

## CONTRIBUTOR

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# FIGHT-DANCING AND THE FESTIVAL

## TABUIK IN PARIAMAN, INDONESIA AND IEMANJÁ IN SALVADOR DA BAHIA, BRAZIL

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## ABSTRACT

Festivals bring people together in affirmations of community. This article looks at two festivals in coastal locations in Indonesia and Brazil with a close inspection of performances of fight-dancing included within both festivals. The improvisatory or choreographed organization of the fight-dancing performances echoes the manner in which the festivals themselves are assembled. As these festivals grow in popularity, the process of inventing tradition is heterogeneously co-constituted by those parties who actively invest in the symbolic capital of the events. Verbal and non-verbal forms of expression reinforce each other in the construction of a multivalent sense of regional traditions. The corporeal engagement of organisers and participants blurs the boundary between embodied remembering and narrative accounts. Based on archival research and ethnographic fieldwork, this article explores the interweaving of fight-dancing with the history, growth, and post-colonial expression of regional festivals.

## INTRODUCTION

Religious festivals are important sites of cultural activity. In this article, I discuss performances of fight-dancing featured during religious festivals in Indonesia and Brazil. Tabuik<sup>1</sup> is the name of an annual festival in Pariaman, West Sumatra. Iemanjá is the name of an annual festival in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil. During both festivals, people carry objects in procession out to sea. These seaside festivals exhibit almost entirely discrete histories, precipitate from completely different religions, and have evolved in geographically separate societies. Nonetheless, they feature ritual tasks with overlapping similarity, topographically similar sites, and incorporate performance arts for public entertainment. Amidst the similarities that run through these coastal festivals, I draw attention to dissimilar performances of fight-dancing. In the context of both festivals, fight-dancing performances have been mobilised along with other performance genres to instantiate a construal of the past serving variable interests in the present.

The festivals of Tabuik and Iemanjá both arose from minority groups within forcefully expatriated communities. The festival of Hosay in Trinidad studied by Korom [2003] has similar origins. Korom suggests that community events such as the festival of Hosay flourish through 'cultural creolisation', a process where minority religious communities adopt local customs to allow their rituals to thrive creatively [Korom 2003: 5]. Korom points out that it is in the public arenas of these rituals that cultural encounters take place and gradual transformations of the observances occur [Korom 2003: 59]. The rituals become contested phenomena that are negotiated and co-constituted by the parties involved. I attempt to capture a sense of this hybridity in Indonesia and Brazil by describing the activities that accompany and surround the main events.

Presentations of fight-dancing are incorporated into the public entertainment of the festivals of Tabuik and Iemanjá. The West Sumatran form of fight-dancing is called *silek minang* and the Brazilian form of fight-dancing is called *capoeira*. Choreographed performances of *silek minang* appear during the official proceedings of the Tabuik festival, while the improvised art of *capoeira* is usually found somewhere alongside the festival of Iemanjá. The way fight-dancing is embedded within each festival provides a framework to conceptualise the similarities and differences between *silek minang* and *capoeira*. The

<sup>1</sup> The festival of Tabuik is named after the tabuik cenotaphs that are the focal point of proceedings. 'Tabuik' with a capital 'T' is used for the name of the festival and 'tabuik' with a lower-case 't' is used for the name of the cenotaphs. Please note as well that this word is Indonesian. Nouns in Indonesian can be singular or plural depending on the context of the sentence.

analogous social settings of the performances provide some common ground to grapple with various internal and contextual processes of Indonesian and Brazilian fight-dancing. Emphasising the idiosyncrasies and issues of the two communities, I explore the history, religious themes, and contemporary manifestations of Tabuik and Iemanjá, and describe the respective performances of fight-dancing.<sup>2</sup>

## PART 1 FROM PERSIA TO PARIAMAN

People from the hinterland region of West Sumatra say that the coastal region is rich with legends, mystical beliefs, and Sufi traditions. These traditions are indigenous creations blended with adaptations of performances from neighbouring regions and abroad. The festival of Tabuik in the coastal city of Padang Pariaman is a popular example of such a blend. Tabuik is a fascinating religious festival incorporating local and foreign elements that reflect the diverse influences from the region's history.

Tabuik commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the grandchild of the Prophet Muhammad who died in the battle of Karbala in 680 AD. Around the world, Hussein's ordeal has sometimes been remembered by tragic and distorted acts of martyrdom [Israeli 2002] as well as through theatrical re-enactments and processions. The public rituals of the commemoration of Hussein are known for their eccentric breast-beating, weeping, wailing, self-flagellation, or self-mortification with razors, flails, and knives [Chelkowski 1979: 2-3; Pinault 1992: 135, 180]. In Indonesia, however, Hussein's struggle is recalled through diverse performances and ritual traditions, including the dance and body percussion of the Acehnese.

In Padang Pariaman, the re-enactment of the suffering of Hussein at Karbala has become an annual cultural event celebrated on his anniversary, the tenth day of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic calendar. This event promotes social cohesion and regional identity as

<sup>2</sup> My introduction to these festivals occurred through my fieldwork pursuits in fight-dancing. I first observed and participated in Tabuik in Pariaman, West Sumatra, in January 2008. The following year, I found myself immersed in the activities of a capoeira group in Rio Vermelho, Bahia, during the Festival of Iemanjá. My ability to participate within each festival and my point of observation varied. During Tabuik, my participation was confined to the observation and documentation of performances and proceedings. Like the other visitors, I was able to follow the procession to the beach, but the events had already been pre-planned and roles already assigned. During the festival of Iemanjá, I was invited to become an active participant and assist the activities of a fight-dancing group in the preparation, coordination, and celebration of the day's events.

well as tourism and trade. Although the inhabitants of Pariaman and the surrounding areas are mostly Sunni Muslims, they have embraced a convivial interpretation of this Shiite tradition.

From Persia to the furthest satellites of the Islamic world, the Ashura observances have spread and 'assumed many forms, reflecting the diverse cultures and ethnic groups among which they developed' [Nakash 1994: 142]. In Iran, annual mourning processions were well-established by the tenth century AD and have been performed with great pageantry and emotion ever since [Chelkowski 1979: 2-3]. In India, celebrations of Ashura were stimulated by a minority sect of Shiite Muslims and today involve Sunnis and Hindus [Campbell 1988; Cole 1988: 115-117]. Hindus will often visit Shiite shrines and offer homage to Hussein during the month of Muharram [Pinault 1993: 160]. From India, Ashura has spread further and become a popular pan-Indian festival in places where Indians went as indentured workers and where Shiites were a minority [Wood 1968: 151]. In Trinidad, the festivities became part of the carnival period festivities and assumed the name Hosay supposedly as a derivation of the name Hussein [Korom 2003]. Tabuik in West Sumatra has formed in a distant outpost of the Shiite world [Kartomi 1986: 144] where a predominantly Sunni community continues a unique expression of the Muharram observances.

Present day Muharram ceremonies date back to at least the tenth century Shiites in Iran [Kartomi 1986: 144]. The earliest roots can be traced even further back to pre-Islamic Persian legends. Muharram ceremonies found ready ground in the ritual plays of Sasanian and Parthian tragedies of ancient Persia [Yarshater 1979: 89] and the origin and development of the indigenous ritual drama of Hussein can be drawn from Mesopotamian, Anatolian, and Egyptian myths [Yarshater 1979: 94]. Pre-Islamic Persian legends with themes of redemptive sacrifice that venerate deceased heroes find continuation in Hussein's story [Chelkowski 1979: 2-3]. Supporters believe that Hussein's suffering and obedience to the will of God gave him the exclusive privilege of making intercession for believers to enter Paradise [Thaiss 1994: 40]. The mourning processions were developed in Persia after 1500 CE and then, through Persian contact with India, became a recent unique Indo-Muslim culture that cannot claim great age [Kartomi 1986: 144].

Muharram commemorations found throughout the Islamic world all display their local distinctiveness. In Pariaman, for example, cenotaphs are brought out to sea; in other locations, they are immersed in rivers or tanks of sacred water [Korom 2003: 189, 269]. The submersion of the cenotaphs in water appears to follow the Hindu custom of immersing a deity after a religious festival [de Tassy 1995: 33; Pinault

1992: 61-62, 153-165]. The tabuik cenotaphs themselves resemble the *madya* tower-shrines made for funeral rites in Bali [Lueras 1994: 197-203]. Although observances of Muharram are practiced by Muslims in remembrance of martyrdom, they may also have connections to fertility rituals [Horowitz 1964: 80] and Hindu observances of Krishna and Ganesha [Forster 1924: 314]. Muharram ceremonies, sometimes called Tabot [e.g. Permana 1997], could even be related to celebrations of the Ark of the Covenant or a form of processional worship from the Old Testament (the Torah) celebrating the Tablets of Law onto which the Ten Commandments were inscribed. Commemorations of the Ten Commandments involving Tabot are still carried out in places such as Ethiopia. According to Edward Ullendorff [1968: 82, 122], the word Tabot is derived from the Jewish-Palestinian Aramaic word *Tebota*, which in turn is derived from the Hebrew *Tebah* meaning box or ark. In any particular location, Muharram ceremonies have been susceptible to the confluence of multifarious contributions and interpretations.

Early Shiite influences in Indonesia possibly opened the space for a later inculcation of the Muharram tradition into the communities of Bengkulu and Pariaman. During the fourteenth century, the Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiyah, a major Shiite literary work, was translated into Malay [Brakel 1975: 60-61, 75, cited by Kartomi 1986: 141-142, 144]. Classical Malay literature indicates that early Indonesian Islam had a very strong Shiite character [Wieringa 2000]. Today in Indonesia, the Shiitic text, Hikayat Muhammad Hanafiyah, has been thoroughly neutralized so that no Sunni could possibly object to the stories within it [Wieringa 1996].

#### *The Sporadic Growth of Tabuik in Pariaman*

English and Dutch colonial powers acted as catalysts in the transplantation of Ashura rites from India to Indonesia. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the British took Indian soldiers and farmers to West Sumatra and Trinidad. Of these indentured workers, only a small minority were Shiite Muslims [Wood 1968: 151], but the Muharram ceremonies came to involve Sunnis and Hindus [Campbell 1988] and over time the processional festivities sporadically prospered.

In West Sumatra, Muharram ceremonies were first brought to Bengkulu by Sepoy Indians from Madras and Bengal [Estudiantin 2009: 180]. Of the Sepoy regiments deployed by the British, it is estimated that up to 20 percent of the soldiers were Muslim, a majority were Hindu, and a minority were Sikh, Christians and Jews [Mead 1858: 28-32]. Many Indians married with the native citizens, and their children

are known as Sipai. In Bengkulu, the celebration, known as *Tabut* in this region, is carried on by Sipai descendents [Widiastuti 2003]. Though Shiites comprised only a minority of the sepoy troops under the command of British colonial powers, the Muharram ceremonies proved to be popular among the expatriate and Sumatran communities.

From Bengkulu, the Muharram ceremonies were subsequently brought to Pariaman, supposedly by a Muslim leader named Kadar Ali [Kartomi 1986: 142]. In Pariaman, the guardians of the Tabuik ritual were a select group of descendents. Recently, however, this role and its responsibilities have been diffused throughout two subdistricts of Pariaman city, the Pasar and Subarang communities. The festival has changed from a small religious ritual to a city-wide celebration. Newspapers and TV reports suggest that the festivities have enjoyed greater growth in Pariaman and become more famous in this region.



Figure 1: The Muharram festivities in West Sumatra in 1939. The ornamented edifice in the centre of the photograph is a cenotaph (model tomb) called a *tabuik*. This *tabuik* was constructed especially for a procession on the tenth day of Muharram. KITLV archives, Leiden [KLV001049773]

When the Western Coastal area of Sumatra was handed over to the Dutch after the Treaty of London was signed in 1824, some Sepoy troops remained in Pariaman. They carried on the Shiite tradition. By 1831 the *Tabuik* festivities were well-established and have continued, though somewhat sporadically, ever since [Bachyul 2006]. Some Indonesian scholars have suggested that, following the British colonial government, the Dutch provided funds for the ceremonies in order to create unrest, trigger quarrels between Islamic groups, and weaken the resistance of the West Sumatrans [Ernatip et al. 2001: 14-5, cited by Estudantin 2009: 180], although evidence for these claims is minimal. Nonetheless, such interpretations are possible because carriers of *tabuik* edifices were pitted against each other and would often physically fight. The Dutch may have believed this ceremony would divide the local Minangkabau communities. Whatever the truth may be, the tradition in Pariaman and Bengkulu has been popular enough to outlast colonial rule and has sporadically managed to attract diverse sponsors. For a brief period, the festival's commercial value attracted sponsorship from local businesses, mainly Chinese traders. Nowadays, the event enjoys sponsorship from the local government and the Department of Tourism, both of which have supported the inclusion of traditional Minangkabau performances.

Across Southeast Asia, observances of Muharram also had economic and other obscure ties to Chinese business [Kartomi 1986: 158] and the Triads [Wynne 1941]. In the colonies of the British Empire, the British colonial government viewed public Shiite Muharram observances primarily as a security risk harbouring a great potential for violence [Pinault 1992: 63] and other illicit activities [Wynne 1941]. With this perception, the British saw the need to suppress Muharram observances. While the British may have inadvertently transported the Muharram rites to Pariaman and Bengkulu, it is only because the English subsequently left that the festival prospered. Had the British retained control over the region, they would most likely have attempted to extinguish the Muharram festivities, for they believed the ceremonies were connected to Islamic and Chinese secret societies.

Originally, the *Tabuik* rituals were the responsibility of a small community of Sepoy descendents. The event was a costly venture involving the construction of large edifices that required generous benefactors. For some time during the 20th century, the event had been sponsored by local businesses, mostly owned by Chinese traders interested in promoting business [Kartomi 1986: 158]. President Suharto's purge of suspected communists in 1965-1966 saw a rapid decline of Chinese traders. While the number of benefactors in Pariaman dwindled, the festival nonetheless continued to gain popularity and government officials and national corporations began to assume a larger role in the events. Today the event enjoys

sponsorship from the local government and the Department of Tourism. The influence of nationalism and regional pride has meant that the traditional festivities now include performances from the wider genre of Minangkabau arts; government administration, meanwhile, has sedated objectionable public aspects of the procession, sanitised incongruous religious aspects, and introduced entertainment performances from an assortment of local arts.

*Procession, Submersion, and Destruction*

Two of Padang Pariaman's communities, the Pasar and the Subarang, actively participate in the Tabuik procession. Through their efforts, the Tabuik tradition has become famous throughout West Sumatra. Nowadays, the government steps in to carry out much of the organization of the event.

As well as being the name of the festival, 'tabuik' is also the name given to the cenotaphs that are the focal point of the public processions in the Ashura rites. According to legend, a borak collected the scattered parts of the bodies of Hussein and his brother Hasan after the battle of Karbala and carried them to the sky. Legend also relates that the borak ordered devotees to build a tabuik every year to commemorate Hussein's death. These tabuik are the dominant material features



Figure 2: Muharram ceremonies in West Sumatra, 1948. Pictured in the centre of the photograph is a tabuik cenotaph constructed especially for the ceremonies.

KITLV archives, Leiden [KLV001009626]



Figure 3a. Mounting the umbrella-shaped handcrafted flowers [Photo courtesy of Kaja Dutka]



Figure 3b Constructing the cenotaph  
[Photo courtesy of Kaja Dutka, 2008]



Figure 3c . The finished Tabuik in the centre of town  
[Photo: Paul H. Mason]

during the event. Each tabuik is an upright, standing coffin built from bamboo, rattan, cloth, paper, and decorated with eight umbrella-sized adornments covered with handcrafted flowers. This cenotaph is placed above a statue of a borak, a powerful steed with broad wings and the head of a smiling girl. A tabuik edifice has three levels and can exceed 15 metres in height and 500 kilograms in weight [Muhammad 2008]. The base level features long wooden poles that enable a group of men to carry it.

Preparation of the two tabuik cenotaphs begins on the first day of Muharram. Construction begins with the collection of earth from Subarang and Pasar land. This earth is wrapped in white cloth representing Hasan and Hussein and later put into each tabuik. Special rites accompany the making of the tabuik. These rituals represent different parts of Hussein's story and symbolise his courage in fighting the enemy as well as the courage of his son, Abi Kasim, who avenged his death. The rituals are accompanied by community events, kite races, traditional plays, various prayers, martial arts performances, Sufi dances, and speeches by political and social leaders. While the rituals generally involve select groups, the accompanying entertainment builds excitement among the broader community in anticipation of the procession of the two tabuik. The rituals and performances are all enacted before the final procession and eventual dismantling of the structures in the ocean waves at *Magrib* (sunset prayers).

On the tenth day of Muharram, the day of Ashura, the procession is officially opened with traditional performances including the Gelombang welcome-dance, the Indang seated dance, and a martial arts performance that presents the story of Hasan and Hussein in theatrical form. The procession of the two tabuik follows. Each tabuik is lifted by approximately twenty men. The tabuik are rocked, danced around, and shaken to perform a mock-battle symbolising the battle of Karbala. Onlookers shout '*Angkat Hussein*' ('Lift up Hussein') or '*Oyak! Oyak!*' ('Shake! Shake!') [Rahsilawati 2007]. The colourful umbrella-shaped decorations that ornament the tabuik evoke a prestigious air while the bobbing and shaking adds to the visual spectacle. After being shaken and turned in circles, the tabuik are carried out of the city centre. The tabuik proceed from the city centre to the beach accompanied by loud barrel-drums, hand-held kettle-drums, and synthesiser music called *organ tunggal*.

At the end of the journey, which occurs just before the evening prayer, both tabuik are thrown into the sea. What is not destroyed by the waves is pulled apart by the bearers and onlookers, for the destruction of the two tabuik symbolises both the end of the battle and the ascent of Hasan and Hussein to heaven. Some people wade into the water in search of souvenirs of the destroyed cenotaphs. However, most people return to daily life with no deeper participation in the events than that which has been crafted for them by the event organizers and government officials.

### *The Day of Ashura in Pariaman*

On the day of Ashura, the procession of the tabuik only commences once government officials have arrived – even if that means that the procession is delayed, the mock battle shortened, and the tabuik have to be rushed to the beach to beat sunset.<sup>3</sup> Once the official guests arrive, a *silek gelombang* welcoming dance is performed to open the ceremonies. *Silek gelombang* is a greeting dance based upon the practice of *silek minang*. Composed of deep postures and strong poses, the dance demonstrates strength and readiness, recalls ancestors who arrived on the waves of the sea, and signifies welcoming, invitation, and hospitality [Risnawati 1993: 12].

From early afternoon on the day of Ashura in January 2008, *silek gelombang* dancers waited in the middle of the main road of Pariaman for the governor and various government officials including the Head of Tourism. One group of dancers was dressed in red traditional Minang attire. The other group was dressed in black. Traditional Minang attire consists of wide-set pants, a long-sleeved shirt with slight decoration around the cuffs and neck, and a *destar* triangular headpiece or a decorative cloth wrapped around the head.

Prior to the arrival of the dignitaries, crowds built to enormous numbers. The *silek gelombang* dancers stood ready to welcome the dignitaries with their performance. Masses of people waited amidst the market stalls, side attractions, and blaring synthesizer music. Police ushered the crowds to the side of the road and cleared a path leading from the *silek gelombang* dancers to a central stage for official guests and dignitaries. The two groups of dancers looked like teams preparing for a tug-of-war, seemingly eyeing their opponents from a distance. Iranian Shiites might have interpreted the colours of the performers as significant with the red costumes representing *shembra* or *shemr*. Firemen sprayed the crowd with water from their truck as people eagerly awaited the commencement of the opening *silek gelombang* dance. The high-pressure water kept the crowd back from the road and cooled the bitumen road for the dancers who were barefoot. Organ tunggal blared from over-amplified speakers. Everyone awaited the arrival of the dignitaries who were running on *Jam Karet* (time that is flexible like rubber).

As soon as the first crowd members caught sight of the dignitaries, the organ tunggal music stopped and a single-head *tasa* drum signalled six double-sided *gendang tambuah* barrel drums to commence. The

<sup>3</sup> In December 2008, the festival was attended by the Iranian ambassador. Official speeches by dignitaries, sponsors, and politicians went overtime and the mock battle had to be shortened so that the tabuik could be dragged to the beach before sunset.

*tasa* drum reportedly originates from India and is said to possess a magical power imparted by a mantra that once incited members of each tabuik to fight each other. Today it signals the start of a symbolic fight performed by the *silek gelombang* dancers. At the sound of the *tasa*, the *silek gelombang* dancers assumed their postures and commenced their cycles of movement. The dancers made a series of sideways approaches towards each other and gradually made their way closer to centre stage where an offering was placed between them. They cautiously approached each other with *silek minang* postures that, much to the excitement of the crowd, demonstrated power, strength, and readiness; the crowd pulled in close, and the dance sent spectators into a frenzy. Organisers and police had difficulty holding people back. Both groups of dancers continued to warily approach each other until they met at the offering plate placed in front of the stage where dignitaries were seated. Upon arriving at the plate, the lead performers shook hands with each other. Music erupted from all over the city and everyone jumped and danced around in jubilation. The tension of the *silek gelombang* dance was high and the offering plate was a site of consensus, a peaceful meeting point where different parties had been welcomed through movement.

The *silek gelombang* dance preceded a series of performances and speeches that acted as the forerunner to the much-awaited Tabuik procession. The performances were all carried out in front of the stage of dignitaries with the crowd surrounding the performance space in front of the stage. During the performances, a choreographed presentation of *silek minang* was featured. *Silek minang* groups often have a prepared choreographed product that they can hire out for performances. This performance product had been adapted for the occasion.

In a *silek minang* performance, generally two adult male performers (possibly a father with his son or nephew) begin an elaborate sequence of stylized bows in various directions to dignitaries, members of the audience, and then to each other. The performers then demonstrate a series of open-hand and knife techniques that have the mark of social heritage, cultural patrimony, and regional identity. To the trained eye, *silek minang* performances are visibly well-rehearsed and pre-set. In much the same way that Yogyakarta-style court dance is regarded as a cultural heirloom of Central Java [Hughes-Freeland 2008], *silek minang* is a cultural heirloom of the Minangkabau of West Sumatra.

In the performance of *silek minang* during Tabuik, ceremonial sequences of movement were performed by two performers dressed in black Minang attire. Their bows were accompanied by the sound of a woodwind flute played over loudspeakers. After a sequence of opening movements and two sideways bows, the *gendang tambuah* drums began to play and a repetitious melody was sounded on a sarunai reed

woodwind flute. Female dancers, who had performed the seated Indang dance earlier in the proceedings, moved to surround the fighters. The dancers were dressed in red or blue and clapped their hands and moved to the rhythm of the music. In the background, a small replica tabuik was shaken up and down by three men dressed in yellow traditional Minang attire. The fighters maintained their distance and performed eloquent threatening postures. When the choreographed fight started, the dancers circled the fighters as well as the men rocking the replica tabuik. Gradually, an older fighter moved to replace the younger of the two fighters. The fighter who remained took a knife and thrust to the side of the older fighter. The older fighter eventually overcame his opponent and took his knife away at which point the younger fighter returned to complete the battle. At the end of the battle, the dancers and the fighters encircled the men shaking the replica tabuik and danced around jubilantly.

The combat choreography involved three performers and evoked an emotive response from the audience. The interchange between two of the performers alluded to the battle efforts of Hussein and his son. During the performance, stabs with a knife that landed safely to the side of an adversary were still met with gasps and shouts of exhilaration; grappling techniques that were visibly pre-negotiated still caused people to hold their breath; and defensive moves that were initiated before the attack to which they were supposed to respond still managed to sustain the audience's rapt attention. Perhaps it was the protracted tension of the accompanying music that bore a contextual relationship (but not a rhythmic, metric, or melodic relationship) to the movements that deeply engaged the audience.

After the regional performances finished and the opening speeches concluded, the large tabuik were lifted by approximately twenty men each, turned in circles, and the umbrellas shook as the constructions were rocked in a mock performance to symbolically represent the battle of Karbala. Both tabuik were taken from the city to the beach located almost half a kilometre away. The electric and telephone wires overhead presented an interesting obstacle for the tabuik carriers. Comically, each tabuik was tilted and dragged to avoid these dangers.

The procession of the tabuik was accompanied by a cacophony of music groups located at various places along the road to the beach. Loud barrel drums sounded above the noise of the crowd, hand-held kettle drums were just barely audible, and organ tunggal performers sung barely comprehensible lyrics. The soundscape differed from the Shiite processions elsewhere that include religious chants, wailing, and other forms of ritual drama. When the procession arrived at the beach at sunset, both tabuik were thrown into the sea. This symbolised both the end of the battle and the ascent of Hasan and Hussein to heaven.



Figure 4. A tabuik being thrown into the ocean with onlookers crowding the beach. [Photo: Kaja Dutka, 2008]

#### *Performances, Sponsorships, and Reworkings of Tradition*

Tabuik was once a complex ritual process coordinated by a small community of Indians living in Pariaman. It followed the heritage of distinct lineages. Originally, the procession of the tabuik to the beach was probably accompanied by special Shiite chants, recitations, and other pageantry. As recently as the 1980s, the violent re-enactment of battle was performed between groups of men throwing stones at each other.<sup>4</sup> As the Sepoy lineage became more diffuse, the funds and manpower for the tabuik constructions declined. The accompanying Shiite traditions were also increasingly overlooked or at least maintained outside of public view.

The material and costly aspect of Tabuik explains why external support, control, and organization have been adopted so easily. Constructing

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication with Professor Margaret Kartomi [2008].



a tabuik requires a significant amount of manpower and costs a lot of money – an amount certainly beyond the savings of most villagers. The need for sponsorship creates a space for government bodies and national corporations to offer financial support. This opportunity has been seized upon in order to self-promote, facilitate tourism, and enhance trade relations with other parts of the Islamic world. For religious groups tied to these sponsoring organizations, it was also an opportunity to etiolate the Shiite aspects of the ritual and bring them into accordance with Sunni practices in Indonesia. The procession has become government funded, controlled, and organized, and the government-implemented changes have had profound effects on the rituals.

Kartomi points out that since 1974 the Muharram observances in Pariaman have been diverted towards attracting tourists and this has meant a loss of ‘the essential elements of passion, which is a distinguishing feature of Shiism’ [Kartomi 1986: 159]. The Tabuik ceremonies are now accompanied by a plethora of ancillary cultural vignettes that manifest associations in the minds of Indonesians, which are deeply emotive but historically superficial. The idea of acquiring spiritual merit through participation in the construction, parading, and worship of the tabuik has been diverted by a culturally and politically empowered complex of contemporaneous community activity of another nature. The sacred aspects of the commemoration are unknown to many, but the celebratory aspects are complemented by the incorporation of other local customs into the order of events. This collective of supplementary performances creates a fuller expression of identity, culture, and tradition through an integrative, figurative, and reiterative framework. Tabuik now has fewer explicit connections with its specific Shiite origins. The celebration has been transformed into an ethnic festival expressing the community identity of the people of Pariaman, distinguishing the people of West Sumatra, and occupying a special place within the Republic of Indonesia.

Despite recent additions to Tabuik, the main processional event remains irreplaceably as the core attraction. The people who carry the Tabuik have t-shirts with the names of their government and business sponsors clearly emblazoned. The fact that the Tabuik tradition grew from a minority group in Pariaman has meant that it was easy for economically more powerful entities to exert their control over the event through monetary sponsorship. The Tabuik festivities are thus subordinate to sponsorship and include choreographed performance products found useful to the sponsoring bodies.

The choreographed art of silek minang is a relatively recent introduction into the now predominantly government-organised ceremonies. The ceremonies, which were once opened with religious

rites, now begin with speeches by dignitaries and performances of regional culture. Like other local customs along the Southwest coast of Sumatra [Galizia 1989; Feener 1999], the local representatives of the Indonesian state have in the past few decades taken over the organization of the ritual and the religious celebration has been melded into a cultural manifestation [Feener 1999: 87].

Nationalist flavours have been sprinkled into the events with an increasing impulse of the state to pay tribute to regional identity in their affirmations of power. As such, the various rituals leading up to the procession of the tabuik are accompanied by entertainment events organized by the local government that celebrate regional arts and culture. Not all regional arts are included. Only those that are recognized as being representative of regional identity and deemed to fit with national ideology are incorporated. For example, a choreographed silek minang martial arts performance is featured while the improvised Sufi martial arts performance of Ulu Ambek is not. Ulu Ambek is specific to Pariaman and is usually performed at prestigious local events or village inauguration ceremonies. Silek minang, however, has stronger ties to the nationally recognised standard of pencak silat. In fact, the performance of silek minang during Tabuik was labelled pencak silat in the calendar of events. While locals would recognise the distinctive movements of silek minang, the national label encourages them to see their indigenous martial art as part of a larger body of martial arts systematised by the government.

The nation building policy to promote *puncak daerah* (local peaks of cultural excellence) favours some performance genres over others. Versions of the indang and gelombang dances featured on the day of Ashura are taught at the undergraduate level in Indonesian Arts Institutes. Through this association, the indang and gelombang dances, unlike ulu ambek, are recognised by a national pedagogy and are integrated into national events. The integration of silek minang, indang, and gelombang into the festival of Tabuik is, as Felicia Hughes-Freeland describes it, an example of how ‘dance becomes both implicated in, and is also constitutive of, the embodied and imagined community of the nation state’ [Hughes-Freeland 2008: 17].

Festival participants suggest numerous interpretations of the event. For some, Tabuik is a re-enactment of the conflict between the brothers Isaac and Ishmael in the Islamic version of the story of Abraham; for others, the two cenotaphs symbolise tensions between the different subdistricts of Pariaman city. In this latter interpretation, discord between the richer and poorer parts of the city is represented. The social tensions between the two subdistricts are symbolically expressed in the mock battles, and then thrown out to sea. Some locals say this brings peace and cohesion to the Pasar and Subarang communities.

An overarching theme that encapsulates the whole event, however, is government recognition, sponsorship and control. The references to a unified Indonesia through local arts performances are unambiguous and speeches by dignitaries strongly influence the public construal of Tabuik. By honouring and recognising regional arts and festivities, the government has set up a monetary reward system that acts as positive reinforcement for the development and propagation of nation building.

*Regional Heritage and National Culture from a Worldwide Tradition*

Muharram ceremonies are found in two principal locations across the western coast of Sumatra, Pariaman, and Bengkulu. Across West Sumatra, replica tabuik can be seen paraded at other festivities, from Siliwangi and Lake Singkara to Bukittinggi and Lake Maninjau, and people always associate the replica tabuik with a 'tradition from Pariaman'. In these separate locations during different festivals, there may be only one tabuik not two. In Pariaman, the two tabuik are still the main material focus of Muharram festivities and have come to represent more than the sacredness of a procession. The edifices are an affirmation of solidarity, place, and community. The procession provides an adequate frame for the expression of community by incorporating other local traditions, creating a space for spectatorship, and grounding the celebration within the topographic coastal location of Pariaman.

All over the world, Muharram ceremonies are observed in locations as diverse as India, Trinidad, and Norway. Sometimes the ceremonies attract interest from tourists. Sometimes they gain bad press by being associated with boisterous parades, self-flagellation, and occasional violence. In the city of Pariaman, Muharram ceremonies are peaceful and lively celebrations that unite communities. Snouck Hurgronje was one of the first to note that 'the processions remind one more of a fair or carnival than of a funeral pageant' [Hurgronje 1906: 203].

Regardless of its exact origins, the tradition has undergone numerous transformations within the diverse cultures and ethnic groups in which it has been nurtured. The history is so diverse, and the contemporary local element is so strong, that people happily embrace many differing interpretations. Not all the visitors to the Tabuik ceremonies are aware of the legend of Hussein or the ritual's connections to Shiite and pre-Islamic conventions. Many people will more readily recognise the national and regional cultural references that government sponsorship has brought to the event. Visitors enjoy an experience conveying Minangkabau distinction as well as shared Indonesian tradition, validating the celebrations as regional heritage and national culture.

**PART 2**  
**THE FESTIVAL OF IEMANJÁ IN**  
**SALVADOR DA BAHIA, BRAZIL**

Iemanjá, the Goddess of the sea, is a symbol of fertility worshipped among communities all along the coastline of Brazil. Ceremonies in her honour are observed all year round but particularly near the New Year. Along the south central coast, Iemanjá is a prominent figure in the syncretic religion of Umbanda. In the Northeast, she is the nature Goddess, Orixá, a divinized African ancestor worshipped by the followers of Candomblé religion. Iemanjá can be depicted as a seductive mermaid, a buxom African woman, and even the Mother Mary.

Under many different names and taking many different forms, the Goddess Iemanjá receives pilgrims from all across Brazil [Carneiro 1986: 67]. Along Urca beach in Rio de Janeiro, ceremonies dedicated to Iemanjá are observed at the end of the year or at the turn of the New Year [Nadel 2005]. On Ipanema and Copacabana beach (also in Rio de Janeiro), celebrations honouring Iemanjá coincide with New Year's Eve [Smith 1992]. In Salvador da Bahia, in the northeast of Brazil, Iemanjá is honored and celebrated on February 2, and on other dates at Lagoa do Abaeté, Dique, and Itapagipe [Ferreira 1958: 265].

Iemanjá is venerated as the Queen of the Sea who protects her children at all costs, a powerful female figure and a goddess of fertility. She is the archetypal symbol of motherhood and the patron saint of fishermen. Her followers bring her ritual offerings to win her favour. Her huge following, both inside and outside of the religion of Candomblé, may be in part because of the Brazilian obsession with the beach and the sea [Voeks 1997: 56]. Ramos and Machado [2009: 45], two Brazilian psychologists, believe that the rapid expansion of the worship of Iemanjá observed along the coast of northeast Brazil is a demonstration of the force that the great mother archetype exerts over the psyche of the people of Bahia. For Ramos and Machado, this ritual is reminiscent of the ancient Greek worship of the Goddess Aphrodite, where offerings of flowers, perfumes, and prayers were taken out to sea in small boats. Although only around 2-3 percent of the Brazilian population report being involved with Candomblé [Selka 2005: 74], the hope of the renewal of life has become a pagan ritual practiced by countless Brazilians regardless of religion and from many different socio-cultural levels [Ramos and Machado 2009: 45].

The improvised art of capoeira is inevitably found somewhere during the festivals of Iemanjá. The appearance of capoeira during Iemanjá is often impulsive, precipitating at the side-fair, not at the ceremony itself [Edison 1940 in Landes 2002: 138]. Impromptu community performances are common and can be found amongst the crowds who



Figure 5. Gifts being brought to the beach of Rio Vermelho, Bahia, Brazil, 2nd February 2009.

[Photo: Paul H. Mason]

gather to present gifts to Iemanjá. Capoeira performances consistently feature the iconic rhythms of the *berimbau*, a monochord musical bow with a gourd resonator affixed to one end. The sound of the *berimbau* can carry across the throng and attract onlookers to vibrant and eclectic physical demonstrations.

The festival of Iemanjá itself is celebrated by locals and mediated by a heavy presence of police. There is no central organising authority, but business, religious, and arts communities devise their own ways of joining in the hype, celebrating the occasion, and making themselves known. The structured chaos of the organization of music and movement within capoeira is perhaps a reflection of the structured chaos of the Festival of Iemanjá.

*The Social, Religious and Historical Context of Candomblé in Bahia*

The religion of Candomblé is composed of a complex of competing houses dedicated to divinised African ‘ancestors’ known as the Orixás [Downey 2004: 347]. The Orixás are nature gods ‘associated with distinct provinces of the natural world – water, air, forest, and earth – and it is from these primary sources that they gather and impart their ... vital energy’ [Voeks 1997: 56]. Water is typically associated with female Orixás. Fresh waters are linked to an Orixá called Oshum, soil-penetrating rain that makes mud is linked to Nanã, and the waters of the sea are linked to Iemanjá [Wafer 1991: 123].

Candomblé at its roots exhibits intra-African syncretism that continues in the Americas [Daniel 2005]. The term Candomblé comes from the Bantu language group carried to Brazil by West Africans who constituted the first large-scale source of enslaved labour in Bahia that began in the early seventeenth century [Harding 2000: 45]. The Dahomeans and Yoruba composed the majority of the last wave of African immigrants from the late eighteenth century to the final slave shipment in 1851 AD [Voeks 1997: 52]. Intra-African syncretism began in Benin and Nigeria even before the South Atlantic Slave trade and continued in Brazil where European and African syncretism also occurred and continues to occur [Daniel 2005].

During the nineteenth century, capoeira and Candomblé underwent similar modes of oppression. Between 1910 and 1940, there was a mobilization and commercialization of festive aspects of Afro-Brazilian urban popular culture that undermined the formal and informal discriminatory practices of the first Republic of Brazil. ‘By making Afro-Brazilian practices more visible [and] less clandestine, it abated some of their connotations of polluting menace’ [Borges quoted by Shaw 1999: 10]. Afro-Brazilian practices that were once considered a potential threat to authority were converted into something ‘clean’, ‘safe’, and ‘domesticated’ [Fry quoted by Shaw 1999: 11]. By being put on public display, Candomblé and capoeira became ‘chic’ and respectable. They lost the power they once had by being absorbed by popular culture.

Between Candomblé houses, there is a ‘thin coherence’ of relative cultural stability [Johnson 2002b: 35]. No overarching structure unifies all Candomblé houses [Downey 2004: 347] but intra-African syncretism accounts for some of the threads of commonality in the codes and symbols that they all contain [Daniel 2005: 140]. Many stories of Iemanjá represent her ‘as a matron with enormous breasts, the symbol of fecund and nourishing maternity’ [Verger 1993: 256]. In the worship of Iemanjá, her followers and admirers offer presents that include flowers (fresh or artificial), perfumes, coins, small mirrors, combs, cosmetic tools [Ferreira 1958: 265], dishes of carefully prepared foods, soap wrapped in cellophane, letters of supplication, dolls, pieces of fabric, necklaces, bracelets, and other presents that would ‘please a beautiful and alluring woman’ [Verger 1993: 256].

Every year on February 2 in Rio Vermelho, presents are gathered together in baskets in the Casa do Peso under the supervision of the ordained mothers and fathers (*Mae- e Pai-de-santo*). They conduct the events with ritual song accompaniment, oversee the filling of the baskets, the embarkation, and the launching of gifts out to sea. If the gifts submerge, it signifies that Iemanjá, the Queen of the Sea, has accepted the gift and gives her protection to her devotees. If the waves wash the gift back to the shore, it is a sign of bad tidings. The individual gifts to Iemanjá by Bahians contrast with the construction of two large Tabuik edifices financed by Indonesian government bodies and national organizations. It would be difficult for an external sponsor to exert economic power over prolific gift-giving. Sponsors can more easily fund the construction of two large objects than finance festivities where a multitude of locals furnish their own individual gifts.



Figure 6. 2nd February 1990, Boats laden with gifts for Iemanjá head out from the beach of Rio Vermelho. Photo Courtesy of the Fundação Gregorio Mattos, Salvador da Bahia.



Figure 7. 2nd February 1977, Worshippers bringing baskets of flowers to the fishermen who will present the offerings to Iemanjá. Photo Courtesy of the Fundação Gregorio Mattos, Salvador da Bahia

In 1950, the Festival of the Mother of the Water (*Festa da Mãe d'Água*) in the suburb of Rio Vermelho was described in a local newspaper as one of the most beautiful festivals of Bahia.<sup>5</sup> It was publicised that from the very earliest morning hours of the second of February, the initiated and the devoted would arrive to pass offerings to the colony of fishermen who would take these gifts out to sea. Countless other people were expected to come 'simply out of curiosity'. Capoeira and *roda da samba* were described as having their space at this festival. This space, however, was auxiliary. The festival continues to this day and capoeira games continue to be played alongside the festival of Iemanjá as a side-attraction that culminates at various locations with the capoeira practitioners who congregate in the crowds.

When Ruth Landes did research into Candomblé in the 1940s, she was told by her principal informant, Edison Carneiro, that 'Os Capoeiras não se importam com o Candomblé' ('capoeiristas do not care about Candomblé') [Landes 2002: 147]. Indeed, during a Festival of Iemanjá, Landes had to walk some distance into the fair, far from the ritual events, to see capoeira. When she saw the crowds forming for a capoeira game, she noted that there was not a woman or ordained Candomblé priest among them [Landes 2002: 149]. Landes came to the understanding that Candomblé practitioners did not hold a high opinion of the violent and drunken games of the capoeira of this period, and that the trouble-seeking men of capoeira did not find diversion in Candomblé.

The connections and distinctions between capoeira and Candomblé are not always clear. They share a similar history of oppression, an overlapping repertoire of instruments, and an ambience of Africanism. 'Capoeiristas were drawn from among the same milieu as the Candomblé worshippers and the influences of one on the other are often marked' [Taylor 2005: 333]. Despite Landes' observation that Candomblé and capoeira are discrete, capoeira has numerous Candomblé-inspired songs, and today, many capoeira practitioners respect Candomblé and its rituals. In fact, many capoeira practitioners turn to Candomblé for protection rituals that 'close the body' during capoeira play [see Downey 2005: 146-147], wear beaded necklaces that have been blessed (*patua*), and claim to be devotees to one Orixá or another. Quite possibly by banding together, capoeira practitioners and Candomblé devotees have found a fuller expression of their culture, a more robust identity, and a greater sense of place in Brazilian society.

The once-secret religion of Candomblé is now widely disseminated in public [Johnson 2002a: 315] and has become institutionalized in popular Brazilian society [Voeks 1997: 56]. Carneiro [1986: 67]

observed that the cult of Iemanjá came to practice more in public spaces than inside houses of Candomblé. Perhaps this publicity pleases Iemanjá who is said to be given to vanity. For Brazilians, the festivals in Iemanjá's honour have become spaces where some of the secrets of Candomblé are taken to the streets, put on public display, and made accessible [Johnson 2002b: 131]. The secrets revealed have their allure and suggest the presence of other secrets. It builds the reputation of a Candomblé house. 'The circulation of meanings ... in mass media and popular culture has led to the participation of new practicing bodies; it has brought a new ethnic constituency' [Johnson 2002a: 303]. Progressively the local Festival of Iemanjá has transcended religious ritual to become cultural tradition and is 'at times implicated in Brazil's national representations' [Johnson 2002a: 315]. The publicity of the events filters into the lives of Bahians and it has also allowed various aspects of the rituals to become contested. The capoeira practitioners, who once played their games at the sidelines of the fair, now deliver their own gifts on the beach of Rio Vermelho, insert their own expressions of tradition into the celebrations, and announce their own opinions about the practice of events.

#### *Capoeira and the Festa de Iemanjá, 2009*

Assemblies of samba schools, marching bands, local DJs, hundreds of street-sellers, performance art groups, and Candomblé followers all squeezed themselves into the streets near the beach of Rio Vermelho. The festivities did not exhibit an obvious centralized organizing body. There was no stage for politicians to capitalize on a captive audience. Groups were finding their own spaces to be a part of the activities. Artists, merchants, and religious devotees were the driving forces of the celebrations and celebratory ambience.

Capoeira practitioners were found in abundance within the crowd. Throughout the day, at various locations near the beach of Rio Vermelho, they created a space for their art. Capoeira does not require a lot of administrative preparation for performances. Once a network of practitioners has decided upon a location and a time, the only thing remaining is to bring the instruments and hope that rain does not affect plans.

Grupo Nzinga is a capoeira group located near the beach of Rio Vermelho in the Alto da Sereia (Mermaid's peak). Since 2005, Grupo Nzinga members have participated in the Festival of Iemanjá. They perform capoeira, samba dancing, and have their own procession of offerings. Each year they carry a basket of gifts from their academy to the beach of Rio Vermelho. During the performances and procession,

5 Diário de Notícias, 29 January 1950.

they sing songs dedicated to Iemanjá and celebrate her as a symbol of feminism. Here is a sample excerpt from one such song:

*Verse:*

**Não deixe meu barco afundar,  
Não deixe, rainha do mar**  
(Don't let my boat sink  
Don't let it happen, Queen of the Sea)

*Chorus:*

**Minha Sereia Rainha do mar,  
Não deixe meu barco virar,**  
(My mermaid, Queen of the Sea,  
Don't let my boat capsize)

The teachers of Grupo Nzinga have an affiliation with their own Candomblé temple located well into the outskirts of Salvador.<sup>6</sup> For several years, they have held African dancing lessons for children and adults on Tuesday and Thursday nights. During these classes, students learn the music and dances of the Orixás. For children aged sixteen and under, capoeira classes at Grupo Nzinga are free. Like many capoeira schools, the teachers take etiquette, education, and community action very seriously. Due to the academy's shanty-town location, the teachers of Grupo Nzinga have found themselves variously involved in land-rights issues, preventing domestic violence, and advocating feminism and gender equality. Being located at the Mermaid's Peak, they often sing songs to Iemanjá during the weekly classes. These songs are an expression of location, affiliation, and cultural education.

Preparations for the 2009 festival of Iemanjá within Grupo Nzinga had commenced only a week before the day of celebrations. The proximity of their academy to the beach meant that they did not need to look for a space on the streets to hold their performance. From this advantage, their community-based and community-centred group put on one of the most planned of all capoeira performances that day. The way they celebrated the festival of Iemanjá had evolved from their experiences over previous years.

After a weekly capoeira event held in their academy on Friday 30 January 2009, the group leaders announced their plans for the festival of Iemanjá and discussed what needed to be done. They had two days to meet and prepare their academy for the proposed capoeira performance,

<sup>6</sup> There are many capoeira groups in Bahia. Grupo Nzinga is just one group among several with whom I performed ethnographic fieldwork.

samba de roda, lunch, and short pilgrimage to Rio Vermelho beach. They could not be sure how many people would turn up, but they had plans to distribute information flyers to advertise their performance, make t-shirts, and decorate the academy. They agreed to meet on Saturday afternoon to commence cleaning and decorating the academy, preparing the instruments, and painting shirts for their campaign. Then, on Sunday, they continued decorating, preparing instruments, and painting shirts. Everyone was invited to bring some food that they subsequently enjoyed and shared. The group made a modest profit by selling their shirts, as well as cans of beer, soda, and guarana soft drink. By the end of the day, the room was nicely decorated. Small blue and white flags in commemoration of Iemanjá lined the ceiling and a basket had been decorated ready to receive biodegradable gifts for the Queen of the sea.

Environmentalist concerns drove Grupo Nzinga to develop a slogan: '*Iemanjá protege a quem protege o mar: escolha bem seu presente*' ('Iemanjá protects those who protect the sea: Choose your present well'). This slogan was part of an incentive campaign to promote biodegradable gifts to Iemanjá instead of items that pollute the sea. The anti-pollution campaign met with some disagreement among various traditionalist communities that celebrate Iemanjá. Opponents claimed that it would be wrong to stray from tradition, that it was not possible to replace the gifts that Iemanjá enjoys, and that the ceremonies should remain as they have always been observed [Oliveira 2009a].

Some argued that Candomblé exists to protect nature and that people could offer fried fish, fruits of the season, remove plastic from gifts and replace non-biodegradable objects with paper replicas. For those people, what was important for Iemanjá was 'the symbol and not the object' [Oliveira 2009a]. The pedagogical coordinator for Grupo Nzinga, Lígia Vilas Boas, explained that 'the academy's objective was to raise awareness of marine pollution but they could not predict the impact that their campaign would have on more than 100 years of tradition' [Oliveira 2009b]. As a potent site of Afro-Bahian heritage, Grupo Nzinga seized upon the opportunity to use the veneration of Iemanjá as a way to educate people about the respect for nature.

By ten o'clock in the morning on the day of the festival, many people had arrived at the academy of Grupo Nzinga. Capoeira practitioners from other academies and many children from the surrounding shanty-town had come to join in the fun. Only a limited number of flyers had been distributed, but news had evidently passed around by word-of-mouth that Grupo Nzinga was celebrating the day. With such a crowd, one of the leaders, Mestre Poloca, was personally attending to the tuning of the berimbau, a job normally reserved for one of his senior students.

The academy was filled with people and bursting with the noise of conversation, but slowly the sound of the single-string berimbau being struck by a thin stick drew the capoeira practitioners to one end of the room. The practitioners formed a circle, some of them seated on a bench with instruments and others seated on the floor forming the circular performance space of capoeira called the *roda*. Mestre Paulinha, one of the leaders of Nzinga, began to lead the orchestra with a steady rhythm on the berimbau gunga, the largest of the berimbaus. Another two berimbaus followed suit. The rhythmic drone from the orchestra of three berimbaus carried across the room and the visitors grew quieter in anticipation of the performance.

Many of the capoeira practitioners of Grupo Nzinga were hesitant to sit near the orchestra. The closer to the orchestra they sat, the faster they would have to enter the *roda*. As a researcher, I also did not want to sit too close to the orchestra. I had never been to a capoeira *roda* at the Festa de Iemanjá before. I wanted to observe before I participated. Other people more adeptly found excuses to position themselves at a comfortable distance from the front of the queue. As a consequence, I was in the second pair called to play and my opponent was a student of the respected Mestre João Pequeno. I would have thought that long-standing members of Nzinga would have been the first to play, but instead, it was João Pequeno's formidable student and me, a foreigner with only five weeks experience in Brazil.

João Pequeno's student had a comforting smile and a respectful attitude. After Mestre Paulinha sung the opening *ladainha*, a chorus began in response to her lead, which meant we could commence a game. João Pequeno's student and I shook hands and commenced our game slowly. We began with very low crouching moves that were positioned within a cautious distance of each other's kinesphere. But slowly we began to trust the other's dance and we became bolder and more daring, taking care not to irreparably raise the tension of our interaction.

The game we played remains fondly in my memory as it was both friendly and playful yet gently testing at the same time. Perhaps it was because João Pequeno's student was a guest and I was a relative newcomer to Nzinga that we both showed our restraint and indulged only in light-hearted mischievousness in the *roda* of this academy. It was also likely that my partner was a skilled practitioner who knew how hard to push an opponent who was visibly less experienced and skilled. Winning in capoeira does not always mean triumph over an opponent. It can often mean the success of exploiting opportunity and chance. Possibly the most crowd-pleasing part of the game I played during the Festa de Iemanjá was when my partner unexpectedly changed pace and performed a stylised movement called a *chamada*. He raised his hands gesturing that he wanted me to come close and make

contact. I cart-wheeled without taking my eyes off him and slowly made my way towards his open hands. I stood up and placed the palm of my right hand on his and my left hand on his elbow so that I could stop a potential strike. We walked back and forth checking each other's balance and looking for a moment's weakness where we could make a surprise attack. And then, my partner stopped, crouched, and invited me to resume play. He had opened the space and was waiting for me to make the first move. Sometimes, practitioners in my position will joke and pretend that they are preparing for an elaborate gymnastic flip but then revert to a very simple but guarded dance movement. I performed the exaggerated movements that typify people pretending to prepare for an elaborate flip. My movements suggested that I was only pretending. Then, to everyone's surprise, including my opponent's, I actually performed a front handspring and returned to the game. My showmanship had become a challenge that he was impelled to meet. Soon after, he called me for another *chamada*. Once again, we danced back and forth, and again he crouched and offered floor-space for me to perform my acrobatics. However, I noticed that he was not crouching as deeply as he had before. He was obviously preparing for something. So, again, I performed the exaggerated movements that looked as though I was preparing for a front flip. I motioned forwards, took a large step, and then back-flipped back into the game. My opponent was adequately deceived; he balked and the crowd laughed. However, it was a reserved laugh, a laugh that suggested that today my acrobatics were funny but tomorrow I had better be careful because now they all knew my trick.

When Mestre Poloca decided that our performance was over, a berimbau was lowered and repetitive quavers were sounded. João Pequeno's student and I moved over to the berimbau, shook hands, and left the *roda*. Everyone's attention was directed to the next two capoeiristas who moved to the foot of the berimbaus and waited for the appropriate cue to start playing. They warily shook hands and improvised their own hesitant yet precise moves as they danced into the centre of the circle, testing each other for balance, concentration, and agility. The moves were spontaneous and consciously impulsive with each practitioner trying to lure his opponent into trust through dance and then surprise with a skilled attack. They listened to the beat of the berimbaus and the messages of the songs, but the space created by the guiding rhythms was theirs to sculpt with their respective abilities, interactions, and instinctive creativity.

After each pair of capoeiristas had exhausted their game, new practitioners from either side of the *roda* would enter the circle, crouch at the berimbaus, and commence a new game. Each game was unpredictable and enjoyable because of its capriciousness, skilfulness, and occasional humour. Although the moves were improvised, certain arrangements had been set in place that allowed these unrehearsed

movement dialogues to evolve. The musical rhythms had been rehearsed and songs had been memorized, but the tempo, occasion, and choice of each new song was left to the musician leading the orchestra. The roda had been given a time and place, but the capoeiristas who entered did so at their own impulse and desire.

After the roda, a small party of capoeira students carried a basket of offerings and made the pilgrimage from the training room to the beach of Rio Vermelho. They were accompanied by a small berimbau orchestra playing Candomblé-related *ijéxa* rhythms and singing songs to Iemanjá. They tried to stay together as a group but were frequently separated by the crowds of people, the haphazard street stalls, and the ever-present control of police blockades. Those that reached the beach delivered the basket to the flotilla of fishermen and sang more songs before returning to the academy for more drinks, dancing, and merriment.



Figure 8 Mestre Poloca plays berimbau and leads a capoeira game during the Festa de Iemanjá. [Photo Paul H. Mason, 2009]

### Reflections on Capoeira and Candomblé

Issues of publicity and secrecy throughout the practice of Candomblé find parallels in the recent developments of capoeira. In Candomblé, 'tourists' eyes and prying scholars have made secrecy increasingly untenable' [Downey 2004: 348]. The revelation of secrets to the public is accommodated in Candomblé in order to bring economic sustainability. Revealing secrets appears to be a permutation of long-standing tendencies in Candomblé. Over time, secrets about

membership, structure, location, mythology, and even practice have been divulged. The secret is 'no longer in information about the practice of the religion, but rather, in the knowledge behind and below the obvious manifestations' [Johnson 2002b: 181]. Although disclosure of secrets may enlarge the power of Candomblé authorities, it has given rise, as Greg Downey observes, to a new type of devotee who is bound to no house: 'These practitioners piece together their own idiosyncratic sets of devotions and theologies from diverse sources and consume their favourite rituals by circulating among houses' [Downey 2004: 349].

Just like the patronage of Candomblé, Capoeira teachers must also fund their practice by finding a reliable student base. However, with an abundance of books and audiovisual materials on capoeira as well as the growth of an international economic-bound traineeship, Brazilians observe the same kind of master-less students in capoeira. They wander from group to group, training and playing in the academies of Bahia and the gymnasiums of the world. However, without a strong Mestre-student relationship, practitioners are often un-initiated in the subtleties of musical messages, sometimes unsolicited by the favour of the berimbau, and forever caught between different schools of movement aesthetics. Here, Bahians have established a monopoly on capoeira and Candomblé. Initiates of Candomblé and practitioners of capoeira retain and circulate information periodically as if to suggest that it is the content that is of value. The true meaning of form is disguised by the sale of content. The pedagogical transfer of information distracts the tourist from understanding that by the simple act of moving in harmony with the other then they too become the secret. Without an understanding of the complicity of distributed embodiment, the capoeira tourist remains a customer and the teacher retains clientele.

The musical processes and movement organization of capoeira are also reflections of the activities of the festival of Iemanjá. The festival activities are generated by large numbers of separate but interconnected Candomblé groups each of which participates at their own pace and leisure but inevitably respond to specific spiritual leaders within their group. In a capoeira performance, specific elements have to be organized under the guidance of respected teachers. The capoeira circle is a structured space for improvised activity. Similarly, the festival of Iemanjá is both structured and improvised. Certain arrangements are made by the fishermen of the Rio Vermelho beach and the Candomblé practitioners of the temples while the rest is an improvised ensemble of tourists, opportunistic businesses, and inspired artists.



## CONCLUSION

Tabuik and Iemanjá are prime examples of 'the invention of tradition' [Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983] assuming the status of a religious ritual and cultural event. Merle Ricklefs [1974] – whose work on the relationship between authenticity and tradition predates the concept of the invention of tradition – showed that a tradition is not a 'thing', but rather, a politically contingent and strategically constructed process [see also Hughes-Freeland 2008: 14]. In Pariaman, Tabuik reinforces developing types of authority. In Brazil, Iemanjá reaffirms historical modes of resistance. These festivals exhibit a range of socio-historical, religious, and organizational particularities. The differences between the lament of Hussein and the reverence of Iemanjá are pronounced. The differences between silek minang and capoeira are similarly discernible. The choreographed movements of silek minang performed during the government-organized events of Tabuik, however, differ strikingly from the improvised rhythms of capoeira extemporized during the festival of Iemanjá.

During the regional festivals of Tabuik and Iemanjá, the choreographed or improvised structure of fight-dancing performances somehow mirrors the social organization of each event. Political and corporate sponsors formally coordinate the official proceedings of Tabuik. Performances of the choreographed art of silek minang are strategically integrated into Tabuik to fit the agenda of political sponsors. Performances of fight-dancing in West Sumatra are choreographed. Similarly, the Tabuik festivities are choreographed. In contrast, the festival of Iemanjá in Brazil is largely an improvised event and capoeira is improvised too. Local groups in Bahia voluntarily assemble the festival and capoeira performances are initiated in an improvisatory manner. The internal dynamics of capoeira and silek minang are a reflection of the organization of the coastal rituals in which they are respectively embedded.

Capoeira and Iemanjá in Brazil are largely improvised and the hierarchies of organization are more obscure than in silek minang and Tabuik from Indonesia where the hierarchies are explicit and the public components mostly choreographed. Nonetheless, Tabuik does exhibit some improvised elements and a few aspects of Iemanjá do require set structures. On the whole, ordered events have attracted preset stage performances and community events have attracted community ventures. The choreographed structure of silek minang and the improvised nature of capoeira capture the processes through which traditions have been assembled, invented, and propagated within Pariaman and Bahian communities.

In an observation of trends in performance theory, Lowell Lewis has noted that 'practices and events don't merely reflect but also influence

or enact social changes through a performative process' [Lowell 2001: 410]. More than just being a reflection of the improvised or choreographed nature of the ceremonies, the physical presence of fight-dancing during Tabuik and Iemanjá significantly sculpts the impression of events. Watching crafted bodily movement can evoke imaginations of that movement's historic origins [Anderson 1998]. Giving crafted bodily movement a public space during a commemorative event allows the imagined origins of a bodily practice to become infused with the imagined origins of the festival. When commemorative ceremonies and bodily practices overlap, the collective memory of a community becomes constituted by theatrical re-enactments, narrative accounts, and corporeal acts of embodied remembering.

West Sumatran and Afro-Brazilian fight-dancing have their own narratives of origin, evoke a sensation of the past for the performers, and elicit an abstruse notion of tradition for the witnesses. Viewing presentational performances is not necessarily a passive process. During the choreographed silek gelombang opening to Tabuik, for example, some local audience members were spurred to execute the postures of silek themselves in an emotive response to the performance. This physical response evidenced 'a common repertoire of somatic states' [Blacking 1977: 10] that have been 'sedimented in the body' [Connerton 1989: 36, 72, 102] through familiarity and possible physical experience with the movements being viewed. Such responses offer a concrete example of the shared somatic states that form the basis of 'bodily empathy' [Blacking 1977: 10]. Acts of somatic viewing among locals verifies a corporeal engagement with the presentational activity that taps into personal narratives, experience, and training.

Performances of bodily practices invigorate the imagined history of the current moment. More than just a direct visceral connection, embodied practices, as Hughes-Freeland notes, 'are brought into cultural memory and then into history by the ways they are interpreted and rendered meaningful in what people say about them' [Hughes-Freeland 2008: 42]. The presence of fight-dancing at the festivals of Tabuik and Iemanjá enforces a particular vision of contemporary traditions and influences subjective imaginations of the past. In this way, the festivals, by their association with adjunct embodied traditions, became imbued with complementary narratives of origin. In Pariaman, the choreographed performance of silek minang was a presentational activity sponsored by the state and viewed by the public. In Brazil, the participatory performance of capoeira was assembled by members of the public to create an 'experiential space' for the 'various narratives of capoeira, imagined origins, and epic histories' [Downey 2005: 115]. Acts of embodied remembering and narrative accounts reinforce one another. Silek minang consolidates Tabuik as part of regional heritage and capoeira strengthens the connection of Iemanjá to an African past.

The festivals of Tabuik and Iemanjá have become important parts of regional cultural pride, localised social cohesion, and opportunities for the growth of tourism. The public and private spaces of these festivals as well as the space for the inclusion of auxiliary entertainment have become redefined over time. Ashura rites that were once at the forefront of the Muharram observances in Pariaman are now elided for the expression of regional culture endorsed by the government. The festival of Iemanjá, now a public event, explicitly places ritual elements of Candomblé on show for the public. To a large extent, the changes to the organization of these events have been constrained by the material features of the festivals. The large cenotaphs of Tabuik lend themselves to administrative control. The prolific gift-giving to Iemanjá promotes initiatives from individuals and local communities. Political control of Tabuik has done the same to expressions of Shiite culture in Pariaman that political leniency towards the festival of Iemanjá has done to Candomblé in Bahia. In both cases, the power of a religious minority over their own traditions has been reduced and exposed to external forces.

The revellers of Iemanjá and Tabuik are willing observers who in cooperative gestures follow the activities of the rituals they observe. Simultaneously, they are interfering participants. The ways in which they interact with the ritual creates new understandings of the events, not only because of their individual gaze but also because of their individual participation. The propagation of idiosyncratic interpretations reshapes, distorts, and redefines events. Cultural theorists may ask how growing popularity and increasing media attention will revitalize and renegotiate ideas about tradition, religious heritage, and tourism in years to come. With a multitude of vested interests from political groups, commercial businesses, and arts and religious communities, the festivals are open to change and restructuring. A longitudinal study would allow cultural theorists to track these changes. Further research may also uncover to what extent the emotional force of these events is carried by the natural symbols inherent in the topographical location, the physical action of taking objects out to sea, and the sense of community built by social manifestation.

In Pariaman, many people did not know that Tabuik was a re-enactment of the martyrdom of Hussein. The lack of informed participants during Tabuik leads to the same question that Johnson [2002b] asks about the festival of Iemanjá: can the interpretation of a ritual as a re-enactment of myth proceed when many participants do not know the myth or recognize its connection to the ritual? As privileged observers, Jackson [1989: 126] reminds researchers: 'It is probably the separateness of the observer from the ritual acts which makes him think that the acts refer to or require justification in a domain beyond their actual compass'.

Even without understanding the symbolism, Tabuik and Iemanjá are exciting and enjoyable events. During Tabuik, the participation of most attendees is probably sufficiently explained by the simple pleasure of watching the umbrellas on each tabuik fall as they are pulled by gravity and lifted again as the bearers shake the structure. Another drawcard for attendance is the hype of the procession to the beach and watching the destruction of the tabuik in the waves. During Iemanjá, the crowds on the beach of Rio Vermelho, the flotilla of fishermen taking offerings out to sea, and the excitement of impromptu arts performances attract people from neighbouring Bahian communities. However, do explanations reliant purely on entertainment value abrogate a responsibility to a diegetic understanding that grounds human activity in history and symbols? One thing is sure: Public rituals expose themselves to a variety of interpretations and multifarious influences. Interpretations are shaped the most by those who invest the greatest amount of time and skill in the symbolic capital of the events. The organisers, the performers, the gift givers, and the cenotaph makers are thus the main players in the invention of tradition. The process of inventing tradition is co-constituted by an assortment of overlapping intersubjectively experienced construals assembled in time and space by socially-embedded, environmentally-situated, and embodied actors.

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