 considered one of the disasters. By combining library and field research, the data for this study were retrieved by applying in-depth interviews. The data analysis technique was accomplished by reducing, displaying and drawing conclusion of the data. *Tulak Bala* ritual is conducted in two ways. First, Acehnese people organize the ritual annually at the end of the second month in Islamic calendar, Safar, called as *Rabu Habeh* or *Mano Safa* (taking bath in a river of sea). Second, they apply the rituals when certain disasters occur, which in this case, COVID-19, having risk to their life. Its practical process is varied, namely having prayers and sending feast in mosques or houses, even having torch parade around the village. Besides, special amulets are sometimes hung on the back of house, on the roof and even in every corner of the house to avert the disease. The societal responses evidently agreed to apply the ritual, although many refused to believe *Tulak Bala* by reasoning that all the diseases are from Allah. They argued that focusing to increase faith in praying while keeping precautions is the only way to keep away the disease.

Keywords—*tulak bala* in Aceh, historical and societal views on outbreaks, cultural traditions, preventions of pandemic, COVID-19 in Aceh

I. BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Practiced by religious communities, a ritual commonly involves a series of word, actions of each believer by using some objects, equipment and tools in certain places, times and dress codes. It is the core of the social identity of all

communities [1]. The purpose of doing certain ritual is to gain blessing and sustenance from work, as being practiced in ritual for *tulak bala*. This practice is adjusted due to the changes and cycle of life happened in human life like natality [2], circumcision [3], marriage [4], death [5], and other special events [6].

Tulak bala is a defense upon the human and natural disasters. It is performed through traditional medication containing spiritual values and turning down bad omens occurred in one area. Indonesian people who are known having many tribes certainly practice distinguished ways of doing the cultural practices related to the religious rituals including the practice of *tulak bala* [7]. However, its frequent ritual done by certain Muslims is clearly diverse, which indeed has the binding rules based on Quran and hadith.

In this case, Acehnese people are known to be very pious in following the religious rituals, even become fanatic upon its teaching. That is because the Islamic teaching has been in the blood and heart of Acehnese. However, not all Acehnese people want to do the true Islamic teaching and even there are many of them who do not understand the truth of Islamic teaching. Nevertheless, they are very sensitive toward the influence coming from another credence, either internally or externally. If one teaching is against the order of Quran and hadith, so they will directly fight against that teaching since it cannot be accepted.

From many outbreaks afflicting human, one of them is what is being happened, COVID-19 that has caused countless casualties all over the world. This phenomenon becomes the hottest topic in the beginning of 2020 that frightened many people, not to mention Acehnese people. The virus has caused

hundreds of deaths in many countries in the last few months. Many means and efforts are done to stop the virus to cause further casualties in many ways.

Acehnese people named this Corona virus as *tha'un* (disaster). In the past, one of its examples was cholera, which killed numerous Acehnese people, particularly those who resided in the lower areas having no sources of clean water [8]. In fact, this phenomenon is still happening until today in the middle of society in Aceh.

In a current situation, Acehnese people need to be aware of the health protocol and keep maintaining their obedience toward Allah. This phenomenon can be happened in various responses and behavioral patterns of society besides recitating the prayers and doing the ritual of *tulak bala* to prevent the disease with many ways. Based on the past tradition, to eliminate the disease of *tha'un*, Acehnese people held several forms of ritual containing the spiritual values nearby the river, unoccupied land, houses, mosques, religious rooms, and even at the gate of village. The procession of such ritual was done with full of sincerity without ignoring the Sharia values.

COVID-19 that is now being contagious is coming from similar form to the previously existed diseases, but in another name. However, the level of its transmission is almost the same and can be very dangerous toward humans. During 1990s, there symptoms had been observed happened in many European countries. The pandemic also once came to the areas in Indonesian, including Aceh. Even, the history recorded that many disasters frequently took place in Aceh in various forms. The past reality of Acehnese people that had experienced the series of disasters and threats, now some of the effects could be felt as the virus outbreak that is threatening humans' life [9]. Hence, one new phenomenon has the correlation with other events happened in the past.

This study highlights *tulak bala* as a customed ritual to prevent bad luck based on the views of Sharia-based community in Aceh, Indonesia. It aims to grasp wider knowledge that such ritual has its backgrounds to be conducted without breaking the current norms – specifically Sharia laws, in fact, many individuals still argue its effectivity. In addition, this study will suggest how the community reacts and handles on a spreadable outbreak occurred, which may enrich the insight of outbreak preventions in different contexts and locations.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study applied an analysis descriptive approach by integrating a field study. The data were retrieved through in-depth interviews with 18 informants selected based on their backgrounds – education, religion, government, and community. In details, there were 17 males and 1 female (aged 36 to 60) who got interviewed each from June 16 to 23, 2020. Their domiciles are from five regions of Aceh – Banda Aceh City, Aceh Besar Regency, Aceh Timur Regency, Aceh Selatan Regency, and Pidie Regency. The technique of analysis data used was the analysis interactive model proposed by Miles

and Huberman [10] encompassing data reduction, data display and conclusion draw.

III. RESULTS

A. *Tulak Bala as A Ritual Based on Cultural Approach*

Commonly, Acehnese people has frequently conducted the practice of *tulak bala* once a year, even though there is no disaster happened, but the ritual itself was continuously run as the protector from the disaster. The ritual should be set according to the date, day and month of the procession. The agreement and discussion should be firstly done to decide the time of the ceremony. It is usually held in the evening because people do not have any activity to do, so all people could attend during the nightly procession. Junaidi (male, 53, public figure) proposed that the procession is usually held after dusk prayer and in the morning. In addition, mentioned by Jasman (male, 40, village chief), the place of procession of the ritual is divided into two, namely at house and at the village territorial border. The house becomes the main venue for the procession, while the borderline is selected based on some amulets installed. During the installation of the amulet for protection, there would be no recitation of prayer as usually done by the ancestors in the past since it is the same as in the house. Nevertheless, the common procession of *tulak bala* is conducted on every February 15. Jasman also mentioned that there was no definite explanation about why the procession should be done on that time. He added that this was done as the legacy of the ancestors, and should be “obligated” every year, if it is not; it would become the debt that would cause the disaster. In addition, if the time is overrun, it is believed that it will endanger people from the evil spirit, to be possessed by the devils, natural disaster, and so on [11].

There are several practices of *tulak bala* within Aceh Province. Idrus (male, 50, village chief) revealed one in Southwest Aceh Regency that the locals use limes and the help of a shaman. The limes are cut, which have been spelled by the shaman. The spell, however, is whispered resembling the sentence *basmalah* (in the name of Allah). In the evening, the water from the limes is then washed upon the face, hands and legs of family members, who want to prevent any bad luck, including the spread of disease like COVID-19. The limewater is also splashed on every wall of the house followed by the installation of amulets around the door ventilation done during the day. The lime is believed to have good effects to eliminate the bad luck in every people, such as certain sickness, unstoppable problems, and other calamities. Moreover, all of this is executed to protect the owner of the house. Besides, the amulet hanged is the special wood called *kayu ibu-ibu*. According to a shaman, Abdurrahman (male, 55) is chosen since it is believed as the oldest wood compared to others. In addition, Isti (female, 35, village elder) reveals that chanting prayers either reading individually or collectively is a must since it may push away distresses. According to her, *mujarabah*, an old manuscript written by unknown *ulama*, describes *tha'un* and it is commonly chanted during the ritual.

Bismillah, bismillahi sya'nil 'adhiimil burhaanusy syaddis sulthaani kullu yaumin huwa di sya'nin maasya Allahu, kaana wamaa lam ya'lam yaa sya'lam yaqul laa haula walaa quwwata illah billah. Allahumma inni a'uzubika minath tha'uni waththa'uuni wamautil fuhyiati min humumil wabaai wamin juhdiil balaai wasuil qadhaai wadarkisy syiqaai wasyamatatil a'daai yaa zaljalaali walikraam [12].

The meaning: In the name of Allah who is all compassionate and most merciful. In the name of Allah who is great / powerful, strong evidence has been obtained by the sultan. That every day he feels / sees evidence of the greatness of Allah, that he (the sultan) and anyone who does not know, why not (*yaa sya'lam*) just say there is no power and strength except Allah who is Great / powerful / has power. O Allah keep me away from *tha'un* disease and *tha'un*-like epidemics and death because of the plague and fear / panic because of the plague and keep me away from the difficulties of the plague, and the difficulties of affairs / due to disease, misery and screams that occur, O the Most Owner of glory and the Most Owner of Honor.

Interestingly, eating onion in South Aceh Regency also becomes the antidote of the outbreak as it gives the warmth, reduces asthma and breaks *balgham* (slimes inside the blood vessels). Here the onions are sometimes mixed with honey, as reflected in the words of Prophet Muhammad, "*iza dakhaltum baldatan fakhiftum wabaaha fa'alaikum bibashlihaa*" (when you enter a country and you are afraid of the occurring plague, should you eat the country's shallots) [13]. It was discussed that the antidote's efficacy has been discovered right before the COVID-19 attacked.

In addition, another form of *tulak bala* by doing torch parade while reciting prayers for preventing COVID-19 is also done by the same locals in South Aceh Regency. Besides, the ritual is executed to prevent and ask for the protection from Allah of every kind of diseases. As the faithful servants, the communities assured that all diseases belong to Him and they should have been endeavored to keep faithful on the calamity tested by Him. The parade is considered as the customs and tradition and the belief from previous Acehnese ancestors; when the disaster comes, every villager recites *Yaasin* (QS 36:1-83) and other surah of Quran right after dusk prayer.

Likewise, in the eastern part of Aceh Province, where most of the people are Malay, they conduct the kind of *tulak bala* led by a *pawang* (skilled person) by reciting verses of Quran and other Arabic-Malay spells on the foods – mostly chickens – used as the ritual symbol. The purpose of casting the spell is to summon the ancestral spirits wishing for the protection for the people. It is obviously seen as a wish for the protection from every danger to Allah. This ritual continuously must be executed by Malay people in the region as the appreciation toward the ancestors that had once done this ritual for generations, even though the model of their procession is now slightly different [14]. This is similar with the fundamental perception that Safar is a thermal month and there were many

disasters that befell mankind [15]. Hence, from that perception, people are still having the faith to keep doing the ceremony that was typically mystic until now.

Accordingly, the Acehnese people practice *tulak bala* both to preserve the tradition and societal habit, which will lead to the positive effects, according to them. Values taken by certain community ancestors and then passed down verbally to their next generation are relatively processed without ignoring the ecological system [16]. The goals are to keep the ancestral legacy having sacred values for the life of humans.

Local wisdom is the past cultural product that must be preserved as the guidance of life. Even though it is local, but the values embedded in it are considerably universal. Its explicit knowledge contained emerges from long period of time evolving with the surrounding society and environment. The very long evolution process adhering the heart of communities can be the source of potential energy from the collective knowledge system of society to live together dynamically and peacefully [17]. This becomes the main factor to the emergence of *tulak bala* ritual amongst society and becomes one ancestral customs legacy that cannot be simply abandoned. Therefore, since the first presence of which, the tradition, which was caused by the cultural acculturation between Islam and Hindu, limits outsiders' insights to simply follow the practice since they have no experience with the locals' ancestral legacy and the habits.

B. Views on Tulak Bala as an Outbreak Prevention

Both local and national government of Indonesia issued several policies to limit people's outdoor activities, including worships. According to Yunus (male, 55, teacher), this policy should be analyzed first based on local conditions of a region. For instance, most of Acehnese people cannot simply ignore the obligation to worship in their mosques. This action includes the execution rituals, although the health protocol is a must. Karim (male, 60, village elder) believed that Aceh Province has its tightly immersed connection between the religion and traditional customs, which could resolve every disaster and *tha'un* through the rituals conducted. The ritual is conducted because Acehnese people believe that every disaster (*tha'eun*) that has been given must be wiped away by Allah eventually. Another statement also mentioned by Jailani (male, 50, village elder) that the ritual of *tulak bala* done by Acehnese people is the preventive effort and the protection toward the disaster that probably would befall someone. It is implemented to preserve the order and the welfare of individual, group, or wider community.

Considering the medical aspect, Sulaiman (male, 45, nurse) argued that the vaccine for the virus was the key to this outbreak. Nevertheless, due to its rarity and unproven efficacy, the Acehnese people tended to conduct the rituals like *tulak bala*. He added that the virus was from the microorganism, which was unarguably considered as the one of creations made by Allah. In generations, people have conducted the ritual of *tulak bala* and considered that it would be good if it is preceded. Similarly, Kuswan (male, 55, religious leader)

suggested that the ritual could be good or bad depending on people's perspectives and by considering the benefits it would give. His argument corresponds with the opinion of Ali (male, 40, public figure) who admitted that the goal of the ritual was to rid of bad luck and disaster, for example, by going to the river and releasing the offerings which are washed away. According to Zakarya (male, 40, village chief), *tulak bala* can bring the benefits and good luck, and oppositely if people decided not to do it, so there will be the disaster and the disease. From that argument, it will invite the misleading for all humankind and easily associate Allah. The ritual of *tulak bala* or *rabu abeh* is a tradition done by the society by throwing away the bad luck to the river, as argued by Abu (male, 55, village elder). Similarly, it was also mentioned that the procession of *tulak bala* ritual developed currently is not coming from the teaching of Islam. Ismail (male, 36, lecturer) contested that the ritual was considered to prevent from the disaster, and it should be thrown away. The practice of *tulak bala* surely has the correlation with current phenomenon that is the virus outbreak. Universally, religious congregations followed by thousands of people chant their prayers expecting that something bad will not approach them, not to mention Corona virus.

In general, people find it difficult to abandon the ritual of *tulak bala*, even though some people might not agree with it since the ritual is concerned in contrary with Islamic teaching and it may lead to polytheism. However, that ritual is still being run in every sectors of people's lives in certain occasions. Surya, a social activist (male, 35), believed that some people who agree with this ritual believe that it can bring human to the blessing, particularly if they keep doing their *aqidah*. Ruslan (male, 50, village elder) perceived that the relationship between Islamic teaching and *tulak bala* was somewhat reflected as the harmony that is accepted by people as the harmony because they have not witnessed the conflict and debate upon the argumentative dispute toward the *tulak bala*. In this case, most people are not well educated toward the harm from the ritual. The relationship between Islam and *tulak bala* is not against each other toward the society, in which they receive the insight toward the ritual directly from their surrounding where they live. This action involves indeed Islamic leaders called *ustaz* to guide and supervise the ritual. Zamzami (male, 40, public figure) agreed that this ritual has been part of life for Acehese people, in which should not be abandoned. He believed that any religions teach every human to keep their values both worldly and hereafter. In this circumstance, non-Muslims may not understand true tawheed, and they tend to be fallen to the polytheism or misleading action. In Sharia-based community like in Aceh Province, several steps can be implored such as praying to Allah, being fully sincere with verses contained in Quran, doing good alms, feeling sorry for any mistakes committed, and repeating dhikr and chants to Prophet Muhammad [18]. The point is that all the things happened in human, there must be the reasons and wisdom behind it all.

IV. DISCUSSION

The globalization of culture spread to each corner of the world, even Aceh Province, where it was acculturated by the Hindu teaching, right before the Islamic civilization. Consequently, through that phenomenon, there was the acculturation process between Hindu and Islamic culture, manifested in the ritual of *tulak bala*. It is a kind of ceremony to reject disasters, where the people will gather in one place for praying together [19]. This is one of the cultural forms in Aceh Province that is rooted toward the Hinduism legacy in the past. In fact, this tradition has been experienced by them without simultaneous changes with the Islamic civilization strongly embedded within Acehese people.

Tulak bala is a habit which is religiously magical from the life of certain native people encompassing the culture, norms and rules that are related and later become one system or traditional regulation [20]. The ritual of *tulak bala* happened within this Sharia-based community is a manifestation from the system of societal trust which contains the universal values that can preserve the culture. It is a form of trust and considered sacred and holy in every human's activities, which always cover purpose, and goals that will be achieved, including the religious activities [21]. Hence, for the locals, the ritual is considered as a symbolic action of human having certain meanings and objectives to protect selves from the distraction of evil spirits.

COVID-19 can be fought and wiped out through the unity as the citizen, properly based on the position, function and each portion. This tradition of cultural wisdom that has lived for a long time in Indonesia, together with compassion, is united, eradicating invisible enemies according to our respective roles. All is aimed through the *sapujagat do'a*, which is often recited after prayer and the closing of the *do'a*. "*Robbanaa aatinaa fid dun-yaa hasanah, wa fil aakhiroti hasanah, wa qinaa 'adzaaban naar*" (O our Lord, grant us goodness in this world and goodness in the hereafter and keep us from the fires of hell).

The local cultures in Indonesia are familiar with the ceremony of *tulak bala*, started from Sumatra to East Nusa Tenggara. It is still remembered when the Mayor of Solo, Hadi Rudyatmo, did the shaving ritual as a hope for his local people to stop the impact of Corona virus in their area. That ritual is closely related to the ritual of ancient monotheistic believe that is embraced by Buginese ancients in Makassar, South Sulawesi Province, in which Dewata Seuwae acted as the creator and preserver of the universe. *Songkabala* is commonly done during the dusk. This is similar to the traditional belief that the change of the day from day to evening, or until the sunsets, is identic as the sign for the spirits and jinn to hang around amongst humankind. In every ceremony of *tulak bala*, there is an offering, as the media for hopes and *do'a* between humankind and the creator [22]. That offering is called as "spiritual negotiation media" for spirits for not disturbing the humanity by providing the foods for spirits. Those spirits could be tamed and helped humans' life. This generation-to-generation tradition is not just designed to expel the disease

from one village or country [23], but also is done as the behavior that is continuously preserved by the society that has the cultural legacy and highly respected customs.

The acculturation of culture in Aceh has produced the diverse unique pattern, although some of the religious rituals contain some negative substances. Some Acehnese people keep some ceremonies until today that are commonly done, like the ceremony of *tulak bala* and *Rabu Abeh* (at the end of Wednesday in Safar month) or also called as *Mandi Safar*. The ceremony of *tulak bala* is executed on Wednesday at the end of *Safar* (Islamic month). On that day, all people should gather to cook and eat together. Some dishes are separated and left in one place or on the certain wooden tree [24]. Based on their belief, *Rabu Abeh* is done to expel the evil spirits, because they can demolish humankind around them. The *tulak bala* ritual in the middle of Acehnese people is not a foreign or strange thing; most people even are familiar with this kind of ritual. Since there are many occurrences of this ritual, every time people will face the condition that potentially brings the troubles, so the ritual of *tulak bala* is previously suggested to do [25]. This returns to the community's belief that the ritual is meant to protect them from many forms of disaster.

V. CONCLUSION

The procession of *tulak bala* ritual is done once a year as routine, although at that time, the disaster does not happen at all, but it was still done as a protector and antidote from the disaster. The date, day and month are firstly established before its procession. The discussion was necessary to decide the time of the procession. The procession was usually held in the evening because people had nothing to do or did not do some activities like done during the day, so every people could gather and attend the meeting. The ritual like the torch parade around the village while saying *shalawat, do'a* at mosques, houses and at the border of the village to install the amulet of protection from all threatening diseases.

The societal responses considered this as the behavioral customs of past people that kept being practiced in every occurrence that potentially bring the bad luck happened amongst humankind. Some people also considered that it was unnecessary to do those rituals because they believed that many of its activities contained the polytheism toward Allah and other misleading actions. COVID-19 is a deadly disease and can be infected rapidly through physical contacts between humans. The virus has taken many lives, hundreds in last few months. Many ways and efforts are done to stop this virus for not causing further casualties with many ways. Acehnese society named this as *tha'un* that came from Allah, as a test for humankind.

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